The New Revenge and the Old Retribution: Insights from Monte Cristo

by Linda Ross Meyer

For many years, the philosophy of punishment, though oscillating between utilitarian theory and retributive theory, has declared one principle self-evident: punishment is not revenge. The utilitarian account has it that one of the central purposes of public punishment is to provide an alternative to the evils of blood feud and vigilantism. The retributivist argues that retribution is antithetical to revenge, for punishment is about righting the wrong in the offender, without hatred or anger, and victims do not have standing to punish. As Austin Sarat put it, “[i]n their unceasing efforts to overcome id with superego and to construct a legitimating ideology, modern legal orders seek to substitute the calm calculation of deterrence, the empathetic understanding of rehabilitation, and the stern, but controlled, discipline of retribution for the emotionalism of revenge.” (Sarat, 2002: 307).

Yet, recent scholarship has, from many angles, begun to legitimate the would-have-been-heresy that punishment should be victim-centered, not offender-centered; that it should acknowledge and even perhaps dignify emotions of righteous anger and even hatred; that it should recognize the right of victims to have a say in the accusation and sentencing of those who have wronged them. In the philosophical literature, Jean Hampton and Jeffrie Murphy first suggested that anger and hate could be righteous, and that retributivism should be reformulated to recognize that the wrong to be righted was not a defect in the soul or character of the offender, but the “affront to a victim’s value or dignity.” (Hampton 1992: 1666; Hampton & Murphy 1988). Robert Solomon rehabilitates vengeance as “a socially constructed emotion that can be cultivated to contain not only its own limits but a full appreciation of the general good and the
law as well.” (Solomon, 1999: 144).

In legal academic circles, George Fletcher suggests that the purpose of the criminal trial “is neither to change society nor to rectify a metaphysical imbalance in the moral order,” but to “stand by the victim,” (Fletcher 1996: 256) and he offers up procedural reforms to allow victims standing in the criminal process. Alon Harel and Gideon Parchomovsky argue that the purpose of criminal punishment should be fairly providing protection against crime to victims, not calculating the wrongfulness or culpability of the offender. (Harel et al. 1999).

Offices of Victim’s Rights have become a commonplace feature of the law enforcement institution; victims are allowed to participate in sentencing offenders through victim impact statements, victims are allowed to watch executions and victims are consulted with regard to plea bargains. (Dubber, 1999). A “victim’s rights” amendment to the Constitution was proposed. (Cassell, 1999). Victim-prosecuted claims for civil penalties and punitive damages have gained new support. (Galanter et al. 1993).

The law and economics and game theory literature has been most explicit in arguing that revenge is a necessary part of maintaining norms, and the reinterpretation of criminal wrongs as wrongs to the victim (rather than as wrongs against the community) has led many to question the punishment of vigilantes. (Ayyildiz, 1995; Hine, 1998).

“Therapeutic” jurisprudence writings have argued that punishment should be, at least in part, a way for victims to achieve closure and peace. (Coates et al., 2000; Bandes, 2000). This notion has had especially broad resonance in the culture generally, as “closure” becomes “the buzzword of the Victims’ Rights Movement,” (Rapping, 2000: 673) and has even become an independent justification for harsh penalties. (Kanwar, 2001).
Given the surprising resurgence and sudden respectability of revenge, I ask here what is this revenge that victims desire? If a victim had unlimited time, power, and authority over her wrongdoer, what would she wish to do? How would it achieve a return of her dignity, and how would it effect closure and peace? In short, what is the nature of revenge?

There are many ways to investigate this question — one could talk with victims (Gross et al., 2003) or review historical accounts or conduct simulation experiments — and all of these things have been done. But none of them tell us what the “ideal” revenge would be, for the nature of the world is such that revenge is always delayed or denied somehow. To determine what ideal revenge would be is to conduct a thought experiment, but it should be one that has sufficient, deep, and enduring resonance to give us intimations of moral truth. Alexandre Dumas has given us one such case in his enduringly popular masterpiece, The Count of Monte Cristo.5

Dumas’ intriguing character, Edmund Dantès, is the victim who has the luxury of unlimited time, wealth, and power to avenge himself against his wrongdoers. He is able to create, as his last name alludes, his own personal Inferno.6 To follow Dantès is to learn something important, however incomplete, about the nature of revenge.

The Enemies

Edmond Dantès, as we meet him, is a valiant, honest, open, generous, trusting sailor, about to become the captain of his own ship and to marry the woman he loves. But he has a premonition that all will not be well. “I cannot think that man is meant to find happiness so easily! Happiness is like one of those palaces on an enchanted island, its gates guarded by dragons. One must fight to gain it; and, in truth, I do not know what I have done to deserve the good fortune of becoming Mercédès’ husband.” (34) Sure enough, Dantès’ enemies plot against
him. Danglars, the greedy and jealous ship’s bursar, fears that Dantès’ captaincy will destroy his opportunity to continue embezzling from Morrel, the ship’s owner. Fernand, who is in love with Dantès’ beautiful fiancée Mercédès, wants to stop the marriage (without a direct confrontation with Dantès). And their confederate, the greedy Cadarousse, will be happy to keep their plot quiet for a bottle of wine and the power to blackmail them both.

Danglars knows that Dantès is to deliver a letter from the exiled Bonaparte. Dantès does not know the contents of the letter, and undertook the commission only at the request of his dying captain. But Dantès’ naive sense of duty gives Fernand and Danglars a convenient excuse to denounce him to the local authorities. Dantès is arrested at his betrothal feast and brought before the ambitious assistant public prosecutor, Villefort. The young prosecutor is struck by the coincidence that he, too, was summoned from his own betrothal feast to hear the case. His first impulse of fellow-feeling, however, is soon smothered by more ambitious thoughts, as he composes on this theme a “philosophical analogy” “designed to elicit applause” in his future father-in-law’s salon. (55).

Convinced of Dantès’ innocence after interrogating him, Villefort is about to release him. But just as he is gathering his hat and gloves, he learns from Dantès that the Bonapartist who was to receive this treasonous letter is his own father, Noirtier. To preserve his career, Villefort burns the incriminating letter and consigns Dantès to the island prison Chateau D’If — the Alcatraz of its time. The bewildered Dantès finds himself in a dungeon, completely ignorant of who is responsible for his fate.

The Path of Victimization

Dantès’ suffering in the dungeon is a progressive loss of ignorance, and innocence. When
first interviewed by Villefort, Dantès declared that if his enemies “were to be among my friends, I should rather not know who they are, so as not to be obliged to hate them,” and he was then so very ironically urged by Villefort to “always see clearly how one stands.” (56).

