Plots of Opportunity

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Combining the Two Nations:
Trade Unions as Secret Societies,
1837–1845

It was not unusual in 1839 in England to find Tories and Whigs, aristocrats and factory owners, MPs and merchants, *Blackwood’s* and *The Edinburgh Review*, united in their condemnation of trade unions as conspiratorial secret societies. This consensus of opinion among the relatively privileged owed much to the fact that trade unions, by combining working men together into semi-autonomous bodies, offered a radical challenge to theories of social organization based on practices of middle- and upper-class guardianship. In addition, by binding their members together using ritual forms and oaths, trade unions trespassed on the protected space of the elite public and its exclusive right to fascinating forms of secrecy. Past and present methods of securing union autonomy are aggressively scrutinized in the 1838 House of Commons’s *Report of the Select Committee on Combinations*, the results of which achieved national notoriety when they were summarized in *The Annual Register* for that year. This summarized version of the *Report* encourages its readers to respond to the practice of combination according to conventions of respectability and class prejudice, and in so doing reveals some of the characteristic tendencies of the rhetoric surrounding trade unionism in the 1830s and 1840s.

The first of these characteristics appears in comments on secretive organizations generally. According to the *Annual Register, 1838*, trade unions, “Like all secret associations... begin by the institution of certain mystic and superstitious rites, which not only impose upon the imagination of their neophytes, but give a dramatic interest to their proceedings, and dignity to their lawless schemes” (204). This generalization that all secret associations are superstitious and lawless tacitly rests on two
premises: 1) that the majority of associations are "open" rather than secret; and 2) that these "open" associations are rational and lawful. Once accepted, these premises create a tautology whereby "secret" and "unlawful" become interchangeable terms; ergo, if trade unions employ secretive practices, then they must be unlawful. That trade unions did employ secretive practices is made clear when the paragraph moves on to describe a mock union initiation ceremony:

Thus it appears, that the apartments in which their nocturnal conclaves assemble, are often, on occasions of especial solemnity, decorated with battle-axes, drawn swords, skeletons, and other insignia of terror. The ceremony of inauguration itself, is said to partake of a religious character. The officials are ranged on either side of the room, in white surplices; on the table is the open bible. The novice is introduced with his eyes bandaged—prayers and hymns are recited—and certain mystic rhymes pronounced; after which an oath is administered, of which the imprecatory form may be easily conceived, and the new member, his eyes being again bandaged, is led out. (204–5)

This example both specifies the more general charges of superstition and lawlessness by introducing the word "terror," and reinforces the connection between this terror and the use of ritual secrecy. At the same time, the tone of this passage hovers uneasily between absurdity and deadly seriousness, with the superstition implicit in "certain mystic rhymes" vying with the deadly threat posed by battle-axes and drawn swords. Such a divided tone appears repeatedly in denunciations of trade unionism from the 1830s and 1840s, as critics of the unions seek to arouse public anxiety without attributing too much power to these irrational organizations.

Surrounding this titillating and arguably self-divided account of the initiation ceremony, a lengthy diatribe against trade unionism summarizes the statistical findings of the Select Committee. It is itself preceded by a much briefer passage demonstrating "the subtile activity of the principle which regulates the price of labour" among "the more educated circles of society . . . where moral and social considerations are paramount [and] the mere force of public opinion is found adequate to the desired end" (204). Here, the evils of trade unionism are used to generalize about the working class and its inability to self-regulate except through the "much coarser means" of violence and secrecy. Among these "much coarser means" were the confirmed acts of violence during prolonged strikes—i.e. vitriol burning, physical assaults on "nobs," or strikebreakers, and arson. These actions made unions appear especially dangerous to those with a monetary stake in the various industries where unionism had a significant presence. Crimes directed at industrial capital also carried with them the aura of insurrection associated with such movements as Luddism (1811–17), the
Ppentridge rising (1817), the “Last Labourers’ Revolt” (1830) and the Captain Swing riots (1830–31),2 thereby reinforcing the equation of secrecy and lawlessness already proposed and making such secrecy and lawlessness a primarily working-class phenomenon.

The secretive practice that receives the most attention in The Annual Register is oath-taking among union members. As a quintessential example of this practice the following oath, “said to have been administered by the combined spinners in Scotland, in 1823,” is included: “I, A. B., do voluntarily swear in the awful presence of God Almighty, and before these witnesses, that I will execute with zeal, and alacrity, so far as in me lies, every task or injunction, which the majority of my brethren shall impose upon me, in furtherance of our common welfare; as the chastisement of “knobs,” the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters, or the demolition of shops, that shall be deemed incorrigible” (204–5). Thus strategically presented this oath would have alarmed the middle- and upper-class readers of The Annual Register for a number of reasons. At the basic level of content, the oath challenges laissez-faire economics and the system of social privilege it helped to perpetuate by demanding the unswerving and self-abnegating loyalty of members to democratically ordained violence against the established social order. Also, the above mock-union initiation intimates that most trade union oaths were sworn on the Bible, making them not merely socially binding (and therefore subject to the greater authority of constitutional law) but almost sacramental (and therefore unbreakable) by virtue of being sworn before God. The presence of union oaths could therefore interfere with the administration of justice by making union members unwilling to betray their sacred word and reveal the union’s secrets. Members of more elite groups, like the Freemasons, would have also noticed the uncomfortable similarities between their own initiation oaths and those of the spinners union, both of which feature unswerving pledges of loyalty enforced by divine appeal and the threat of spectacular violence. This kind of symbolic convergence of classes had in the past generated considerable antipathy on the part of the middle and upper classes when deployed in public political space. Indeed, James Epstein traces several incidents of radical “ritual expression” that mirrored the practices of the traditionally powerful and prompted those in power to violently suppress their dangerously familiar working-class counterparts.3

Union oaths were additionally suspect because of the lingering effects of the Combination Acts of 1799. Made law in an effort to stamp out radical discontent and Jacobin sympathy with the French Revolution, the two Combination Acts severely restricted public assemblies and made all oaths not administered by an officer of the Crown acts of treason.4 These restrictions were directed mainly at working-class organizations, with the result that memories of the Combination Acts tended to reinforce the class-bias already present in the anti-union position. The Acts were
repealed in 1824 by a law that Friedrich Engels describes as “enacted by the old, unreformed, oligarchic-Tory parliament, a law which never could have passed the House of Commons later, when the Reform Bill had legally sanctioned the distinction between bourgeoisie and proletariat, and made the bourgeoisie the ruling class.” However, the Combination Acts’ prohibition of oath-taking retained a powerful hold over the English imagination. This hold is best illustrated by the Report itself, which grounds its pejorative examination of trade unions on an oath said to have been sworn fifteen years before, when such absolute solidarity was necessitated by the illegality of combination.

In part, this tendency to conflate past and present evidence can be attributed to the difficulty of gathering accurate information about contemporary organizations defined as fundamentally secretive about their own inner workings. In other words, because he was bound by a powerful oath, one could never be absolutely certain that a given member knew everything, or had shared everything that he knew, or even if what he had shared was reliable. At its extreme, this problem of incomplete knowledge and potential unreliability could lead to the eschewal of evidence altogether, since lack of evidence might just as readily prove the existence of a secret conspiracy dedicated to, among other things, withholding that evidence. Once accusations of such secretive practices as oath-taking presented themselves as true by their very assertion, corollary accusations that a given trade union was really a dangerous conspiracy could also be accepted as true, thus allowing the trade union to become a secret society, something dangerous, wholly other and distinctly un-English.

