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Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*

forcing, adjusting, abbreviating, omitting, padding, inventing, falsifying, and whatever else is of the *essence* of interpreting

Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III: 24

Bleak House is a document about the interpretation of documents. Like many great works of literature it raises questions about its own status as a text. The novel doubles back on itself or turns itself inside out. The situation of characters within the novel corresponds to the situation of its reader or author.

In writing *Bleak House* Dickens constructed a model in little of English society in his time. In no other of his novels is the canvas broader, the sweep more inclusive, the linguistic and dramatic texture richer, the gallery of comic grotesques more extraordinary. As other critics have shown (most notably John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson in "The Topicality of *Bleak House*" and Humphry House in "*Bleak House*: The Time Scale"¹), the novel accurately reflects the social reality of Dickens' day, in part of the time of publication in 1851–3, in part of the time of Dickens' youth, in the late twenties, when he was a reporter in the Lord Chancellor's court. The scandal of the Court of Chancery, sanitary reform, slum clearance, orphans' schools, the recently formed detective branch of the Metropolitan Police Force, Puseyite philanthropists, the Niger expedition, female emancipation, the self-perpetuating procrastinations of Parliament and Government – each is represented in some character or scene. Every detail of topography or custom has its journalistic correspondence to the reality of Dickens' time. Everything mirrors some fact – from the exact references to street names and localities – mostly, it has been noted, within half a mile of Chancery Lane – to the "copying" of Leigh Hunt and Walter Savage Landor in Skimpole and Boythorn, to such out-of-the-way details as the descriptions of a shooting gallery, a law stationer's shop, or the profession of "follower." Like Dickens' first book, *Sketches by Boz*, *Bleak House* is an imitation in words of the culture of a city.

The means of this mimesis is synecdoche. In *Bleak House* each

character, scene, or situation stands for innumerable other examples of a given type. Mrs Pardiggle is the model of a Puseyite philanthropist; Mrs Jellyby of another sort of irresponsible do-gooder; Mr Vholes of the respectable solicitor battenning on victims of Chancery; Tulkinghorn of the lawyer to great families; Gridley, Miss Flite, Ada and Richard of different sorts of Chancery suitors; Mr Chadband of the hypocritical Evangelical clergyman mouthing distorted Biblical language; Bucket of the detective policeman, one of the first great examples in literature; Jo of the homeless poor; Tom-all-Alone's of urban slums in general; Sir Leicester Dedlock of the conservative aristocracy; Chesney Wold of the country homes of such men. Nor is the reader left to identify the representative quality of these personages for himself. The narrator constantly calls the reader's attention to their generalizing role. For each Chadband, Mrs Pardiggle, Jo, Chesney Wold or Gridley there are many more similar cases. Each example has its idiosyncrasies (who but Chadband could be just like Chadband?), but the essence of the type remains the same.

Bleak House is a model of English society in yet another way. The network of relations among the various characters is a miniature version of the interconnectedness of people in all levels of society. From Jo the crossing-sweeper to Sir Leicester Dedlock in his country estate, all Englishmen, in Dickens' view, are members of one family. The Dedlock mystery and the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce bring all the characters together in unforeseen ways. This bringing together creates a web of connection from which no character is free. The narrator formulates the law of this interdependence in two questions, the first in reference to this particular story and the second in reference to all the stories of which this story is representative:

What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together! (16)²

In the emblematic quality of the characters and of their "connexions" *Bleak House* is an interpretation of Victorian society. This is so in more than one sense. As a blueprint is an image in another form of the building for which it is the plan, so *Bleak House* transfers England into another realm, the realm of fictional language. This procedure of synecdochic transference, naming one thing in terms of another, is undertaken as a means of investigation. Dickens want to define England

exactly and to identify exactly the causes of its present state. As everyone knows, he finds England in a bad way. It is in a state dangerously close to ultimate disorder or decay. The energy which gave the social system its initial impetus seems about to run down. Entropy approaches a maximum. Emblems of this perilous condition abound in *Bleak House* – the fog and mud of its admirable opening, the constant rain at Chesney Wold, the spontaneous combustion of Krook, the ultimate consumption in costs of the Jarndyce estate, the deaths of so many characters in the course of the novel (I count nine).