Once in the Chateau D’If, Dantès began with pride and hope that his innocence would be discovered. After time, he “came to doubt his own innocence.” He “fell from the summit of his pride and prayed, not to God, but to men; God is the last refuge.” (114) Finally, having “exhausted every human resource” (115), Dantès turned to God. When, despite his prayers, he remained a prisoner, “[f]ury followed asceticism. Edmond’s curses made his jailer start back in horror. He dashed himself against the walls of his prison and raged against everything around him.” (Id.) Then, the informer’s letter came back to his mind. “He decided that it was human hatred and not divine vengeance that had plunged him into this abyss. He doomed these unknown men to every torment that his inflamed imagination could devise, while still considering that the most frightful were too mild and, above all, too brief for them: torture was followed by death, and death brought, if not repose, at least an insensibility that resembled it.” (115-16). The thought of death, finally, brought Dantès to try suicide.

Dantès loses more than his future, his fiancée, and his freedom. We are told that he loses his pride and self-confidence. He doubts his own innocence. He grovels before his jailors with no sense of dignity. Finally, he loses his faith in God and his very will to live. His misfortune is so great and so undeserved that he later tells his mentor and fellow prisoner, Faria, “I should wish, so that I may no longer blaspheme against God as I have occasionally done, to have some men whom I could blame for my misfortune.” (139).

What Dantès’ enemies have taken from him, is his dignity, self-confidence, and pride. As
contemporary writers remind us so insistently, crime victims suffer shame and loss of both dignity and self esteem. Yet, Dumas makes clear that it is not Dantès’ suffering per se that shames him, but the senselessness of it. He suffers because he cannot understand his fate, because it does not accord with his vision of a just universe.

Dantès has three ways to make sense of his misfortune. One, he deserves it. His enemies are right and he is wrong. He is somehow, inexplicably, guilty, and he should die. Two, there is no sense to his suffering. His world has been turned upside down, chaos, not cosmos reigns, and God must be dead. Or, three, others are to be blamed. If so, then he can still have hope “in time and silence” for the universe to be placed back in balance through his enemies’ fall. As for many victims, anger will mask his shame, (Scheff, 1998) and revenge will be the remedy, because revenge will put the world back in order. Revenge will be his proof of the existence of God.

As Dantès is suffering these thoughts and feelings, and slowly dying of self-imposed starvation, he discovers the Abbe Faria tunneling toward his cell. Dantès’ hope is revived, his fellow-feeling is restored. Faria becomes his teacher, mentor, and prison father. Faria helps him discover the identity of his enemies and thereby “insinuate[s] a feeling into [Dantès’] heart that was not previously there: the desire for revenge.” (145)

As the familiar story goes, Faria dies in prison, leaving Dantès a map to an immense treasure and a means of escape. Faria hopes that Dantès will use it for good, but Dantès plans to use it to harm his enemies. He considers his deliverance a sign that he is to become an angel of Providence — the means by which God will restore the balance of right and wrong. He wants “to be Providence, because the thing that I know which is finest, greatest and most sublime in the world is to reward and to punish.” (477)
The Perfect Vengeance

Dantès now has the power and mission of an ideal avenger. How does he choose to use this power? First he gathers information about his targets. He follows the careers of Danglars and Fernand, learning of all Danglars ill-gotten gains and of Fernand’s ill-gotten honor, carefully gathering evidence and witnesses to all their crimes. He confirms from the greedy Cadarousse that Danglars and Fernand are responsible for the letter denouncing him and he learns of the loyalty of his former employer, Morrell.

Then, we learn, he spends years making a study of forms of punishment. After having “made a comparative study executions in different parts of the world” (332), Dantès decides that “death may be a torment, but it is not an expiation” (332) and that there are “crimes for which the impalement à la turque, or Persian burial alive, or the whips of the Iraqis would be too mild.” (333). It is not merely the suffering or death of his enemies that he seeks, but something “slow, deep, infinite [and] eternal.” (333) He does not merely kill his enemies or torture them or even procure their own imprisonment. Instead he spends nearly ten years more of self-denial, stalking them and making elaborate plans for the perfect revenge.

The reader is drawn into the captivating power of Dantès, now resurrected as the Count of Monte Cristo, whose ancestors, quips journalist Beauchamp, “might have owned Calvary.” (389). He constructs punishments exquisitely tailored to each of his enemies, though all these punishments share the following elements: 1) each enemy suffers a kind of rebound of his own character upon himself, 2) each enemy loses that for which he committed the crimes against Dantès, 3) each enemy suffers public humiliation, and 4) each enemy, in the end, knows that his downfall is due to Dantès. I argue that each of these elements of Dantès’ revenge looks more
like a perfected offender-centered retributive justice rather than the victim-centered vengeance that would “stand by the victim,” grant restitution to the victim, or reestablish the victim’s self-esteem or social standing through the offender’s humiliation.

Rebound of Wrong

The first and most interesting aspect of Dantès’ revenge is that he takes great pains to bring upon his enemies the “natural” consequences of their own evil characters. He makes them, in effect, live by their own law. This is the measure of classic retributive justice, not the vengeance measure of making the enemy suffer as the victim did. Dantès does not demand that his revenge be exactly measured by the extent of his own suffering and loss (except in conversation). None of them are cast into the Chateau D’If. None of them undergo years of starvation or privation. Most importantly, none of them suffer the painful moral vertigo of not understanding why they are suffering. On the contrary, Dantès makes very sure they see their suffering as punishment, not misfortune.

All of these elements resonate with retributive justice. The criminal must suffer the application to himself of the law of his own making, so that he may once again be brought within the umbrella of reason and treated as having made the choice of a person with reason, applicable to all reasonable beings. (Moore, 1997; Hegel, 1967; Morris, 1981). He cannot stand outside the community as an other or an exception, for that would be to strip his actions of the universal import and meaning they have as the choices of a being with reason. In retributive punishment, Hegel says, the criminal should come to see his punishment as “nothing save his own act.” (Hegel, 1967, para 100, 220).

Dantès’ revenge is of just this sort, carefully engineered through years of painstaking
manipulations.

For Fernand, the cowardly soldier, Dantès orchestrates a public accusation of treason, exposing Fernand’s claims to honorable military service as false. His wife and son then desert the deserter.

For Danglars, the greedy banker, Dantès turns his own greed against him, ruining him publicly by exposing his would-be rich son-in-law as a pretender, and ruining his fortune by reversing his scheme of trading on public secrets. Danglars is finally captured by bandits at Dantès’ instigation, and suffers the extortion he inflicted on others.

For Cadarousse, Dantès turns his own blackmail against him, causing him to be shot by his own confederate.