Such specious reasoning was resisted by a number of social actors whenever it appeared. Trade union members and radical politicians and periodicals rightly considered it unfair, both because it forced unions into a position from which there was no escape and because it relied on tacit and contestable definitions of secrecy and Englishness. Even those willing to condemn trade unions recognized a potential danger in the interdependence of these definitions. By making oath-taking and other practices of secrecy the final arbiter of meaning, those who applied the figure of the secret society to trade unions left themselves open to the effects of their own rhetoric. If it could be demonstrated that supposedly “English” institutions also employed secretive practices analogous to those attributed to trade unions—as many of their members knew they did—then, according to the definition already implied in the initial collapse of secrecy and lawlessness, those English institutions could be labeled unlawful as well. This capacity of the figure of the secret society to cut both ways could ultimately lead, therefore, to a complete breakdown of the very binary opposition between open English institutions and their secretive un-English counterparts that middle- and upper-class critics of trade unions had sought to establish in the first place.
The potential instability of the rhetoric surrounding trade unionism can be seen most clearly in the 1838 trial of five Glasgow cotton-spinners on charges of conspiracy and murder. Reactions to the trial appeared in the periodical press, Parliamentary debates, and fiction of the period. With varying degrees of uneasiness, the majority of these texts portray trade unions as secret societies by making oath-taking an essential element of their representations. In 1) the 1838 trial and its aftereffects in Parliamentary debate, 2) the periodical press, and 3) Thomas Carlyle’s Chartism (1839), treasonous oath-taking becomes the basis for the pejorative labeling of trade unions, and by extension the working classes, as dangerous secret societies. This pejorative label was intended to prove that the working classes were unsuited for full participation in English democracy because of their predilection for conspiratorial practices. However, the irony and hypocrisy of this collapse of secrecy, lawlessness, and the working classes can be challenged using two of the novels that follow the trial, since in Charles Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge (1841) and Benjamin Disraeli’s Sybil (1845), the figure of the secret society is extended to the upper classes as well. Dickens’s novel represents trade unions as secret societies through an initiation ceremony into the fictitious ’Prentice Knights, but acknowledges that secret conspiracies may involve members of the upper and lower classes. Oath-taking at an initiation ceremony also grounds Disraeli’s presentation of trade unionism, even as his novel as a whole demonstrates in a far more ambivalent fashion the degree to which secretive institutional practices operate at all levels of British society.

I. THE TRIALS OF THE GLASGOW SPINNERS

On the 3rd through the 11th of January, 1838, the High Court of Justiciary at Edinburgh conducted what Sidney and Beatrice Webb refer to as “one of the ‘leading cases’ of Trade Union history,” the trial of Thomas Hunter, Peter Hacket, Richard M’Neil, James Gibb, and William M’Lean, better known as the Glasgow spinners (170). The Crown’s thirty-four-page indictment charged these five men with twelve separate crimes: 1) that they did “wickedly and feloniously conspire, confederate, and agree together, to use intimidation, molestation, and threats, and to perpetrate acts of illegal violence against” the nob and masters of various cotton mills in Glasgow, and formed a guard committee for that purpose (9); 2) that they did appoint “a great number” of members of the Glasgow spinners union to act as guards at the Oakbank Factory, where “the said guards, or other disorderly persons under their orders or direction, or abetted and encouraged by them” assaulted John Farmer and William Gordon (10–11); 3) that they similarly appointed guards for the Mile-End Spinning Company, where the said guards or others acting under direction from them
“did use menaces and threats of violence to the operatives . . . and did molest them . . . and did assault them, and did create great terror and alarm among them” (11–13); 4) that they did “wickedly and feloniously conspire, confederate, and agree together, to set fire to, or attempt to set fire to the cotton mill . . . occupied by William Hussey and Son” by hiring an unnamed person for the sum of £20 to set fire to the mill, and that someone did indeed unsuccessfully try to set it on fire, and that they then did attempt to force the masters of various Glasgow cotton mills to rehire their struck operatives (13–16); 5) that they did “by means of illegally and feloniously writing and sending threatening letters” attempt to compel the masters to rehire struck operatives and that they moved to appoint “a secret select committee, or a secret committee,” the members of which were chosen “by ballot, or lot, or some other secret mode,” in order to “overcome the opposition to the said strike, and to attempt illegally and forcibly to raise or keep up wages” (16–19); 6) that they did “wickedly and feloniously hire, engage, instigate, or direct” certain unnamed members of the spinners’ union to assault David Gray and Edward Kean (19–20); 7–9) that they did write three threatening letters to various managers of cotton manufactories in Glasgow (20–24); 10) that they did “wickedly and feloniously hire, engage, instigate, or direct” six members of the union “to invade with force and violence” at night the house in which Thomas Donaghey was staying (24–26); 11) that they did “wickedly and feloniously, and maliciously hire, engage, instigate, or direct, a certain person or persons” unknown to set fire to the house of James Wood, and that such an attempt was unsuccessfully made (26–27); and 12) that they did “wickedly, feloniously, maliciously, and unlawfully, hire, engage, instigate, or direct, or procure” William M’Lean to “assassinate and murder” one John Smith for the sum of £20, which he did (27–30). To these voluminous charges was added the exhortation that these men “OUGHT to be punished with the pains of law, to deter others from committing the like crimes in all time coming” (32).

True to the conventions of contemporary Scottish law, the choice of adverbs and verbs in the indictment often causes it to grow from a legal accusation to a moral denunciation of the defendants and their union. Terms like “wickedly” and “feloniously” invariably add extralegal connotations to the avalanche of already-loaded verbs, “conspire, confederate, and agree together” or “hire, engage, instigate, or direct.” In addition, there is an escalation in both the number and moralizing force of these adverbs and verbs as the charges progress. This rhetorical ratcheting-up does not differ in kind from other trials of the period, though it does exhibit a degree of escalation rarely seen in other legal cases. The indictment’s closing comment does set it apart, however, both by employing the all-capital “OUGHT,” with its connotations of moral instruction, and by casting this case as an example designed to prevent otherwise implicitly inevitable future outbreaks of trade union disorder.
The majority of specific examples of trade union disorder provided by the indictment are structured around an elaborate attempt to cast the Spinners’ Union as a conspiratorial secret society. Only charges one through three can stand alone, and these accusations of the resolution to use intimidation and its actual use at the Oakbank and Mile-End Factories are the least serious in the indictment. In contrast, charges four through twelve all rely to a greater or lesser extent on the presence of a “secret select committee” and the defendants’ membership on that committee in order to be proven. Decided on by some sort of dangerously democratic process and bound by an oath of secrecy, this committee—if it did indeed exist—would effectively transform the otherwise legal Glasgow Spinners’ Union into a conspiratorial secret society headed by the first four defendants. Charges four through twelve were by far the more serious, then, not only because the punishments for fire-raising and murder were greater than those for assault, but also because definitively proving any of the latter charges would effectively make the Glasgow Spinners’ Union an illegal combination. Perhaps the most striking result of this concentration on the practice of illegal combination is the way in which William M’Lean and the crime of which he is accused are almost superfluous to the charges. This relegation of the murder of John Smith to a mere dramatic instance of the alleged conspiracy suggests a certain amount of class prejudice behind the trial, in the sense that the life of a specific working-class man is subordinated to the more general threat to property posed by the Spinners’ Union.

Following the pattern established by the indictment, the greater proportion of the trial focuses on the conspiracy charges, with special attention given to the existence or lack thereof of oath-taking and other signs of a conspiratorial secret society. Three of the prosecution’s main witnesses, James Murdoch, William Smith and Robert Christie, all operative cotton-spinners and members of the Glasgow Spinners’ Union, testified to the existence of oath-taking and other secret signs. According to Murdoch, the union had administered an oath since his induction in 1816, and had altered it in 1822, “and the change on the oath was a great deal for the worse; it became more vicious in its nature” (73). Although he could not recollect the exact wording, he did remember that both oaths were sworn on the Bible, with the words “Ashdod” (Isaiah 20.1) and “Armageddon” (Revelation 16.16) being used. Murdoch also testified that the union had had a “secret committee” intermittently since 1818, and that this committee had in the past employed intimidation, fire-raising, and other illegal acts under the code-word “Colliery” (74). His testimony concerning the existence of a secret committee appeared to confirm earlier statements by the prosecution’s star witness, James Moat, that there had definitely been a secret committee during the strike of 1824 and that he believed that a similar committee had been formed in 1837. Smith corroborated the practice of oath-taking and the use of the
word “Armageddon,” though he denied ever seeing a bible at his initiation (161). The majority of the defense witnesses then testified that their initiations into the union had featured neither an oath nor the words “Ashdod” and “Armageddon,” and that they had never heard the word “Colliery” used in connection with any secret committee, of which they knew nothing. For the purposes of this study the most striking testimony may have come from Robert Christie, who confirmed Murdoch’s testimony on the presence of oath-taking using a bible opened to a passage featuring the word “Armageddon” (142), even as he admitted his own reluctance to testify due to “fear, and the dread of breaking the oath” (152). Christie’s fear and dread was doubtless partly founded on the possibility of union retribution, but his reluctance also points to the fact that the union’s practice of oath-taking introduced a basis of allegiance that could conflict with one’s duty as a subject of the Crown.