With description goes explanation. Dickens wants to tell how things got as they are, to indict someone for the crime. Surely it cannot be, in the phrase he considered as a title for *Little Dorrit*, "Nobody's Fault." Someone must be to blame. There must be steps to take to save England before it blows up, like the springing of a mine, or catches fire, like Krook, or falls in fragments, like the houses in Tom-all-Alone's, or resolves into dust, which awaits all men and all social systems. It is not easy, however, to formulate briefly the results of Dickens' interpretative act. His two spokesmen, the narrators, are engaged in a search. This search brings a revelation of secrets and leads the reader to expect an explanation of their meaning. The novel as a whole is the narrators' reports on what they have seen, but these can only be understood by means of a further interpretation – the reader's.

Bleak House does not easily yield its meaning. Its significance is by no means transparent. Both narrators hide as much as they reveal. The habitual method of the novel is to present persons and scenes which are conspicuously enigmatic. The reader is invited in various ways to read the signs, to decipher the mystery. This invitation is made openly by the anonymous, present-tense narrator through rhetorical questions and other devices of language. The invitation to interpret is performed more covertly by Esther Summerson in her past-tense narrative. Her pretence not to understand the dishonesty, hypocrisy or self-deception of the people she encounters, though she gives the reader the information necessary to understand them, is such an invitation, as is her coy withholding of information which she has at the time she writes, but did not have at the time she has reached in her story: "I did not understand it. Not for many and many a day" (17).

Moreover, the narrators offer here and there examples of the proper way to read the book. They encourage the reader to consider the names, gestures, and appearances of the characters as indications of some hidden truth about them. Esther, for example, in spite of her reluctance to read signs, says that Prince Turveydrop's "little innocent, feminine manner" "made this singular effect upon me: that I received the impression that he was like his mother, and that his mother had not been much

considered or well used" (14). The anonymous narrator can tell from George Rouncewell's way of sitting, walking, and brushing his palm across his upper lip, as if there were a great moustache there, that he must "have been a trooper once upon a time" (21).

The reader of *Bleak House* is confronted with a document which he must piece together, scrutinize, interrogate, at every turn – in short, interpret – in order to understand. Perhaps the most obvious way in which he is led to do this is the presentation, at the beginning of the novel, of a series of disconnected places and personages – the Court of the Chancery, Chesney Wold, Esther Summerson as a child, the Jellyby household and so on. Though the relations among these are withheld from the reader, he assumes that they will turn out to be connected. He makes this assumption according to his acceptance of a figure close to synecdoche, metonymy. Metonymy presupposes a similarity or causality between things presented as contiguous and thereby makes story-telling possible. The reader is encouraged to consider these contiguous items to be in one way or another analogous and to interrogate them for such analogies. Metaphor and metonymy together make up the deep grammatical armature by which the reader of *Bleak House* is led to make a whole out of discontinuous parts. At the beginning of the second chapter, for example, when the narrator shifts "as the crow flies" from the Court of Chancery to Chesney Wold, he observes that both are alike in being "things of precedent and usage," and the similarity between Krook and the Lord Chancellor is affirmed in detail by Krook himself:

You see I have so many things here . . . of so many kinds, and all, as the neighbours think (but *they* know nothing), wasting away and going to rack and ruin, that that's why they have given me and my place a christening. And I have so many old parchmentses and papers in my stock. And I have a liking for rust and must and cobwebs. And all's fish that comes to my net. And I can't abear to part with anything I once lay hold of . . . or to alter anything, or to have any sweeping, nor scouring, nor cleaning, nor repairing going on about me. That's the way I've got the ill name of Chancery. (5)