And for Villefort, the ambitious and compassionless prosecutor, Dantès arranges a public exposure of the crimes he has so bloodlessly committed in order to achieve his position, as well as inducing his equally ambitious wife to commit murder within Villefort’s own family.

To the reader’s keenest satisfaction, the plunderer is plundered, the traitor betrayed, the blackmailer blackmailed, and the ambitious deposed by ambition. Each suffers the law of his own making; each experiences the universal ricochet of his own character.

Forfeiture not Restitution

Retributive justice also requires the forfeiture of ill-gotten gains, the disgorgement of that for which the crime was committed. This measure is different from the measure of civil damages, which are designed to restore the victim to his pre-victimized position. A victim-centered, revenge-based paradigm would suggest restitutionary remedies rather than forfeiture. But Dantès does not take any restitution from his enemies: Danglars’ gold is given away to
hospitals and Dantès does not even reclaim the love of Mercèdes. Instead, the loss suffered by each of his enemies is that for which their crimes were committed — the ill-gotten gains.

Fernand loses Mercèdes, his honor and then, most precious to a coward, his life. Danglars the greedy loses his fortune. Cadarousse the blackmailer is shot in the back by his friends. And Villefort, who attained his own position by cool, rational calculation, loses his heir, his status and, most precious of all, his reason. The Court gains nothing tangible from all this, but on the contrary, spends a large fortune bringing it about.

Public Humiliation

The public humiliation aspect of Dantès’ revenge seems at first to be in accord with victim-centered theories of punishment. Villefort’s crime is uncovered in court, Fernand’s is uncovered at the legislative assembly, and Danglars is publicly embarrassed at his daughter’s engagement party. (Cadarousse is not publicly humiliated).

Jean Hampton’s argument, adopted by and extended by others, (Kahan, 1996), that the public punishment of an offender takes away his false position of domination vis-a-vis the victim and thereby restores the dignity he robbed from the victim,\textsuperscript{14} would suggest that public exposure is essential to punishment. Victims are to have standing in court, to be able to be present and speak, to be able to witness the punishment. The necessity of publicity is less obvious from the standpoint of retributivism.

Yet at none of these moments of public exposure does Dantès reveal himself in public as the triumphant victim, and he is personally present at only the engagement party. In fact, he is careful not to be present at the accusation of Fernand or Villefort. And though Dantès exposes other crimes committed by his enemies, he does not expose the crime they committed against
him. If the shaming of his enemies is meant somehow to enable him to reassert his own dignity and value, as Hampton and Kahan suggest, Dantès does not seem to require this. He doesn’t even bother to clear his true name in public — even in the end when his revenge is complete. Instead, he reveals his true identity before no one except his enemies and his close friends; yet neither his enemies nor his close friends had a false opinion of his character to dispel. Even if the “dignity” to be restored is intangible, Dantès is not even present to bear witness to it. So, it seems that the public event of humiliating his enemies is not for the purpose of raising the status or clearing the name of Dantès, as a victim-centered view might suggest.

There is another account to be given here. The public exposure of his enemies is necessary not to restore Dantès’ reputation or dignity, but simply to unmask the criminals. Here, Dantès takes on the character of a public prosecutor, acting on behalf of the universal Law, and bringing the Truth to actuality, as Hegel would have it. Indeed, Hegel tells us that it is only through the institution of courts of justice, where crime is perceived to be not against an individual, but against an entire community, that Law can come into play in the world, be seen and felt and lived.15

The public exposure of Dantès’ enemies is the very opposite of a private vendetta discharged by a discreet duel or shadowy murder, and indeed, Fernand and Albert (at first) blame Dantès for not seeking revenge privately. They believe the public exposure to be officious on Dantès’ part. But Dantès here presumes to transcend the personal and plays the part of Providence — absolute justice come to earth.

Confronting the Offender

But surely, the final aspect of Dantès’ revenge is victim-centered, for in each case Dantès
makes himself personally known to his enemy as the agent of his downfall. Surely this is the moment of his triumphing over them, showing his equality with them at last. Even here, however, the victim-centered paradigm is at best incomplete, for the point of Dantès’ last interview with his offenders does not seem to be just in order to gain a personal triumph over them (though that is what happens in part), or to make them crawl and beg for mercy, or to establish dominance and mastery, or even to reassert his own equality.

Instead, each of these moments of revelation is primarily a moment of conversion — the sheer improbability of Dantès’ return strikes into his enemies’ hearts a fear, not of Dantès, but of God. Each sees his own fate, his own life, as under the power of a higher order and a higher justice. Each understands his punishment as just and deserved, and each has the opportunity to repent.

In his last moments, Cadarousse declares to Dantès (who is disguised as Abbe Busoni), “[i]f there was any divine justice, you know as well as anyone that there are people who would be punished, but who are not.” (804) ... “There is no God, there is no Providence. There is only chance.” (805) Dantès replies “There is both Providence and God ... [t]he proof is that you are lying there, desperate, denying God, and I am standing before you, rich, happy, healthy and safe, clasping my hands before the God in whom you try not to believe.” (805). Cadarousse demands, “But who are you then?” (806) When Dantès then reveals his real name, Cadarousse cries, “Oh, God, forgive me for denying You! You do indeed exist. You are the father of men in heaven and their judge on earth.” (806).

Fernand comes to Dantès to challenge him to a duel. But when Dantès reveals who he really is, “a face rejuvenated by the joy of revenge, a face that you must have seen often in your
dreams since your marriage ... to my fiancée Mercédès!” (877) Fernand, “his head thrown back, his hands held out, his eyes staring, watched this dreadful spectacle in silence. Then, reaching out for the wall and leaning on it, he slid slowly along it to the door, out of which he retreated backwards, giving this one, single, lugubrious, lamentable, heart-rending cry: ‘Edmond Dantès!’” (877). Fernand stumbled to his carriage, “fell into the arms of his valet,” and rode home to commit suicide. (Id.)

Even the vestige of personal triumph is gone when Dantès confronts Villefort. Villefort has already felt his downfall as “the hands of a vengeful God.” (1018). But when Dantès reveals his identity, it is Villefort’s turn to accuse, for both his wife and son are dead. “‘You are Edmond Dantès!’ cried Villefort, seizing the court by the wrist, ‘then come with me!’ ... showing the count the bodies of his wife and child. ‘There! Look! Are you fully revenged?’” (1024). Dantès turns pale. Villefort curses Dantès, but then Villefort goes mad “his eyes bursting out of their sockets and ... the veins of his temples swell[ing] with boiling ferments that tried to burst the narrow vault of his skull and drown his brain in a deluge of fire.” (1025). We last see him digging in the garden for his missing son.