Oath-taking and other practices of secrecy remained central through both sides’ closing statements. Relying largely on the testimony of Murdoch and Moat, the Lord Advocate declared that “while this association pretended to be doing nothing but what was perfectly legal, they were secretly and darkly carrying into effect ... the greatest crimes” (245–46). These “deeds of violence and atrocity” were carefully distanced by being labeled “so unlike the character of this country; and so different from the usual feelings of Scotchmen” as to be almost incomprehensible by any who do not suffer from the “perversion of moral feeling which gave rise to them” (246). Almost apologetically, the Lord Advocate also admitted the “great difficulty, on the part of the Crown, of establishing this prosecution by evidence” (248), due largely to the “strong impression” caused by the administration of “an oath on the Scripture, not to reveal the secrets of the association” designed to “pervert” the mind of those who take it (248–49).

This clear reference back to the reluctance shown by Robert Christie introduces the possibility that hard evidence may not be the only way to detect a union conspiracy. Combined with the retroactive proof of a past conspiracy established by the testimony of Murdoch and Smith, this explanation of the difficulty of establishing proof due to the presence of un-English, un-Scottish, morally perverse oath-taking forms the basis of the prosecution’s case, which is now proven not only by actual evidence, but also by the lack of that evidence.

These two paralogisms come under direct attack in the closing statements by the defense. Mr. M’Neill, lawyer for all but M’Lean, begins his remarks by reminding the jury that despite the fact that “the largest, and by far the most striking part of the evidence ... related to ... offences said to have been committed between the years 1818 and 1830,” most of which occurred prior to the repeal of the Combination Acts, the defendants “are now on trial for certain offences said to have been committed between the months of April and July, 1837, and for these only”
By revealing that the prosecutor’s case implied that the defendants “are in this way answerable, not directly, but indirectly, for offences not committed by themselves, but committed by other persons long before the prisoners . . . had even become cotton-spinners” (285), M’Neill effectively undercuts the first paralogism undergirding the prosecution’s case. He then goes on to show how the bulk of the charges rely on the presence of a secret committee, the existence of which he disputes using conflicts among the testimony of various witnesses, thereby attacking the second paralogism by discounting the initial accusation of secretive practices (291–95).

The conventions of the Scottish court allowed for a further restatement of the entire case by the Lord Justice-Clerk after the defense had finished. In his lengthy (thirteen-and-a-half-hour) re-presentation of the case, the Lord Justice-Clerk attempted to repair some of the damage done by M’Neill’s closing statement by reminding the jury of the difficulty of obtaining evidence due to the complicating factor of oath-taking (357) and by rereading verbatim some of the testimony of the prosecution’s key witnesses, minus cross-examination and the defense’s counter-witnesses (358). His restatement of the defense’s case was somewhat less generous in that he punctuated his remarks with questions and even reminders of key elements of the prosecution’s case.

Despite the efforts of the prosecution and of the Lord Justice-Clerk on behalf of the prosecution, the jury returned a verdict largely in favor of the defendants. Specifically, after a deliberation of five hours a slim majority found charges one, two and three “against all the pannels proven” and all other charges they unanimously found “not proven.” Such a verdict was possible in Scotland because at the time a trial verdict required only a majority decision, whereas in England a unanimous decision was necessary. This peculiarity of Scottish law made even this partial conviction of the least serious offenses seem less condemning than one might have expected from the rhetoric of conspiracy bandied about during the trial, especially when compared with the unanimous verdict of not proven for the majority of charges.

Even with this mainly exculpatory verdict, the judges pronounced the unusually harsh sentence of seven years transportation, making it clear in their final remarks that they, at least, believed the defendants guilty of far more than they had been convicted of. Indeed, Lord Mackenzie seemed to ignore entirely the jury’s verdict in his remarks, declaring “the conspiracy in which the prisoners joined, was a combination not merely to raise wages, but to do so by using illegal means” (376), and describing this “conspiracy” as “widely spread, as all the evidence shews” (379), despite the fact that the charge of conspiracy had been found not proven. His closing remarks applied his assumption of the defendants’ guilt to the Glasgow Spinners’ Union as a whole: “I consider this Association as one of the most dangerous conspiracies that has been seen in this country for a long period” (380). The Lord Justice-Clerk concurred, misrepresenting the jury’s verdict in the strength of his own conviction that
The verdict of the Jury has stamped this Association of cotton-spinners in Glasgow, as an unlawful Association; and no man that heard the evidence, with regard to its nature, its character, and its proceedings, even for a considerable period of time previous to commission of those acts of conspiracy, can entertain the slightest doubt, that it was unlawful in its structure, utterly unlawful in its objects, utterly unlawful in the means which it resorted to for the purpose of effecting those objects...[T]his was an Association of a most illegal and dangerous description—illegal in its nature, most injurious and dangerous in its consequences, not only to the public, but to the members of the Association themselves. (381)

He continued, characterizing the Glasgow Spinners’ Union as “a species of slavery,” and finding it the duty (and, one suspects, the pleasure) of the court, “to convince the people of this country, that the practice of this most dangerous system will no longer be permitted to exist within the bounds of this kingdom” (381). Thus, for the purposes of “deterring others” and “bringing a part of the community back into a state of order...particularly that class to which you belong” (381), the sentence was meted out. These comments by Lord Mackenzie and the Lord Justice-Clerk provide the clearest indication of the process of distancing as dangerous others not only the defendants, but the members of the spinners’ unions and even the entire working class, permitted by the strategic accusation of the presence of a “secret select committee,” or more broadly of a “conspiracy.” Even though this accusation was found “not proven” by the jury, its very articulation was enough to prompt moral disapprobation and seven years’ transportation. By all but ignoring the jury’s verdict and punishing the defendants with seven years’ transportation, the judges effectively underwrote their decision using the figure of the secret society, and in so doing made secretive practices the final measure of meaning in the trial and in future public reactions to it.

These public reactions sided almost unanimously with the prosecution and the judges. The newspaper press was particularly unmerciful in its denunciations of the spinners, and of trade unionism more generally, as these remarks from William Lovett, president of the Working Men’s Association and co-author of The People’s Charter, make clear: “The horrible charges trumped up against these men were re-echoed through the press, as the acts and deeds of trade unions in general, and no language was thought too severe to be used against them” (131). Perhaps the best measure of public feeling in the aftermath of the trial comes from the unusually sympathetic opening of an article in the February edition of Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine:

We have no ambition to emulate the elegant invectives against the proceedings of the Glasgow Cotton-Spinners Union, in which a large portion of the press have
been indulging. Their proceedings have been bad enough, to be sure, but we cannot see the parallel between them and the crimes of Burke. Neither can we see in them any trace of national demoralization. Comparatively speaking, there are few, even of the working-classes, implicated in these transactions; and, as to their enormity, “let him who is without sin throw the first stone.” (“The Trial of the Glasgow Cotton Spinners,” 78)12

Contemporary articles in Blackwood’s and the Edinburgh Review were more typical in their reactions to the trial. Both felt quite sure not only of the defendants’ guilt but also of the propriety of generalizing about the guilt of trade unionism generally:

[Al]though the evidence, in the opinion of the jury, failed to connect the prisoners with the more aggravated of these charges, yet they were all fully proved to have been committed by some person connected with, and in the interests of, the Combination (“Trades’ Unions and Strikes” 233); not a human being can doubt that the whole were proved to a demonstration against the combination generally. (“Practical Working of Trades’ Unions,” 296)

Combinations were especially dangerous because of the relatively high level of education enjoyed by their members. Indeed, one article laments that trade union debates “are conducted by these highly educated and skilful workmen, in the language, and with all the forms of the House of Commons” (“Practical Working of Trades’ Unions,” 284).14 However, this very education makes the individual workmen susceptible to logical persuasion, and both articles assiduously attempt to employ such persuasion in their largely statistical proofs of how injurious strikes are for the striking workers. At least one article, however, has a back-up plan in case such proofs fail: the establishment of a permanent police force “capable of supporting the civil magistrate in his contest with such organized and formidable confederacies” (“Practical Working of Trades’ Unions,” 302).