Such passages give the reader hints as to the right way to read *Bleak House*. The novel must be understood according to correspondences within the text between one character and another, one scene and another, one figurative expression and another. If Krook is like the Lord Chancellor, the various Chancery suitors – Miss Flite, Gridley, Tom Jarndyce and Richard Carstone – are all alike; there are similarities between Tulkinghorn, Conversation Kenge and Vholes; Tom-all-Alone's and Bleak House were both in Chancery; Esther's doll is duplicated with a difference by the brickmaker's baby, by the keeper's child at Chesney

Wold and by Esther herself. Once the reader has been alerted to look for such relationships she discovers that the novel is a complex fabric of recurrences. Characters, scenes, themes and metaphors return in proliferating resemblances. Each character serves as an emblem of other similar characters. Each is to be understood in terms of his reference to others like him. The reader is invited to perform a constant interpretative dance or lateral movement of cross-reference as she makes her way through the text. Each scene or character shimmers before her eyes as she makes these connections. Think, for example, how many orphans or neglected children there are in *Bleak House*, and how many bad parents. The Lord Chancellor himself may be included, figuratively, among the latter, since his court was charged in part to administer equity to widows and orphans, those especially unable to take care of themselves. The Chancellor stands *in loco parentis* to Ada and Richard, the "Wards in Chancery."

In this system of reference and counter-reference the differences are, it is important to see, as essential as the similarities. Each lawyer in the novel is different from all the others. Esther did not die, like the brick-maker's baby, though her mother was told that she was dead. The relation between George Rouncewell and his mother is an inverse variant of the theme of bad parents and neglected children. Krook is not the Lord Chancellor. He is only a sign for him. The man himself is kindly enough, though certainly a bit eccentric. The Lord Chancellor is a kindly man too, as he shows in his private interview with Ada and Richard. They are sinister only in their representative capacities, Krook as a symbol of the disorder, avarice and waste of Chancery, the Lord Chancellor as the sign of the authority of his court. An emblem is always to some extent incompatible with its referent. A sign with ominous or deadly meaning may be an innocent enough old weather-beaten board with marks on it when it is seen close up, or it may be the absurd painting of "one impossible Roman upside down," as in the case of the "pointing Allegory" on Mr Tulkinghorn's ceiling (16). The power of a sign lies not in itself but in what it indicates. *Bleak House* is made up of a multitude of such indications.

Though many of the connections in this elaborate structure of analogies are made explicitly in the text, many are left for the reader to see for himself. One valuable bit of evidence that Dickens took conscious pains to prepare these correspondences is given in his plan for Chapter 16.³ In this chapter Lady Dedlock gets Jo to take her to see the paupers' graveyard where her lover lies buried. Jo points through the iron gate at the spot, and Lady Dedlock asks if it is "consecrated ground." Dickens' notes show that he was aware, and perhaps intended the reader to be aware, of the similarity between Jo's gesture of pointing and the gesture of the pointing Allegory on Mr Tulkinghorn's ceiling. The latter

is mentioned in passing earlier in the chapter and of course is made much of at the time of Tulkinghorn's murder. "Jo - ," says the note for this chapter, "shadowing forth of Lady Dedlock in the churchyard. / Pointing hand of allegory - consecrated ground / 'Is it Blessed?' " The two gestures of pointing are alike, as is suggested by the similarity of pose in the illustrations of both by "Phiz" for the first edition: "Consecrated ground" and "A new meaning in the Roman." Both are examples of that procedure of indication which is the basic structural principle of *Bleak House*. This procedure is "allegorical" in the strict sense. It speaks of one thing by speaking of another, as Dickens defines the Court of Chancery by talking about a rag and bottle shop. Everywhere in *Bleak House* the reader encounters examples of this technique of "pointing" whereby one thing stands for another, is a sign for another, indicates another, can be understood only in terms of another, or named only by the name of another. The reader must thread her way through the labyrinth of such connections in order to succeed in her interpretation and solve the mystery of *Bleak House*.