Finally, when Dantès reveals himself to Danglars, he first asks Danglars to repent “of the evil you have done.” (1066). Dantès then forgives him, revealing that he is “the one whom you sold, betrayed and dishonoured ... the one upon whom you trampled in order to attain a fortune ... the one whose whose father you condemned to starvation, and the one who condemned you to starvation, but who none the less forgives you, because he himself needs forgiveness. I am Edmond Dantès.” (1066). Danglars “gave a single cry and fell, prostrate” in a stupor that lasts until the next morning, when he discovers “his hair had turned grey.” (Id.).
The revelation of Dantès as the agent of punishment is, in part, a way to demonstrate to his offenders that they did not get away with anything. As in the retributivist demand that a defendant understand not only \textit{that} he is being punished, but \textit{why} he is being punished,\textsuperscript{16} Dantès’ revelation of his identity gives the suffering of his enemies a meaning and a sense — it is divine retribution, not mere revenge. Indeed, when Villefort’s son is poisoned, Dantès blanches — he does not want to be “fully revenged” — he wants justice. He fears he has gone too far.

In sum, what Dantès, the ideal avenger, desires is not revenge, but justice. It would be hard to distinguish the vengeance Dantès inflicts from the retributivism of Hegel or Kant. The retributivist imagines the offender confronting the universal law of his own making, suffering the rebound of his own character. And the retributivist, like Dantès, sees this occurring in the public forum, where all can witness the actualization of justice, the coming to appearance of law. Falsity is replaced with truth; appearance with actuality. As in the conversion of Cadarousse, the existence of God is proved by the appearance of justice. Chaos is abolished; cosmos reestablished.

So, Dantès as ideal victim doesn’t want to watch his enemies suffer and die merely, nor does he want restitution, or a public proceeding reaffirming his honor. It is not enough to give Dantès back riches, security, social position, or even happiness. He wants, he thirsts for, he longs for, he suffers for, justice. He wants his enemies to live by their own law, and to understand themselves as bound by reason, to understand their fate as deserved, to see that they are living in a world where justice prevails. He wants justice, because only justice can banish Dantès’ doubts about the meaning of it all. Only justice can prove the existence of God.

But, as Villefort’s final accusation makes clear, Dumas does not leave us with this
triumphant conclusion. He does not allow us to be so completely comfortable. There is a darker side to this revenge-as-justice. But to fully understand the character of this darker side, Dumas first asks us to contrast an older form of vengeance.

Avenging Honor

Unlike Dantès’ search for vengeance, which carries a metaphor of balancing the universal order, other characters in the novel seek vengeance in order to restore honor or cleanse pollution. Robert Solomon perceptively notes that revenge plays on three metaphors: debt, balance, and pollution. The debt metaphor requires a “paying back” of like for like; the balance metaphor a “felt need to put the world back into balance,” and the pollution metaphor a “cleansing.” (Solomon, 1999: 141).

The former two are both reflected in Dantès’ vengeance, though “balance” predominates. Still the “Count” is concerned with accounting, as he tries to balance the scales of cosmic justice. But the pollution metaphor is reflected in a different understanding that crime “dishonors” the victim, and as in the Orestia, the avenger is required to purify the family to restore honor. The Count, by contrast, uses the language of honor seldom in giving reasons for his vengeance, and he dismisses the conventional form of honor-vengeance, dueling, as sufficient only for insult, but not for crime (333-34).

Still, the book is full of honor avengers, including Dantès’ charge-d’affaires, Bertuccio, who has sworn vengeance against Villefort for refusing to prosecute the assassination of his brother. And Dantès consorts with and perhaps even invites vengeance out-laws to shelter on Monte Cristo.

The pollution metaphor is most explicit in the story of Rita, a long aside told to Albert
and Franz by their innkeeper. A bandit, Cucumetto, captured the young girl Rita while she awaited her love, Carlini. When he discovered her plight, Carlini arranged for Rita to be ransomed, instead of gang-raped by the band of outlaws as is the “common law.” (297). But Cucumetto betrayed him, raped Rita, prevented Carlini at gun point from aiding her, and then consigned her to “satisfy the lusts of the whole band.” (295) Carlini appeared to give up his defense of Rita, but while the others drew lots for their turn with her, he forestalled them by stabbing Rita in the heart. When her father arrived with the ransom, Carlini offered his life for hers: “if I was wrong, avenge her.” (299) The father replies, “[y]ou did well,” (id.) embraced Carlini and together they buried Rita’s body. The father, then, hanged himself. The clear message here is that crime pollutes; better to die than to be a victim.

The culture of honor is difficult to understand from our modern perspective. Trisha Olson gives the most penetrating insight into it when she writes:

In contrast to modern accounts of the nature of wrong, the medieval person experienced wrong as a sullying of another’s honor and dignity. It could be no other way. In a world where identity is not individualistic, but tied to, and dependent upon, our various relationships with others then a rupturing and blackening of a relationship is a blackening of both the wrongdoer and the one wronged. The idea of the psychology of the individual came at the end of the twelfth century. Until that time, the world was a place of deeds and those deeds took place between persons shaping, elevating or degrading the appearance of each. Hence, the feud commanded respect. It said that one was not ‘timid’ and would take action to restore his reputation (fama being the touchstone of whether one dwelled in a state of honor or shame.” (Olson, 2001: 475)

Only later is honor translated into a metaphysical, untouchable Kantian dignity, or a Hegelian will which cannot be touched by crime. But Dumas’ novel literally straddles the ancien regime and the modern one, covering the period of the French Revolution, the rise and fall of Napoleon, and the Restoration. The culture of honor still persists, but the state refuses to recognize it.
Legal justice fails twice then, argue Dumas’ Corsican characters — once in failing to avenge and twice in killing the avengers. Honor killings are driven underground, and in the process become ambiguous.

The ambiguity of vengeance crimes is highlighted several times in the book. For example, when Bertuccio asks Villefort for justice when his brother is murdered, Villefort refuses to consider the killing a murder, rather than a revenge: “There are disasters in every revolution ... Your brother was a victim of this one. It’s unfortunate, but it doesn’t mean that the government owes your family anything. If we were to try all the cases of reprisals that the supporters of the usurper carried out on those of the king when they were in power, then it could well be that your brother would be condemned to death. What happened was entirely natural, it’s the law of retaliation. ... He lived by the sword and he died by the sword.” (427) But Bertuccio responds “[y]ou are wrong, Monsieur. He lived by the sword, but he died by the dagger.” (Id.) Bertuccio then declares a vendetta against Villefort.