Feelings in Parliament toward the spinners largely matched those of the periodical press. On February 9, 1838, Lord Brougham presented a petition before the House of Lords asking for clemency towards the five cotton-spinners on the grounds that they had only been convicted of the least serious charges against them and that had the trial taken place in an English court, the conviction never would have occurred. Further, he argued that even had an English jury convicted these men of the same charges, the seven months they spent in jail prior to their trial would have exceeded by five months the maximum sentence that could have been handed down in an English court (Hansard, 40: 931–35). This petition for clemency was greeted by a spirited denunciation of illegal combinations and of trade unions more gener-
ally offered by Viscount Melbourne, who declared "that these men had been convicted of an offence of a most pernicious character... and [that] the more open the law had been made for allowing men to enter into combinations, the more necessary it was to check any attempt at violent proceedings by the most serious punishments which the law allowed" (Hansard, 40: 937). He continued, reflecting on the abolition of the combination laws in 1824, "when the combination laws were abolished, the fault which was found with the proceeding was, that the penalties were too weak and too light: and he must say, that if the offence were proven to [the] extent charged against these persons, the punishment which was assigned to it was not excessive, nor the infliction of it unjust" (Hansard, 40: 938). All these remarks were framed by his assertions that he "begged leave to say, that he did not intend to give an opinion on this case" (Hansard, 40: 938).

In the House of Commons, the reaction to the trial went a bit further. From a largely sympathetic petition presented by Mr. Wakely on the twenty-fifth of January, 1838 calling for a select committee to investigate the Glasgow spinners’ union and the trial (Hansard, 40: 473–76),15 the House quickly moved to appoint the much more general Select Committee on Combinations to investigate trade unionism throughout the British Isles. This shift to a more general committee was the brainchild of Mr. Daniel O’Connell, who in his remarks offered several pregnant observations on the practice of combination:

The fact was, that there was nothing but combinations amongst the rich from one end of the country to the other. He had no hesitation in saying that there was a trade union in that House. The landed proprietors in that House constituted a large majority, and took care to prevent any alteration in the law which would make corn cheap. . . . Again, had they not a trade union in the Temple. Had they not in that place a recent and remarkable instance of conspiracy. . . . When there was such a remarkable instance of the preventing the acquisition of rank and wealth in a liberal profession, by a combination of a detestable clique in the heart of the metropolis, they should not make such loud complaints of combinations of working men at distant places who had such difficulties to contend with. (Hansard, 40: 1067–68)16

These rather broad hints of upper-class conspiracies went unacknowledged in the House, which elected to confine the select committee’s scope to trade unions only, with the results already noted above.

Despite the vehemence and extent of the periodical and Parliamentary reactions to the trial, however, it remained for Thomas Carlyle in Chartism to offer the most scathing representation of the Glasgow spinners. Scattered among his more general
comments on the nature of working-class unrest and the need for a national program of religious education to end it, are three references to something called “Glasgow Thuggery.” The most general of these connects this phenomenon to past examples of semi-revolutionary working-class unrest, representing them all as symptoms of a national disease: “Glasgow Thuggery, Chartist torch-meetings, Birmingham riots, Swing conflagrations, are so many symptoms on the surface; you abolish the symptom to no purpose, if the disease is left untouched” (Works, 29: 120). These “symptoms” had all been extensively recorded in the popular press, accompanied by appropriate catch phrases and a certain amount of moral horror. Carlyle appears dismissive, or at least distrustful, of these accounts, even as he reproduces them in his critique: “‘Glasgow Thuggery,’ ‘Glasgow Thugs’; it is a witty nick-name: the practice of ‘Number 60’ entering his dark room, to contract for and settle the price of blood with operative assassins, in a Christian city, once distinguished by its rigorous Christianism, is doubtless a fact worthy of all horror: but what will horror do for it” (Works, 29: 119). Indeed, Carlyle seems to share the newspapers’ horror at this violation of the sacredness of his “Christian city,” though his disapprobation is expressed in more exacting terms:

Glasgow Thuggery speaks aloud, too, is a language we may well call infernal. What kind of ‘wild-justice’ must be in the hearts of these men that prompts them, with cold deliberation, in conclave assembled, to doom their brother workman, as deserter of his order and his order’s cause, to die as traitor and deserter; and have him executed, since not by any public judge and hangman, then by a private one. . . Not loyal loving obedience to those placed over them, but a far other temper, must animate these men! (Works, 29: 148–49)

In Carlyle’s diagnosis, “Glasgow Thuggery,” with all of its violent disregard for “Christianism,” displays an infernal inversion of the moral order. Horror by itself, then, will not suffice for reinstating the proper “loyal loving obedience”; only a religious reeducation can save those implicitly damned by their own violent circumvention of civil order.

Carlyle’s specificity in these passages makes it quite clear that, as Patrick Brantlinger observes, “When Carlyle speaks of ‘Glasgow Thuggery’ in Chartism, he has in mind a specific strike—that of the Glasgow cotton spinners in 1837—and the violence arising out of it” (Brantlinger, “The Case,” 37). Somewhat less obvious for a modern reader, but perhaps more important, are the implications of the term “Thuggery.” This “witty nick-name” would have called to mind a very specific reference for readers in the 1830s and 1840s, as it did for Engels, who explains that the Glasgow Thugs were “so called from the East Indian tribe, whose only trade is the murder of all the strangers who fall into its hands” (Engels, Condition of the Working-
These worshippers of the Indian goddess Kali had first come to the attention of British authorities in 1799, but it was not until the publication of Dr. Richard Sherwood’s “Of the Murderers Called Phansigars,” in 1816 that the extent of their organization became known. Readers in the 1830s would have had this group fresh in their minds from the publication of Captain W. H. Sleeman’s *Ramaseeana, or Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language used by the Thugs, with an Introduction and Appendix, descriptive of the System pursued by that Fraternity, and of the Measures which have been adopted by the Supreme Government of India for its suppression* (1836).

Sleeman’s book was reviewed in the *Edinburgh Review* (January 1837) and the *Foreign Quarterly Review* (April 1838), either of which would have made Carlyle and others’ association of the Spinners with Thuggee particularly damaging to trade unionism. According to the reviews, Sleeman’s book had provided “overwhelming evidence” of “a vast fraternity of murderers, consisting of many thousands of persons,” operating until recently without restraint throughout the Indian subcontinent (“The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India,” 357). This “extraordinary organized society of ruthless villains” was composed of two classes: Burkas, or stranglers, and Kuboolas, or novices (“The Thugs, or Phansigars,” 1), a distinction which neatly mirrors the difference between members of a “secret select committee” and ordinary union members. Readers of the Report of the Select Committee on Combinations as summarized in *The Annual Register* might also recognize similarities between the committee’s generalizations about mystic ritualism in trade unions and the Thugs’ “variety of signs and symbols” and veneration of the pickaxe (“The Thugs, or Phansigars,” 5).

Specific textual similarities between these reviews and *Chartism* make Carlyle’s characterization of the Glasgow spinners as the Glasgow Thugs even more explicit in its labeling of the Glasgow Spinners’ Union as a dangerous secret society. Carlyle’s disgust at the “wild-justice,” or alternative morality, grounding the spinners’ alleged acts of terrorism and murder exhibits a remarkable similarity to one reviewer’s amusement over the “superiority which the Thugs assume over ordinary murderers” as a result of “the peculiar religious belief . . . that they draw a distinction between Thuggee and murder” (“The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India,” 383). This distinction leads quite naturally to one-sided comparisons between Christianity and the Thugs’ “distorted state of morals” much like Carlyle’s implied contrast between the once “rigorous Christianism” of Scotland and the moral system adopted by the Glasgow spinners (“The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India,” 383, 394). Carlyle’s metaphoric relation of Glasgow Thuggery and disease also echoes a similar representation of the nature of Thuggee prior to Sleeman’s finally organizing a national body dedicated to systematically prosecuting them:
The full extent of the evil, however, was not then known; and whilst our active magistrates flattered themselves that they had put a stop to the practice, it was really only temporarily suspended in their own neighborhood. A system which embraced the whole of India could not be suppressed by a few partial inroads upon it. The dispersion of the gangs had the usual effect of a persecution which does not go the length of entire eradication. ("The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India," 367)

The subtle application of the term “persecution” instead of “prosecution” makes clear that what was needed in India was not a strictly legal solution. The reviewer’s horror at the depravity of the Thugs leads him to righteous conclude, “If any practice at all approaching in atrocity to that of Thuggee, were to be discovered in England, it would be immediately put down by a united effort of the whole people” ("The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India," 393). Those who considered the Glasgow spinners as a kind of English Thuggee sought to motivate just such a reaction by the judicious application of the label of secret society to English trade unions in the aftermath of the Glasgow spinners trial.