The situation of many characters in the novel is exactly like that of its writer or reader. So many people in this novel are engaged in writing or in studying documents, in attempting to decipher what one chapter-title calls "Signs and Tokens," in learning to read or write, in hiding documents or in seeking them out, there are so many references to letters, wills, parchments and scraps of paper, that the interpretation of signs or of texts may be said to be the fundamental theme of the novel. Krook's shop is full of old law papers - one of them, it turns out, perhaps the authentic will for resolving the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Krook is obsessed, rightly enough, with the idea that he possesses documents of value, but he does not trust anyone to read them or to teach him to read. He tries to teach himself, forming laboriously with chalk on his wall the letters that spell out "Jarndyce," rubbing out each letter in turn as he makes it. Miss Flite carries everywhere her reticule full of documents. Richard broods day and night over the papers in his case, as he is drawn deeper and deeper into Chancery. Gridley too pores over documents. Much essential business in this novel, as, to be sure, in many novels, is carried on by means of letters. Tulkinghorn finds out Lady Dedlock's secret by the law writing in her lover's hand which matches the note of instructions Trooper George has from his old officer, Captain Hawdon. Esther teaches her little maid, Charley, how to read and write. Mrs Jellyby's irresponsibility is signified in the way she sits all day writing or dictating letters about Borrioboola-Gha instead of caring for her family. Poor Caddy Jellyby, her mother's amanuensis, is bespattered with ink, and Lawyer Tulkinghorn is a fathomless repository of secrets, all inscribed on the family papers in his strong-boxes.

Some of the most dreamlike and grotesque episodes in the novel involve documents, for example, the chapter in which Grandfather Smallweed, after Krook's death, rummages among the possessions of the deceased, surrounded, in his chair, with great piles of paper, or the chilling scene of the end of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. The latter moves beyond "realism" in the usual sense toward what Baudelaire in "The Essence of Laughter" calls the "dizzy hyperbole" of the "absolute comic":

It appeared to be something that made the professional gentlemen very merry, for there were several young counsellors in wigs and whiskers on the outside of the crowd, and when one of them told the others about it, they put their hands in their pockets, and quite doubled themselves up with laughter, and went stamping about the pavement of the Hall. . . . [P]resently great bundles of papers began to be carried out – bundles in bags, bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under, and threw down for the time being, anyhow, on the Hall pavement, while they went back to bring out more. Even these clerks were laughing. (65)

Not to put too fine a point upon it, as Mr Snagsby would say, what is the meaning of all this hermeneutical and archival activity? The reader of the novel must go beyond surface appearances to the deeper coherence of which these surfaces are the dispersed signs. In the same way, many of the characters are cryptographers. They attempt to fit details together to make a pattern revealing some hidden secret. Like Krook they must put "j" and "a" and so on together to spell "Jarndyce." They want to identify the buried truth which is the substance behind all the shadowy signs with which they are surrounded, as Richard Carstone believes that there "is – is – must be somewhere" "truth and justice" in the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce (37). Two motives impel these readers of signs. Like Richard, Gridley or even, in spite of herself, Esther, they may want to find out secrets about themselves. Each seeks his unrevealed place in the system of which he is a part. To find out how I am related to others will be to find out who I am, for I am defined by my connections, familial or legal. Esther *is* the illegitimate daughter of Lady Dedlock and Captain Hawdon. Richard *is*, or perhaps is not, a rightful heir to the Jarndyce fortune. Other characters – Mr Tulkinghorn, Guppy, Grandfather Smallweed, Hortense, Mrs Snagsby or Inspector Bucket – want to find out secrets about others. Their motive is the search for power. To find out the hidden place of another in the system is to be able to manipulate him, to dominate him, and of course to make money out of him.