The ambiguity of revenge is also underscored later, when Bertuccio tells the Count how he stabbed (and believed he had killed) Villefort and stole a box he thought contained treasure. Dantès says “[i]t seems you committed a modest little murder, combined with robbery.” (430) But Bertuccio says, “No, Excellency, ... [i]t was a vendetta, combined with reparation.” (Id.) Perhaps Dantès is only toying with Bertuccio here, but the distinction between vendetta and murder has become fraught with doubt, as avengers jump from the murk behind pillars or bushes and stab their unarmed victims in the back.

Dueling was a way of clarifying the distinction between murder and vengeance, with its clear, gentlemanly rules of fairness. Villefort’s father, Noirtier, for example, produces a
document arguing that his killing of General Epinay was fair and just, because the death was the outcome of a duel, and therefore not a murder. But although Dantès is willing to fight a duel over an insult (and “more or less certain of killing my opponent” (333)), he does not believe a duel gives satisfaction of greater wrongs: “[Y]ou consider yourself revenged because you have run this man through with your sword or put a bullet in his head, after he has turned your mind to delirium and your heart to despair? Come, come! Even without considering that he is often the one who comes out of this contest on top, purged in the eyes of the world and in some respect pardoned by God ... No, no, ... in return for a slow, deep, infinite, eternal pain, I should return as nearly as possible a pain equivalent to the one inflicted on me.” (333)

Dantès seems a modern hero, then, who seeks something more than restored honor. He may also be crueler, for the avenger of honor does not seek to inflict “slow, deep, infinite, eternal pain,” but merely kills to cleanse. Dantès, however, takes vengeance to a metaphysical level. The wrong is a cosmic disharmony, not only a personal pollution. And he is no longer Dantès the sailor, but the Count of Monte Cristo — Calvary’s own accountant.

The Human and the Divine

In a gripping encounter with Villefort, who is described as “the living statue of the Law,” (472) the Count of Monte Cristo explains how superior divine justice is to mere human justice. He declares that he is one of the “invisible and exceptional” (477) agents of Providence, “whom God has set above office-holders, ministers, and kings” (474) whose mission is to reward and punish (477).

Repeatedly, Dantès asserts that he is an agent of divine justice, perfect justice, justice untainted by the usual foibles of the human justice, so “inadequate as a consolation.” (333) “I
have my own justice, high and low, which suspends no sentences and hears no appeals, which merely condemns or pardons.” (275). He rescues innocent men from execution, befriends worthy bandits, and seeks out the evil that escapes human administration.

But for all his being “millionaire and adroit” (334), his plans do not go smoothly. Because of his careful instigation (perhaps even solicitation) of Villefort’s wife to poison all who stand in the way of her son’s inheritance, Dantès’ friend Maximillian almost loses his love, Villefort’s daughter Valentine. When he realizes that his vengeance may rebound upon Maximillian, he cries like “a wounded lion,” (888) “God punishes the most boastful and the most detached of men for their indifference to the frightful scenes that He displays before them. I ... like the fallen angel, laughed at the evil that men do ... now I myself am bitten by that serpent whose progress I was observing.” (889). Later, he does not foresee that when Villefort’s wife finally poisons herself at Villefort’s command, she will also poison her young son. Dantès had earlier argued “[i]t is written in the Holy Book and the sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children .. why should I be better than God?” (851). Now, faced with the dead child, he “realized that he had exceeded the limits of vengeance, he realized that he could no longer say, ‘God is for me and with me.’” (1024). Dantès even comes to respect Fernand’s son, Albert, who he planned to kill and whose prospects he has ruined, and wonders how he can give back “the happiness I have taken away” from this innocent man. (991)

For all his careful and thorough planning, for all his investigations, he still is not omniscient or omnipotent. His justice is not perfect, his aim goes astray. He causes the innocent to suffer with the guilty, he unbalances the cosmic scales. The prophesy of Albert’s sober friend Franz, that “the one who pours himself a cup of vengeance is likely to drink a bitter draught,”
(334), is true after all. He cannot know or control the consequences of his actions — and indeed both the Count’s rewards and punishments rebound in unanticipated ways throughout the book.\textsuperscript{21} Neither rewards nor punishments can be confined to their targets.

Recognizing the imperfection of even his better justice, Dantès struggles to balance the scales, sparing Danglars’ life “because he himself needs forgiveness,” (1066) and bringing Maximillan and Valentine safe to each other. “I consider that restitution is a weight thrown back into the scales in the opposite tray from the one where I cast evil ... what would happen to me -- I, who am unable to atone for evil except by doing good..” (1072). He even plans to commit suicide “to punish” himself for the wrongs he has done on his path to perfect justice. (1076).

Justice and Ressentiment

But there is an even deeper question for Dantès. It is possible that he has not only unbalanced the scales, but that he should never have sought to play the part of Providence at all. Perhaps God is not on his side. Or worse, perhaps God is not. He asks himself, “can it be that in a single hour the architect can become convinced that the work into which he has put all his hopes was, if not impossible, then sacrilegious? I cannot accept that idea, because it would drive me mad.” (1036). He seeks constantly for evidence that he is meant to pursue this path, for signs that he is in the right. (1043, 1072). Yet, he doubts his mission. He has seen revenge as the proof of God’s existence. Justice is a way to avoid blasphemy, a way to keep his faith. But what if he is wrong? He agonizes, “Ah, I shall have to become a fatalist, after fourteen years of despair and ten years of hope had made me a believer in Providence.” (855).

There is something weak and heretical about a faith that requires human enemies in order to avoid losing faith in God. We blame humans for our suffering, because otherwise we cannot
make sense of it. Justice understood this way becomes a witch-hunt, a foil against facing the frightening thought that there is no sense to make of it all.

And, this background demand for a divine justice that we can make sense of, is itself a demand that God be reasonable, and that reason be God. We want an all-powerful reason, one that cannot pass away, one that is never defeated or changed. And so, our idea of divine justice, as something that is all-powerful reason, “infinite and eternal,” can even reach the past and wrap it in a justification from the future, uniting past and future in a timeless balance.

This unchanging justice is inevitably at war with the flux and finitude we are. We exist in time, and yet long to control it, stop it, rewind it, fix it, change it, erase it, complete it. As Nietzsche put it, “‘It was’: thus is the Will’s teeth-gnashing and lonesomest tribulation called. Impotent towards what hath been done -- it is a malicious spectator of all that is past ... This, yea, this alone is revenge itself: the Will’s antipathy to time, and its ‘It was.’” (Nietzsche, 1950: 155).

Justice, understood as a revenge against time, is even so a revenge against our own mortality (and therefore life itself), the ultimate form of life-negating nihilistic ressentiment.