II. FROM THE 'PRENTICE KNIGHTS TO THE SEVEN

The trial of the Glasgow spinners, and the strategies of representation that emerged from it remained active in public opinion and the fictional press for at least ten years. In fact, two of the most important political/historical novels written in the next decade, Barnaby Rudge and Sybil, both employ much of the information collected about trade unionism as a result of the trial in their own representations of trade unions. Both Dickens and Disraeli also rely upon the corollary method of valuation-by-secrecy popularized during the trial. However, their use of the figure of the secret society ultimately reveals its capacity to define not just trade unions, but also wealthy associations and even Parliament. In this way the novels work together to respond to the latent implications of the trial, finally suggesting that a definition of Englishness negatively constructed out of condemnations of secrecy cannot hold up under scrutiny.

Originally conceived of in 1836 as a historical romance in the tradition of Scott’s Waverly and The Heart of Midlothian, Barnaby Rudge, by the time Dickens began writing it in earnest in 1839, and certainly by the time it began appearing in 1841 in Master Humphrey’s Clock, had grown to include far more than the story of Gabriel Varden set against the Gordon Riots of 1780. For the purposes of this study, one of the most significant changes to the final draft is the inclusion of Sim Tappertit and his quasi-trade union, the 'Prentice Knights, later renamed the United Bulldogs. Critics
have been comparatively reticent about this addition, which is curious, since Sim not only plays a role in the riots comparable to that of Dennis, Hugh or Barnaby, but he arguably provides for their participation by his own activity as a mob leader. Moreover, as the founder of the 'Prentice Knights/United Bulldogs, Sim allows for the introduction of a fictional secret society based at least in part on the Glasgow spinners. Though, as A. E. Dyson notes, it is singularly difficult to determine the novel’s tone towards Sim and his organization (68), a close examination of the structure of *Barnaby Rudge* reveals that they occupy a pivotal role in the novel’s representation of social disorder.

Sim Tappertit enters the narrative in the fourth chapter of *Barnaby Rudge*, and even in this first presentation the novel displays a remarkable ambiguity of tone toward him. Unknowingly caught in the act of eavesdropping on a conversation between Gabriel and Dolly Varden, Sim’s first appearance is marred by being focalized through the locksmith’s consciousness. Thus, his initial illicit listening and elaborate toilet are filtered through Varden’s judgments of them as “A bad habit . . . a sneaking, underhanded way” and “Now he’s going to beautify himself—here’s a precious locksmith,” making Sim’s later admiration of his legs, “which, in knee breeches, were perfect curiosities of littleness,” and “the power of his eye” seem that much more ridiculous to the reader (4.78, 79). This initial focalization is almost certainly what moves Dyson to describe Sim as “Neat, dandified, a vain and bumptious little malcontent, he is as ludicrous to his allies as to his foes” (55). However, a darker, much more serious side to Sim’s character is revealed by the narrator, who compares Sim’s fatuous self-admiration to an overfilled cask: “As certain liquors, confined in casks too cramped in their dimensions, will ferment, and fret, and chafe in their imprisonment, so the spiritual essence or soul of Mr Tappertit would sometimes fume within that precious cask, his body, until, with great foam and froth and splutter, it would force a vent, and carry all before it” (4.80). It is easy to see the sexual overtones of this characterization and even to predict that Dolly Varden will be seriously threatened by Sim’s bottled virility later in the novel. However, Sim’s incipient explosiveness has much wider social implications than just the sexual menacing of Dolly Varden. Sim also has plans to menace his mother country:

Sim Tappertit, among the other fancies upon which his before-mentioned soul was for ever feasting and regaling itself (and which fancies, like the liver of Prometheus, grew as they were fed upon), had a mighty notion of his order; and had been heard by the servant-maid openly expressing his regret that the ‘prentices no longer carried clubs wherewith to mace the citizens: that was his strong expression. He was likewise reported to have said that in former times a stigma had been cast upon the body by the execution of George Barnwell, to which they should not
have basely submitted, but should have demanded him of the legislature—tem-
perately at first; then by an appeal to arms, if necessary—to be dealt with as they
in their wisdom might think fit. These thoughts always led him to consider what a
glorious engine the 'prentices might yet become if they had but a master spirit at
their head; and then he would darkly, and to the terror of his hearers, hint at cer-
tain reckless fellows that he knew of, and at a certain Lion Heart ready to become
their captain, who, once afoot, would make the Lord Mayor tremble on his throne.
(4.80)

The outlet for Sim’s fantasies of power are the self-described “secret society of
'Prentice Knights” (8.112), a group of disaffected “reckless fellows” who gather in
the blind-man Stagg’s basement room in the Barbican to play at skittles, dice and
cards and to hatch plots against “the masters.” As with their leader, the 'Prentice Knights
seem on several levels to suffer from a certain amount of ridiculousness.
Historically, the presence of an apprentices’ conspiracy in the late eighteenth cen-
tury is anachronistic, to say the least. Indeed, Dickens’s choice to include a trade-
union-like conspiracy departs from all of his known historical sources. Three of these
sources—Thomas Holcroft’s A Plain and Succinct Narrative of the Late Riots, The Thunderer,
and Robert Watson’s The Life of George Gordon—do propose a conspiracy theory to
account for the Gordon riots, but all believe that this conspiracy originates outside
of England, from either American, French or Papal sources. The most common
and widely accepted explanation for this historical anomaly is that, in his depiction
of the Gordon Riots in Barnaby Rudge “Dickens was, consciously or unconsciously,
suggesting that something similar was the case with the then contemporary
Chartist movement and its leaders” (Jackson, Charles Dickens, 28). Certainly the 'Prentice
Knights seem much more at home in the 1830s than in the 1770s, and this connection
becomes almost incontestable when we know that Dickens read Carlyle’s Chartism
while writing Barnaby Rudge.

However, this explanation of their historical infidelity does not absolve the 'Prentice
Knights of their institutional ludicrousness. Born out of the foaming and splutter-
ing of Sim Tappertit’s soul and dedicated to securing the rights of the apprentices
to their masters’ daughters, the 'Prentice Knights conduct their secret meetings in
a snail- and slug-rich cellar used, “at a no very distant period . . . as a storehouse for
cheeses; a circumstance which, while it accounted for the greasy moisture that hung
about it, was agreeably suggestive of rats” (8.110). These meetings of the member-
rats parody to absurdity the “insignia of terror” said by The Annual Register, 1838

to characterize the nocturnal meetings of trade unions: “battle-axes, drawn swords, [and]
skeletons” become a “rusty blunderbuss,” a “very ancient saber,” and a “chair of state,
cheerfully ornamented with a couple of skulls” (8.114, 114, 112). The organization’s
credibility is not increased by its changeable name; in the second half of the novel, an exchange between Gashford and Lord George reveals that the members have found it necessary to rename their group the United Bulldogs because of the “indentures of the old members expiring by degrees” (36.344). In other words, the hated masters have been so unjust as to train the leaders of the group into journeymen, making their earlier name, and by implication their earlier goals, obsolete.