These two versions of the theme of interpretation echo through the

novel in melodramatic and parodic forms. Many characters find themselves surrounded by mysterious indications, sinister, threatening or soliciting. Poor Mr Snagsby says, "I find myself wrapped round with secrecy and mystery, till my life is a burden to me" (47). He is "a party to some dangerous secret, without knowing what it is. And it is the fearful peculiarity of this condition that, at any hour of his daily life, . . . the secret may take air and fire, explode, and blow up" (25). Most of the characters are more aggressive than Mr Snagsby in their relation to secrets. Mr Tulkinghorn's "calling is the acquisition of secrets, and the holding possession of such power as they give him, with no sharer or opponent in it" (36). Guppy slowly puts together the evidence of Lady Dedlock's guilt and Esther's parentage. "It's going on," he says of his "case," "and I shall gather it up closer and closer as it goes on" (29). In the same way, Hortense, Lady Dedlock's maid, is "maliciously watchful . . . of everyone and everything" (18), and the "one occupation" of Mrs Snagsby's jealous life "has been . . . to follow Mr Snagsby to and fro, and up and down, and to piece suspicious circumstances together" (54). She has, says Mr Bucket, "done a deal more harm in bringing odds and ends together than if she had meant it" (54). Just as Gridley, Richard and Miss Flite are obsessed with the documents in their "cases," so the Smallweeds carry on Krook's search for valuable papers after his death, "rummaging and searching, digging, delving, and diving among the treasures of the late lamented" (39). Tom Jarndyce, the original owner of Bleak House, who finally blew out his brains in despair, lived there, "shut up: day and night poring over the wicked heaps of papers in the suit, and hoping against hope to disentangle it from its mystification and bring it to a close" (8). Even Sir Leicester, when he hears the story of a noble lady unfaithful to her husband, "arranges a sequence of events on a plan of his own" (40), and Esther, though she makes no detective effort to uncover the facts about her birth, nevertheless finds Lady Dedlock's face, "in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (18). She is, in spite of herself, led to put these broken pieces together to mirror the truth about herself, just as, in relation to another secret, she says, "I observed it in many slight particulars, which were nothing in themselves, and only became something when they were pieced together" (50).

The remarkable fact is that these interpreters for the most part are failures. Sometimes their interpretations are false, fictional patterns thrown over the surface of things like a mirage without relation to any deeper truth. Sometimes authentic secrets are discovered but are found out too late or in the wrong way to be of any use to their discoverers. *Bleak House* is full of unsuccessful detectives. The "plan of his own" which Sir Leicester constructs does not save him from the revelation

that will shatter his proud complacency. Mrs Snagsby is ludicrously mistaken in her idea that her husband has been unfaithful and is the father of Jo. Krook dies before he finds anything of value in his papers, and even Grandfather Smallweed makes little out of his discovery. Guppy finds out Lady Dedlock's secret, but it does not win him Esther's hand. Gridley dies without resolving his suit. The case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is used up in costs before the revelation of the newly-discovered will which might have brought it to a close. Even Tulkinghorn and Bucket, the two most clairvoyant and persistent detectives in the novel, are failures. Tulkinghorn is murdered just before he is going to make use of the secret he has discovered about Lady Dedlock. Bucket, in spite of the fact that "the velocity and certainty of [his] interpretation . . . is little short of miraculous" (56), does not save Lady Dedlock. The masterly intuition which leads him to see that she has changed clothes with the brickmaker's wife (another lateral displacement) gets Esther to her mother just too late. They find her "cold and dead" on the steps of Nemo's graveyard. Moreover, the novel is deliberately constructed by Dickens in a way calculated to make the reader a bad detective. Carefully placed clues are designed to lead the reader to believe that either George Rouncewell or Lady Dedlock has murdered Tulkinghorn. Even now, when Dickens' strewing of false clues may seem amateur in comparison with the sophisticated puzzles in modern mystery stories, some readers, one may imagine, are inveigled into thinking that Lady Dedlock is a murderess.