Dantès admits to being an enemy of time. He says he has only three adversaries: distance, time, and mortality. (476) The first two his immense fortune allow him to overcome, but he worries that he will die before his mission is accomplished. Dantès races against his own mortality in trying to make the past present itself again and to make ghosts rise all around him: Villefort’s dead infant son is dramatically resurrected, Haydée, thought dead, comes back to haunt Fernand, Valentine is miraculously restored to life, and of course, Dantès himself is a ghost, come back from the grave. Dantès battles time, torquing it to his will, stopping and reversing and twisting it to achieve his “slow, profound, infinite, and eternal” justice.
Justice is the search for a perfectly rational, perfectly fair, perfectly meaningful universe. But we are not perfect and neither is our world. The fanatical quest for justice (and hence for humans to blame) may mask the disquieting and unsettling truth that the world does not make sense to us, that there is no easy explanation for why bad things happen to good people. That we find this truth so disquieting and unsettling in turn manifests a certain self-hatred and inability to reconcile ourselves to the uncertainty and mystery that come with being finite. 25 We, like Dantès, wish to defeat time.

Justice and Closure

Does Dantès, the avenged victim, achieve peace and closure at last? It certainly seems so, as he sails off into the sunrise with his new young bride, Haydée. Yet Dumas is careful to tell us that the peace he achieves at last is not due to his vengeance. Indeed, the end of his vengeance was, according to his plan, to be closure by death. He expected to finish his mission, and then commit suicide.

In his suffering in prison, he loses his youth, his family, his freedom, his future. He also loses his pride and his dignity. But in honing himself for vengeance, he realizes that he has lost something more. He explains to Mercèdes that “[f]rom then on, that fortune seemed to me a holy vocation; from then on, there was not one further thought in me for that life, the sweetness of which you, poor woman, have sometimes partaken. Not an hour of calm ... I loaded my weapons ... making my body used to the most violent exercise and my soul to the roughest shocks, teaching my arm to kill, my eyes to see suffering and my mouth to smile at the most dreadful of spectacles. Kind, trustful and forgiving as I was, I made myself vengeful, secretive and cruel — or rather, impassive like fate itself, which is deaf and blind.” (1034). Vengeance does not give
him back his humanity; instead he becomes, like Villefort, a “man of bronze,” and a “hammer of God.” (475).

Villefort’s own “conversion” makes the point as well. The professional prosecutor, the statue of the law, the man “like granite” (427) “cemented to his pedestal” (472) who has cut his name off in order to serve as a detached and ambitious professional, discovers that his own wife has been poisoning his family. “Today,” he tells himself, “the man who is to hold the sword of justice must strike wherever the guilty one may be.” (1001). “Impassive” (1003) he interrogates her: “Where do you keep the poison that you habitually use?” (1003). His trick question is that of an experienced interrogator, intentionally lacking in foundation. She asks whether she is to reply “to my husband or to the judge?” “To the judge, Madame, to the judge!” he replies. “I have been put on earth to punish,” (1005) he tells her, and despite her pleas as his wife and the mother of his son, he declares “I shall denounce you with my own lips and arrest you with my own hands.” (1006).

“The man who is to hold the sword of Justice,” however is Monte Cristo, and, ironically, Villefort becomes defendant rather than prosecutor when he arrives in court that day. His past crime of attempted infanticide is revealed as he unknowingly prosecutes his own son for murder. Like Cadarousse, he sees this as the vengeance of God. (1018) Suddenly he is struck by the brutality of his conduct toward his wife. “He had just assumed the role of implacable judge with this woman, condemning her to death.” (1020) For the first time he considers mercy to be “a good deed” (1021) and rushes home to pardon her, but it is too late; his wife and son are dead, and “this man, who had never felt pity for anyone, went to seek out the old man, his father, just so that in his weakness he might have someone to whom to tell his misfortune and someone with
whom to weep.” (1023).

The implacable avenger is also heartless. The peace that vengeance gives is the peace of not feeling anything, the peace of death. The closure is the closure of having one’s heart “torn out.” (854). Vengeance does not heal, it cauterizes. As Villefort so ironically prophesies at the beginning of the novel, “we do not repair wrongs, but avenge them, that is all.” (46).

Justice and Mercy

So how does Dantès achieve his happiness in the end, if not through vengeance? It is precisely because he has not managed to tear out his heart. He is still capable of loving Faria and staying with him until his death. He is still capable of being moved by Mercèdes’ plea for Albert’s life. He is still capable of loving Maximillian and Haydée and of forgiving Danglars.

The counterpoint to Dantès’ quest to balance the scales of justice is the character of Mercedes. For Dantès, the proof of God’s existence is justice, but for Mercèdes, the proof of God’s existence is, as her name itself suggests, mercy.

When Dantès returns, Mercèdes alone recognizes him, and her first greeting is a blessing “from the bottom of my heart.” (410) When Mercèdes’ son Albert challenges Dantès to a duel to recover the family’s honor, Mercèdes comes to beg Dantès to spare her son’s life. She asks him to “Forgive ... for my sake, forgive, for I love you still!” (851)

Her plea is much like that of Villefort’s wife, and Dantès’ initial answer much like his: “Disobey God, who roused me up to punish it! Impossible, Madame, impossible!” (851) But Mercèdes persists: “As long as I have known you, I have worshipped your name and respected you memory. My friend, do not ask me to tarnish that noble and pure image which is constantly reflected in the mirror of my heart.” (851-52).
Dantès is moved by her words, and he agrees not to harm Albert, though he believes it will mean his own death, and, more important, the failure of justice, which is to him as though “God had extinguished the sun and with His foot dashed the world into eternal night.” (853)

But for Mercèdes, Dantès’ willingness to end his pursuit of vengeance is “fine, it is great, it is sublime,” (853) and the fact that Dantès lives and is able to forgive proves “there is a God above us.” (Id.). She says “I have nothing further to ask of God . . . I have rediscovered you as noble and as great as ever.”(854)27

In the end, at their final meeting, Dantes tells her she has cause to hate him for causing “all your misfortunes,” (1032) and explains that vengeance made him an unfeeling agent of fate. “Enough, Edmond!” she says, “You may believe that the only person to recognize you was also the only one who could understand.” (1034) She forgives him — without “the glimmer of a reproach.” (1032)

Dantès, still trying to even the score, offers to give Mercèdes back her half of Fernand’s fortune, if she will agree. But she will not choose: “I am no longer a thinking creature. God has so shaken me with storms that I have lost my will. ... Since I am alive, He does not want me to die. If He sends me any succour, it will be because He wants it, and I shall accept.” (1035). But Dantès is horrified by her answer: “That is not how God should be worshipped. He wants us to understand and debate His power: that is why he gave us free will.” (1035). But Mercèdes is horrified in her turn: “Don’t speak like that to me. If I believed that God had given me free will, what would remain to save me from despair?” (Id.) But though her grief, guilt, and self-doubt is overwhelming, she nonetheless tells Dantès au revoir rather than farewell, to show that she still has hope.