Given this silly side of the ’Prentice Knights, it may be tempting to simply dismiss them as comic relief. This conclusion would be premature, however, in light of their much more serious side as expressed in their initiation oath. This oath, “which was of a dreadful and impressive kind,” binds the new member “at the bidding of his chief, to resist and obstruct the Lord Mayor, sword-bearer, and chaplain; to despise the authority of the sheriffs; and to hold the court of aldermen as nought; but not on any account, in case the fulness of time should bring a general rising of ’prentises, to damage or ’n any way disfigure Temple Bar, which was strictly constitutional and always to be approached with reverence” (8.115–16). Though accompanied by various burlesqued elements of a trade union initiation, the content of this oath amounts to a declaration of revolution against that portion of government presiding over the City of London. Moreover, instead of requiring agreement among the majority of members, this revolution can be ordered by a single man, making it much more dangerous even than the oath of the Glasgow spinners and their contemporaries. Finally, as Spence’s note to this passage makes clear, in its reverence for the Temple Bar, the ’Prentice Knights’ oath was meant to further horrify early-nineteenth-century liberal readers: “How constitutional the gateway erected after the Great Fire must have appeared to Sim Tappertit, may be judged from the fact that it was ornamented with statues of James I, Charles I, and Charles II—monarchs whom Dickens hated—and was garnished, until 1772, with the mangled remains of traitors.”

The actions of members of the Knights—now known as the United Bulldogs—during the riots reveals the organization’s latent revolutionary tendencies in action. The newly-initiated Hugh especially distinguishes himself for ferocity, declaring before the assembled Bulldogs, “Here’s my captain—here’s my leader. Ha ha ha! Let him give me the word of command, and I’ll fight the whole Parliament House single-handed, or set a lighted torch to the King’s throne itself!” (39.368–69). Later during the same meeting, even Hugh becomes aware “of the presence of an air of mystery, akin to that which had so much impressed him out of doors. It was impossible to discard a sense that something serious was going on, and that under the noisy revel of the public-house there lurked unseen and dangerous matter” (39.371). Indeed, once the riots get underway, Hugh and other members of a similarly serious nature demonstrate just how dangerous the United Bulldogs can be by besieging Parliament (49.457), assaulting the Horse Guards (49.459), destroying Catholic churches
As these actions during the riots make evident, the 'Prentice Knights / United Bulldogs are positioned in the thick of the novel's complex representation of civil disorder. Numerous critics have noticed that *Barnaby Rudge* is structured by means of the characteristically Dickensian motif of doubling. Steven Connor argues that the novel at its most abstract level presents a conflict between two visions of the city-as-body. This conflict is itself embodied in the temporal discrepancy between the novel's conflicting portraits of England in 1774–75 and in 1780 (chapters 1–32 and 33–79) and in the plot by the parallel representations of disorder evidenced by the Haredale murder and the Gordon Riots. At the level of characterization, even, the novel seems to generate characters who are physical and moral shadows of one another. Such a grouping of characters into complementary pairs underlies, for example, Steven Marcus and Myron Magnet's psychoanalytic readings of the father and son figures in the novel. The almost obsessive devotion to this doubling motif leads Kim Michasiw to identify the central “message” of *Barnaby Rudge* as a moral dialectic between rebellion and stability, madness and civilization: “Rebellion is essential to the formation of identity, yet some bounds must be placed upon it. What *Rudge* posits is that the sources of madness and of civilized order in its highest form are identical—in the rivalry between father and son, between the present and the dead weight of anteriority” (581). What all of these analyses of doubling fail to account for is the structural role that the novel accords to the 'Prentice Knights / United Bulldogs; in fact, this self-proclaimed secret society serves as the center point connecting the novel's doubled poles of disorder.

These poles are most obviously represented by the novel's double plot. The two narratives of the Haredale murder and the Gordon Riots bring ruptures of the social order at the individual and the national level together into an almost organic whole. By making the early murder, with its undertones of fratricide, the frame within which the Gordon Riots take place, Dickens seems to suggest that national disturbance can be traced to individual wrong-doing, thereby making the novel "preeminently concerned with the implications of individual action" (Rice, “The End of Dickens’s Apprenticeship,” 174). Steven Marcus offers the most succinct summary of the implications of this connection between individual and national disorder when he states that *Barnaby Rudge* is concerned with authority in political and social relations, as well as in personal and private ones. Among its most notable qualities are the intelligence and skill with which it connects these two kinds of relations, and the steadiness with which it elu-
mates the ‘intimate relation’ between them. This insistence upon the reciprocal dependence of politics and character . . . in effect denies to politics the autonomy—the claim to “objectivity”—that those involved in politics regularly need to assert. (172)

One might add that the opposite is also true: the reciprocal dependence of politics and character also denies to the private sphere the autonomy from public life that it was so often accorded in the Victorian period. This parallel relationship between the supposedly “separate spheres” is implicit throughout the novel, which reveals the origin of the Gordon Riots in the machinations of Gashford and the irrational nostalgia of Gordon even as it finds the solution to those same riots in the restoration of domestic peace through the marriages of Edward Chester to Emma Haredale and Joe Willet to Dolly Varden.

However, there are also at least two more explicit connections between the domestic and national scenes in Barnaby Rudge. The first emerges from the plotting of Sir John Chester, whose efforts at preventing the marriage of Edward and Emma intriguingly parallel his exertions at fomenting the riots. Recognizing that Dolly Varden serves as the illicit messenger between Edward and Emma, Sir John wisely appeals to her mother, winning her over in language more reminiscent of international politics than interfamilial relations: “Mrs. Varden was but a woman, and had her share of vanity, obstinacy, and love of power. She entered into a secret treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive, with her insinuating visitor; and really did believe, as many others would have done who saw and heard him, that in so doing she furthered the ends of truth, justice, and morality, in a very uncommon degree” (27.274). His reason for securing such a “secret treaty” is principally his lingering jealousy as an unsuccessful suitor of the woman who became Haredale’s wife. This same personal rancor motivates his actions behind the scenes of the Protestant Association’s crusade against English Catholics, including especially Mr. Haredale, who perceptively responds to Sir John’s denial of direct involvement with the Protestant Association, “‘Men of your capacity plot in secrecy and safety, and leave exposed posts to the duller wits’” (43.404).

The ’Prentice Knights / United Bulldogs provide the second explicit connection between the domestic and national, past and present scenes of disorder. As a secret organization of socially and professionally similar individuals—and the echoes of trade unions like the Glasgow Spinners should be clear—the Knights as an institution occupy a middle ground between the public and private spheres. Moreover, the individual members of the Knights live with one foot in each of the novel’s two plots: Sim Tappertit, when not presiding over midnight meetings of his society, lives at the home of Gabriel Varden, who is at once the father of Dolly, for whom Sim tends a secret flame, and the novel’s heroic symbol of domestic and social order; likewise, Hugh, when not
leading attacks on the Warren or Newgate on behalf of the Bulldogs, serves as the stablehand at the Maypole Inn, itself the novel’s main symbol of an ordered past. This connection between the various ordered and disordered worlds of the novel through these two members of the Bulldogs is stated explicitly in one exchange between them:

“Come!” said Mr Tappertit, growing a little impatient under this disrespectful treatment. “Do you know me, feller?”

“Not I,” cried Hugh. “Ha ha ha! Not I! But I should like to.”

“And yet I’d have wagered a seven-shilling piece,” said Mr Tappertit, folding his arms, and confronting him with his legs wide apart and firmly planted on the ground, “that you once were hostler at the Maypole.”

Hugh opened his eyes on hearing this, and looked at him in great surprise. (39.367)

Doubtless some of Hugh’s surprise comes from the unremarkability of Sim Tappertit to anyone but himself, but this surprise may also reflect a moment of “eye-opening” on the part of the reader, who is made to realize in this scene just how porous the divide between order and disorder can be.