25
In the end, Dantès is saved not by vengeance, but by a new love, Haydée’s love. It is love he feels he does not deserve. He tries to sort out whether this gift is a final proof of his right to seek revenge. But at last, he gives up the quest for a perfect balance: “[A] word from you, Haydée, enlightened me more than twenty years of sage wisdom. I have only you left in the world, Haydée. It is through you that I am attached to life; through you I can suffer and through you I can be happy. ... Have I understood the truth? Oh, God! What matter! Reward or punishment, I accept my fate.” (1076). He asks Maximillian “to pray sometimes for a man who, like Satan, momentarily thought himself the equal of God and who, with all the humility of a Christian, came to realize that in God’s hands alone reside supreme power and infinite wisdom. These prayers may perhaps ease the remorse that he takes with him in the depth of his heart.” (1077).

Dantès no longer asks for justice as the proof of cosmos or even for understanding, only “hope.” (Id.). In the end, he has at last reconciled himself to not knowing, to not understanding, and thereby to a faith based not on justice but on love. Dantès’ final response to nihilism is that what attaches us to life is love, which will bring us both suffering and happiness, punishment and reward.

Final Thoughts

The Count of Monte Cristo demonstrates that the new revenge may be closer to the old retributive justice than either the victim-centered or the offender-centered theorists of punishment may wish to admit. Dantès’ elaborate plan of revenge looks very much like retribution. But such retribution does not seem necessarily kinder, gentler or more measured than revenge, as retributivists might like to think. It is instead “long, slow, infinite” torture to face the rebound of
one’s own worst character flaws and feel their effects on all one holds dear. By contrast, a quick stab in the back or a dueling bullet through the chest seem less painful, more respectful, and even more humane.

Nor is the agent of retribution necessarily free of the blood-guilt thought to be borne by the avenger. The inexorability and precision required of retribution, Dumas shows, takes its toll on its agent, requiring not only harder work and greater expense than revenge, but also a hardening and withering of the heart. If crime is a cosmic imbalance, not just a personal injury, avenging angels of retribution have no metaphysical leeway within which to exercise mercy.\textsuperscript{29} Retribution also demands perfection in its execution — a perfection that is impossible in human affairs and that would demand that agents of retribution account for the delicts they will necessarily commit. If there is no room for mercy for the offender, there is also no room for excuse for the prosecutor or the judge. A mistake in calibrating a punishment throws the universe out of balance again.

Dumas’ novel also suggests that revenge used to have a different character, and a humbler goal. In a world where one was \textit{sure} of divine justice in an afterlife, or perhaps where one never demanded an orderly universe at all, the point of revenge was not to balance the cosmic scales, but to satisfy honor and purge the stain of crime. A duel or battle would do, but so might an apology, or a mediated settlement. Revenge was not about Justice so much as restoring relationships and reclaiming reputation. Some of the rhetoric of the victim-offender reconciliation movement may hearken back to this prior understanding, as it emphasizes settling these questions outside of the legal system, within local communities and by local communities. (Coates, et al., 2000).
Whether our thirst for justice can be assuaged by mediation instead of retribution is not clear to me, however. The victims-rights movement, explicitly presented as a discussion of rights, seems to suggest that victims want more than a day on the battlefield or at the mediation table. Victims are often presented as martyred and avenging angels; they are not people so much as banners to galvanize public retribution. Criminal laws are named after them; public support for penalties is sought in their name. The victim, like the crime, ascends to a metaphysical level.

We should also recognize that these modern victims, like Dantès, may long for more than the suffering of their enemies or the restoration of what they have lost. They long to make sense of their own suffering. They long to see right prevail over wrong, cosmos over chaos, God over chance. In a secular world, they turn to the law, rather than the altar, for solace and for justice. But justice cannot and should not be demanded as either a proof or a substitute for God. Dumas is careful to tell us “[h]uman justice is inadequate as a consolation: it can spill blood for blood, that’s all. But one must only ask it for what is possible, not for anything more.” (333).

References:


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1. Justice Stewart is often quoted in this regard: “When people begin to believe that organized society is unwilling or unable to impose upon criminal offenders the punishment they ‘deserve,’ then there are sown the seeds of anarchy — of self-help, vigilante justice, and lynch law.” Furman v. Georgia, 408 U.S. 238, 308 (1972).

2. Hegel argues that there is no injury to the victim’s will, as such. He also says that the self-contradictory denial of freedom implicit in a criminal act has, because of its self-contradiction, no actual existence except as the particular will of the criminal. Moreover, the victim cannot punish because the victim cannot will the universal as such. A particular will cannot coerce a particular will without again transgressing. (Hegel, 1967: para. 91, 99, 102, 103.) Michael Moore also makes a powerful argument against victims having the right to punish. (Moore, 1997).
For my own views on the recent movement toward victim-centered punishment, see Meyer (2000) and Meyer (2003).

3. The connection between right-to-view statutes and vengeance is made in Janicik (2000: 935): “Right to view statutes implement a private form of vengeance that has been authorized by the state...They are actually the means legislatures have used to channel the vengeance of those who believe that victims’ rights do not go far enough.”); See also, Linders (2002: 647-48): “the so-called victims’ rights movement ... has succeeded in gaining access to the execution chamber for grieving family members seeking ‘closure’ ... Where does this emphasis on ‘closure’ come from, and how has it come to be linked to viewing an execution? Going out on a speculative limb, I suggest that the merger of victims’ rights concerns and execution practices that has produced a partially novel execution audience is linked to at least two larger cultural processes: first, the further commodification of individual life -- death to the perpetrator signals the worth of the victim, ... and second, ... to the reconceptualization of risk in modern life, making premature and ‘unnatural’ death ... increasingly intolerable.”


5. I used the Penguin Edition 1996, translated by Robin Buss. The older, anonymous translation that is used by Oxford and Modern Library editions omits several passages I quote here. Quotes in text will be identified by page number only hereinafter. Dumas’ novel has been almost too popular — “[s]erious literary criticism has paid little attention” to it, despite the “wealth of
mythic themes which permeate this novel” but “have not been sufficiently recognized or studied.” (Marinetti, 1976: 260).

6. Images and references to Dante occur throughout the novel. I am grateful to Steve Latham for pointing out that Dumas compares Dantès to Ugolino, Dumas notes that Faria memorized Dante’s Divine Comedy, and Major Cavalcanti (Dantès’ faked aristocrat who is to pose as prospective father-in-law to Danglars’ daughter) is introduced as a descendant of a character from the Divine Comedy. As argued infra, Dantès, like Dante, orchestrates a divine and poetic justice.

7. The experience of victim shame is described by Elster (1990: 872) as a “devastating feeling ... experienced by the man who fails to avenge an insult and who is constantly reminded that he is less than a man.” and by Scheff (1998: 97): “The victim, especially, is likely to feel the shame of helplessness, impotence, betrayal, and/or violation in response to the offense against him or her. However, this shame is usually not acknowledged — by the victim or others — but masked by the more visible emotion of anger.” These responses are confirmed in Barnes et al. (1994).

8. Compare Nietzsche (1969: 68): “What really arouses indignation against suffering is not suffering as such but the senselessness of suffering.”

9. Marianne Constable reminds me that this would be Kafka’s answer — the punishment finds the crime.

10. In accord, Solomon (1993: 228): “anger registers our displeasure that the world does not obey our expectations, and displays our desire to punish those who would not obey our demands.” Anger is a defense against shame, (Scheff, 1998). See also, Solomon (1999:140-41) “the criminal justice system is the codification and implementation of just this primal need for
not only social but cosmic stability,” and “a felt need to put the world back into balance.”

11. The many images of resurrection in the novel are teased out by Marinetti (1998).

12. The Count tells Franz and Albert that “in return for a slow, profound, eternal torture I would give back the same were it possible — an eye for a eye, a tooth for a tooth.” (423).

13. I am grateful to Shai Lavi for this insight.

14. See Hampton (1996: 1686-87): “When we face actions that not merely express the message that a person is degraded relative to the wrongdoer but also try to establish that degradation, we are morally required to respond by trying to remake the world in a way that denies what the wrongdoer's events have attempted to establish, thereby lowering the wrongdoer, elevating the victim, and annulling the act of diminishment.” As Hampton acknowledges, it may be difficult to “defeat him in a way that destroys his claim to mastery,” while yet respecting his dignity as a human being. Id. at 1691.

15. See Hegel (1967: para. 103-04) (in punishment, free will becomes in and for itself — law is actual); para 220 (“the injured universal now comes on the scene, and this has its proper actuality in the court of law.”))

16. See Morris (1981: 264): “in order for a person to be punished there must be an intention — one normally simply taken for granted — to convey to the wrongdoer ... that the deprivation is imposed because of wrongdoing. A communicative component is a defining characteristic of punishment and in part distinguishes it from mere retaliation or acting out of revenge where the goal of bringing about evil for another may achieve all that one desires.”

This need to justify the punishment to the punished explains why courts will not execute the insane. See Ford v. Wainwright, 477 U.S. 399, 409-10 (1986)(“For today, no less than
before, we may seriously question the retributive value of executing a person who has no comprehension of why he has been singled out and stripped of his fundamental right to life. ... Similarly, the natural abhorrence civilized societies feel at killing one who has no capacity to come to grips with his own conscience or deity is still vivid today.... Whether its aim be to protect the condemned from fear and pain without comfort of understanding, or to protect the dignity of society itself from the barbarity of exacting mindless vengeance, the restriction finds enforcement in the Eighth Amendment.”)

17. The pun exists in both English and French. (Comte and compter).

18. However, Dantès is unwilling to apologize on the field of honor, for he loves his “dignity” and would rather let Albert kill him than “boast of my forgiveness as a victory.” (853).

19. As the captain of a smuggling vessel explains, “[i]t’s not their fault if they’re bandits, it’s the fault of the authorities ... they are hunted down because they made their bones [killed an enemy] ... as if revenge wasn’t in a Corsican’s nature.” (267).

20. For the argument that honor mutates historically into dignity, see Whitman (2003: 249-50) and Whitman (2002: 1313-32). For Hegel’s view that a victim’s will/dignity cannot be touched by crime, see Hegel (1967: para 91, 99): will cannot be coerced “except insofar as it fails to withdraw itself out of the external object ... only the will which allows itself to be coerced can in any way be coerced.” para 99: “In itself this implicit will (i.e. the right or law implicit) is rather that which has no external existence and which for that reason cannot be injured.”

21. For example, Dantès saves the firm and honor of his loyal employer, Morell, when he is about to be bankrupt. As a result, his son, Maximillian, resolves to rescue someone on each anniversary of this family miracle. Other innocent victims of Dantès’ revenge are Villefort’s in-
laws and Noirtier’s valet.

22. Social scientists observe our tendency to blame human agents, even when events can be fully explained by other causes. Feigenson (2000: 57-62).


24. Nietzsche (1969: 162-63): “Man, the bravest of animals and the one most accustomed to suffering, does not repudiate suffering as such; he desires it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a meaning for it, a purpose of suffering....the ascetic ideal offered man meaning! ... it placed all suffering under the perspective of guilt....he was henceforth no longer like a leaf in the wind, a plaything of nonsense ...with what he willed: the will itself was saved....[but] this hatred of the human ... [is] a will to nothingness, an aversion to life.”

25. Jeffrie Murphy comes to this view of revenge and retribution in his more recent work. “[O]ne is always corrupted when one would presume to occupy a role best reserved for the gods. As mere humans, with radically finite knowledge, it is perhaps better for us to admit that we are not totally clear about what we are up to here.” Murphy (1999: 159).

26. Villefort is Villefort-Noirtier, but refuses to use his father’s name in order to avoid his father’s Bonapartist affiliations. ‘Villefort’ translates as “fortress” and Dumas tells us that “he occupied an impregnable fortress ... his post as crown prosecutor.” (471).

27. Dumas provides a counterpoint scene in which Madame Danglars asks Villefort to be merciful to Benedetto. Though she does not know it, Benedetto is their son. Villefort refuses to extend mercy to him, arguing “since I myself failed and was found wanting — more profoundly perhaps than other men; well, since that time I have shaken out their clothes to discover a
blemish ... every guilty man that I punished, seemed to me a living proof, a proof constantly
renewed, that I was not some hideous exception! Alas, alas, alas! The whole world is wicked,
Madame, so let us prove it and strike down the wicked man!” (934).

28. Leonard Long points out to me that Haydée may be meant to evoke Hades — and he does
“sail away” to/with her in a kind of afterlife. Is love hell? Or is there an ambiguity here, too —
Haydée also sounds like “aider.” The ambiguity fits with Dantès’ own acknowledgement that
she will bring him both suffering and happiness — the conditions for being attached to life.

29. For an attempt to argue otherwise, see Meyer (2000).