The 'Prentice Knights / United Bulldogs’ practices of secrecy also provide a way to begin to connect two more of the novel’s doubled poles. Chapter 37 begins with some general observations on the seductiveness of secrecy: “To surround anything, however monstrous or ridiculous, with an air of mystery, is to invest it with a secret charm, and power of attraction which to the crowd is irresistible. False priests, false prophets, false doctors, false patriots, false prodigies of every kind, veiling their proceedings in mystery, have always addressed themselves at an immense advantage to the popular credulity . . .” (37.347). Given the earlier secretive rigmarole depicted in the 'Prentice Knights' first initiation ceremony and Hugh’s perception of a "sense of mystery" immediately after his initiation, one might expect that these general observations are meant to apply to Sim’s secret society. Thus, it is rather surprising when in the next paragraph the passage continues,

... But when vague rumors got abroad, that in this Protestant association, a secret power was mustering against the government for undefined and mighty purposes; when the air was filled with whispers of a confederacy among the Popish powers to degrade and enslave England, establish an Inquisition in London, and turn the pens of Smithfield market into stakes and cauldrons; when terrors and alarms which no man understood were perpetually broached, both in and out of Parliament, by an enthusiast who did not understand himself, and bygone bugbears
which had lain quietly in their graves for centuries, were raised again to haunt the ignorant and credulous; when all this was done, as it were, in the dark, and secret invitations to join the Great Protestant Association in defense of religion, life, and liberty, were dropped in the public ways, thrust under house-doors, tossed in at windows, and pressed into the hands of those who trod the streets by night . . . then the mania spread indeed, and the body, still increasing every day, grew forty thousand strong. (37.348)

This parallel between the ‘Prentice Knights and the Protestant Association, coupled with Sir John’s own secretive plotting, implies that the division between rich and poor proposed in the aftermath of the Glasgow spinners’ trial by Lord MacKenzie, the Lord Justice-Clerk, the Report of the Select committee on Combinations and Carlyle’s Chartism, may not hold up if one examines their common reliance on secretive practices.

The next logical step, that secretive practices may be a ubiquitous condition of modern England, never quite materializes in Barnaby Rudge. In fact, the novel seems at pains to back away from this conclusion, scrupulously punishing everyone who ever kept illicit secrets. Sir John is killed in a duel with Mr. Hareton, and his body left unfound for two days on the Warren estate. Adding insult to injury, his “faithful valet, true to his master’s creed, eloped with all the cash and movables he could lay his hands on, and started as a finished gentleman upon his own account” (82.731). The leaders of the riots, Hugh and Dennis the hangman, are hanged in the square outside of Newgate prison, while Lord George is confined to the Tower, where he eventually dies seven years later, imprisoned on unrelated matters. For Sim is reserved the most viciously reciprocal punishment of all: his legs “crushed into shapeless ugliness” and later replaced by wooden prosthetics (71.647), he becomes a shoeblack and marries the widow of a rag and bone collector, who occasionally resolves their domestic disagreements “by taking off his legs, and leaving him exposed to the derision of those urchins who delight in mischief” (82.734).

Even in this final restoration of social order, however, there remains a hint at the suppressed ubiquity of secretive practices in the fate of Gashford. After escaping official retribution and abandoning his position as Lord George’s secretary and aide-de-camp, he “subsist[s] for a time upon his traffic in his master’s secrets; and, this trade failing when the stock was quite exhausted, procure[s] an appointment in the honourable corps of spies and eavesdroppers employed by the government” (82.733). Despite the fact that the ’Prentice Knights and the Protestant Association are no more, there remains a place in the world for secretive practices, and thus a continuing suggestion that the binary opposition between rich and poor, between the government and the governed may not be able to survive a full exposure of its secrets.
This fuller exposure of secretive practices would come from a rising member of Parliament, Benjamin Disraeli, in the form of a political novel which, though “his least typical work” (O’Kell, “Two Nations,” 211–12), is also his most enduring fictional text. In fact, _Sybil, or, The Two Nations_ suffers somewhat from its own enduring popularity, or at least the enduring popularity of its subtitle. This subtitle, “The Two Nations,” and the doctrine that it represents have come to dominate present perceptions of Disraeli’s _Sybil_. The novel’s theory of social division is first proposed to the novel’s hero, Charles Egremont, in the ruins of Marney Abbey:

> “Two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws.”
> “You speak of—” said Egremont, hesitantly.
> “THE RICH AND THE POOR.” (II.5.65–66)

From the moment of _Sybil_’s publication on 8 May 1845, critics have fastened on this succinct explanation of the condition of England, making it independent of and larger than the novel in which it first appears.

In the nineteenth century, Disraeli’s image of the divided nation became a powerful metaphor for those seeking to reform English society. The Reverend A. Hume drew on the two nations doctrine, for example, when he lamented in _Conditions of Liverpool, Religious and Social_ (1858), “It is altogether an anomaly, and a crying evil, in a christian land, that two communities whose members dwell within sound of the same bells and under the same rule of the same chief magistrate, should in many respects be practically as wide apart as if they resided in two separate quarters of the globe” (qtd. Susan Williams 3). Similarly, Deborah Epstein Nord has demonstrated that many reform-minded “urban explorers” combined Disraeli’s two nations image with the kind of global difference suggested by Hume and “developed the habit of comparing the English inhabitants of Victorian slums to Aborigines, South Sea Islanders and, most frequently, to African tribes” (118). As Nord’s argument makes clear, the nineteenth-century reformist urge to appropriate the “Two Nations” doctrine from _Sybil_ in order to generate sympathy for the poor could also be used to make the poor appear wholly other, and thus unsuited for meaningful participation in society. Unfortunately, many twentieth-century readers have followed in this same tradition, remembering _Sybil_ mainly for its subtitle and thus unfairly aligning it, however unintentionally, with uncritical class prejudice.43

However, as Robert O’Kell points out, the concept of the “two nations” is finally rejected by Egremont as a false doctrine that sustains class-based and religious prej-
Though O’Kell is concerned mainly with how the “Two Nations” doctrine sustains Sybil’s prejudice, his point may be expanded in order to explain the effects of a number of characters’ (and readers’) firm belief in societal binarism. Morley’s own prejudicial belief in the “Two Nations” doctrine finally prompts him to conspire with Bishop Hatton to assault Mowbray Castle (V.11), where he is shot and killed by a division of yeomanry led by Egremont. What Egremont and the reader come to learn is that the “Two Nations” doctrine is insufficient to explain what Brantlinger calls the complex “diversity of the class system,” which in England is filled with spuriously titled aristocrats like the Marneys and the Firebraces, latent working-class nobility like the Gerards, independent but morally flawed mechanics like Bishop Hatton and the Hellcats, and equally flawed masters like Diggs (Brantlinger, “Tory-Radicalism,” 17).

These characters complicate the fallaciously simple binary opposition between the rich and the poor in two ways simultaneously. At the level of fact, the novel leaves no doubts about their moral and social worth. Lord Marney has as little compassion for his grossly underpaid tenants as, being the descendant of “a confidential domestic of one of the favourites of Henry VIII” (I.3.9), he does for legitimate claims to a noble title. By contrast, though one of the leaders of moral force Chartism, Walter Gerard is descended from dispossessed Saxon nobility. Other working men do not share Gerard’s latent nobility, however; Bishop Hatton, for example, is described by Stephen Morley as “a clear brain and a bold spirit; you have no scruples, which indeed are generally the creatures of perplexity rather than of principle” (V.11.343). These “scruples” that Hatton lacks should be taken as roughly equivalent to the German Sitten, the fabric of custom that healthfully holds society together. Lacking this crucial component of cultural regulation makes Hatton capable of abusing his apprentices, assaulting the Trafford factory and leading the Plug Riots. These and the novel’s other cast of characters are then juxtaposed throughout the text, adding to the confusion of any simple binary division of England by their very incongruousness. This technique of juxtaposition has been identified by Daniel Schwarz as “Disraeli’s principle mode of rhetorical argument,” occurring at the level of character and scene to construct meaning through opposition (“Art and Argument,” 24).

Undoubtedly the critic to get the most mileage from this mode of rhetorical argument is Catherine Gallagher, who, in The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction, offers the most cogent and theoretically sophisticated analysis of Sybil in print. Arguing that Disraeli’s task in Sybil is “to legitimize one kind of representation through opposition while delegitimizing another” (203), or to establish “an identity of interests” between the aristocracy and the poor while discrediting “a new usurping oligarchy of aristocratic families” whose claims to the peerage rest on spurious grounds (202,
203), Gallagher concludes that “the novel ultimately legitimizes both” (203). In other words, *Sybil* attempts to proffer a theory of political representation—Tory Democracy—but fails because of its own energetic efforts to discredit the novel’s aristocracy through ironic representation.

This theory of Tory Democracy rests in part on a complex binary opposition between the rich and the poor that at once firmly differentiates between them while asserting that their extreme difference aligns their political interests. However, as Gallagher notes, the “binary structure of the book finally impresses us . . . not with the differences between the classes, but with their similarities,” since in “*Sybil* both typical aristocrats and workers are not so much representatives of their own class as ironic representatives of the opposite class” (203). She demonstrates this similarity through a close comparative reading of the abruptly juxtaposed dinners of Dandy Mick and Devilsdust at the Temple of the Muses, a working-class club (II.10), and of the de Mowbray party at de Mowbray’s country house (II.11) (Gallagher, *Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, 203–4). After suggesting but not analyzing a number of other parallel scenes, including “A Parliamentary division . . . followed by a trade union initiation” (204), Gallagher concludes that

All of these and many other passages direct our attention to the underlying ways in which the classes indicate one another. This ironic form of representation through opposition, then, is morphologically similar to Disraeli’s wished-for political system. . . . According to Tory Democracy, however, representation through opposition should bring out the best in both classes. . . . The novel’s ironic representations, on the other hand, bring out the worst in both classes: their common pretension, selfishness, and ignorance.

Despite its structural similarity to Disraeli’s political ideal, therefore, irony is not a means of infusing facts with values in *Sybil*; rather, it is a means of devaluing what should be significant facts. (205)

In other words, the ironic similarities between the two nations produces a breakdown of signification in which the “fact” of aristocratic social standing can no longer serve as a guarantee of noble “value.” Gallagher concentrates on this gap between the “aristocratic signifier and its signified” in order to reveal Disraeli’s underlying vision of history and the subsequent collapse of his ideal of political representation through literary irony (205).

However, this breakdown of signification can also be traced through Gallagher’s neglected parallel between a Parliamentary division and Dandy Mick’s trade union initiation in order to demonstrate the degree to which Disraeli’s ironic representation of the collapse of social binaries depends on the figure of the secret society.
This figure is most overtly invoked by Dandy Mick’s initiation into a secret trade union. Brought by his friend, Devilsdust, to a seemingly deserted warehouse in a suburb of Mowbray, Mick is confronted by “two forms which he hoped were human” (IV.4.218). Efficiently subduing him and bandaging his eyes, these “two awful sentries” lead him through a maze of rooms until he is “in the presence of the SEVEN” (IV.4.218–19). These SEVEN turn out to be the executive committee of a local trade union. They preside over a series of denunciations of both workers and masters for actions ranging from accepting only piece work—the practice of being paid by the task rather than by the hour—to firing workers because of their membership in the union. Once the denunciations are completed, the SEVEN then lead the union members in a prayer and in singing the “Hymn of Labour.”

After these preliminary matters, Mick’s eyes are uncovered, revealing to him and to the reader the spectacle of a trade union initiation. The walls of the room are hung with black cloth, and at an elevated table sit “seven persons in surplices and masked, the president on a loftier seat; above which, on a pedestal, was a skeleton complete” (IV.4.220). Guarding the skeleton and Mick are four disguised men armed with drawn swords and battle-axes, and sitting on the table is a bible. In the presence of these ritual forms, Mick is then sworn into the union on the following oath:

Do you voluntarily swear in the presence of Almighty God and before these witnesses, that you will execute with zeal and alacrity, so far as in you lies, every task and injunction that the majority of your brethren, testified by the mandate of this grand committee, shall impose upon you, in furtherance of our common welfare, of which they are the sole judges; such as the chastisement of Nobs, the assassination of oppressive and tyrannical masters, or the demolition of all mills, works and shops that shall be deemed incorrigible? (IV.4.221)

This oath and the ritual surrounding it should look familiar since, as Brantlinger points out, “The oath which Dandy Mick takes is that which the Glasgow spinners were accused of using. Disraeli gives it to us verbatim, and the rest of the details of union ritual come from the evidence taken by the Committee on Combinations” (“The Case,” 39).47

However, the union oath and ritual also bear a certain similarity to something much closer to hand: Disraeli’s description in the previous chapter of a Parliamentary division. This description is necessarily sketchy, since “The mysteries of the Lobby are only for the initiated” (IV.3.211), but the reader is permitted to see the prelude to the division. Foreshadowing the perspective of the blindfolded Dandy Mick, the chapter begins with a disembodied voice announcing “STRANGERS must withdraw” (IV.3.210), followed by the overheard exchange

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of a pair of insiders who talk of the mysterious practice of “pairing,” which seems to mean leaving in pairs before being forced to vote. While the division bell continues ringing, peers, diplomatists and members rush about in apparent confusion, and then, “The doors were locked” (IV.3.211), effectively removing from the uninitiated view the internal proceedings of Parliament. As the novel had earlier remarked, “the obscure majority, who, under our present constitution, are destined to govern England, are as secret as a Venetian conclave” (I.6.37).

One might also say “as secret as a trade union meeting,” given the proximity of this scene to Dandy Mick’s entry into the initiated and the novel’s penchant for rhetorical argument through juxtaposition. In fact, this tendency toward conspiratorial secrecy seems to be the crux of the narrative’s representation of the unrepresentability of the Parliamentary division. Just like trade unions, Parliament can be described using the figure of the secret society. Of course, the irony of this representation of Parliamentary secrecy is that it comes from an initiate—Disraeli had been elected to the House of Commons in 1837—one who could show the inner workings if he so chooses, but who instead decides to preserve the division between outsiders and initiates that he critiques. In many ways, this final assertion of his own privileged position as an insider cements the relationship between “the SEVEN” and the House of Commons better than any exposure could have done by embodying the analogous secretive practices that make the authority of both groups possible.

III. Conclusions

Together, the Trial, Barnaby Rudge and Sybil demonstrate the inherent instability of any attempt to demonize trade unions and thereby deny the working classes democratic representation by evoking the figure of the secret society. In the Trial, the supposedly clear relation between the jury’s verdict and the truth of the case is not adhered to by the judges, who attempt to recast the spinners and trade unions more generally as un-English others unfit for full citizenship by locating them within a rhetoric of conspiracy. This strategy is further reinforced by the weight of a Parliamentary Report and of Carlyle’s allusions in Chartism to Indian Thuggee. However, the prominence accorded to secretive practices in this negative definition of Englishness always has the potential to work in reverse. Dickens’s Barnaby Rudge shows how secretive practices are central not only to trade unions, but also to more upper-class institutions like the Protestant Association, and possibly even the government’s attempts to maintain a network of social observation. Sybil follows this initial insight with the implication that the Parliamentary division between outsiders and initiates might also bear some similarity to trade unions’ practices of secrecy. The result of all this
attention is that the attempted application of the figure of the secret society, and the attendant emphasis on secrecy as the essence of meaning, backfires as English institutions at all levels can be shown to employ secretive practices.

That this result was always already present in the figure of the secret society seems evident from the degree to which both Dickens and Disraeli continue to function within the structure of feeling of the trial. Neither seriously questions that trade unions employ secretive practices, as their mutual reliance on the Committee Report as reprinted in The Annual Register for 1838 makes evident. Both also rely on the intellectual construction of social binaries fostered by the trial to construct their texts: Dickens’s characteristic motif of doubling and Disraeli’s mode of argument-by-juxtaposition. Even the eventual implications of their fictions reproduce two observations that went largely unexamined at the time of the trial. Both the Tait’s article, “The Trial of the Glasgow Spinners,” and the Parliamentary speech given by Daniel O’Connell, suggest that combinations may be more widespread than popular prejudice allowed, that the House of Lords, the House of Commons, and the Temple Bar might all be legitimately seen as trades’ unions of the more well-to-do, making the spinners union not a dangerously un-English other, but a disturbingly familiar and very “English” mirrored self.

Ironically, neither Dickens nor Disraeli would have been entirely comfortable with these implications of their own texts. Middle-class liberalism and Tory Democracy were both grounded in some ways on a definition of Englishness that included a deep distrust of secretive practices, especially among the working classes. Despite their authors’ political biases, however, the novels finally undermine the basis for this definition of Englishness altogether by emptying the figure of the secret society of its particularizing significance. If a supposedly “English” institution like Parliament is also “un-English” by virtue of its reliance on practices of secrecy, then attempting to cast trade unions as dangerous others by labeling them secret societies seems ironically counter-hegemonic. In fact, insisting upon the binary opposition between secret and open societies makes the Thugs appear every bit as English as the House of Commons.