A clue to the meaning of this emphasis on false or fruitless interpretation may be given by what appears to be a fault in the novel. The most salient case of an apparent loose end or inconsistency is the failure to integrate perfectly the two major plots. "[T]he plan, so logical and complete," says Angus Wilson in his recent lively study of Dickens,

by which the Jarndyce lawsuit corrupts all who touch it (save Mr Jarndyce, a nonesuch) is quite upset when we discover that Lady Dedlock's fall from virtue has nothing to do with her being a claimant in the case. The fault is the more glaring because Miss Flite, the little, mad suitor at law, specifically tells how her own sister went to the bad as a result of the misery brought to the family by their legal involvement.⁴

This fissure in the novel, a conspicuous rift in its web, seems all the more inexplicable when we consider Dickens' obvious care in other parts of the book to tie together apparently unrelated details. This is done, for example, by the use of a pattern of figurative language which runs throughout the text. One case of this is the apparently trivial metaphor which Dickens uses in the second chapter to describe Lady Dedlock's icy boredom by saying that, unlike Alexander, "having conquered *her*

world, [she] fell, not into the melting but rather into the freezing mood" (2). This is picked up in the climactic scenes of her death in the melting snow which lies everywhere and which matches the break in her frigid restraint leading to her death. Surely, the reader supposes, Dickens could have related Lady Dedlock's "crime" more closely to the corrupting effect of Chancery if he had wanted to do so. Perhaps he did not want to. Perhaps he wanted to mislead the reader into thinking that the revelation of Lady Dedlock's secret is at the same time an explanation of the real mystery in the novel – that is, the question of why English society is in such a sad state. At the same time he may have wanted, by leaving the loose end in the open, to invite the reader to investigate further before he takes the revelation of the one mystery as a sufficient explanation of the other. The larger mystery, the mystery of Chancery or of the degeneration of England, is in fact not explained, or if it is explained this is done in so obscure a manner as to leave things at the end of the novel almost as dark, as mud-soaked and fog-drenched, as they are in the opening pages.

The somber suggestion toward which many elements of the novel lead, like points converging from different directions on a single spot, is that the guilty party is not any person or persons, not correctable evil in any institution. The villain is the act of interpretation itself, the naming which assimilates the particular into a system, giving it a definition and a value, incorporating it into a whole. If this is the case, then in spite of Dickens' generous rage against injustice, selfishness and procrastination, the evil he so brilliantly identifies is irremediable. It is inseparable from language and from the organization of men into society. All proper names, as linguists and ethnologists have recognized, are metaphors. They alienate the person named from his unspeakable individuality and assimilate him into a system of language. They label him in terms of something other than himself, in one form of the differentiating or stepping aside which is the essence of language. To name someone is to alienate him from himself by making him part of a family. Even the orphans or the illegitimate characters in *Bleak House* – Jo, Guster or Esther Summerson – are not free from this alienation. Institutions like Chancery, the workhouse or the Tooting baby-farm where Guster "grew," or persons like Mrs Pardiggle and the Reverend Chadband, act in place of proper parents for such people and force them into social moulds. Everyone in *Bleak House* is, like Jo, made to "move on," in one form or another of the displacement which separates so many of the characters of *Bleak House* from themselves.

It is no accident that the names of so many characters in the novel are either openly metaphorical (Dedlock, Bucket, Guppy, Vholes, Smallweed, Summerson, Badger, Clare, Boythorn, Krook, Swills,

Flite, Volumnia) or seem tantalizingly to contain some covert metaphor lying almost on the surface of the word (Tulkinghorn, Turveydrop, Chadband, Pardiggle, Jellyby, Rouncewell, Squod, Bagnet, Snagsby, Skimpole). Each of these names, especially those in the last group, seems to shimmer with multiple meanings drawn from various contexts, like the portmanteau words of "Jabberwocky." They invite etymological interpretation or "explication" in the root sense of an unfolding. Turveydrop? Turf? Turd? Curve? Drop of turf? "Turvey, turvey, clothed in black," as in the children's singing game? An essay could be written exploring the implications of these names. The meaning of names and of naming is, as in Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, an important theme in *Bleak House*, though Dickens, unlike Proust, seems to remain in that realm of fiction where names truly correspond to the essence of what they name. He does not appear to move on to the stage of disillusion where the incommensurability of name and person or of name and place appears.⁵ Dickens' version of this disillusionment, however, is the implicit recognition that the characters to which he gives such emblematic names are linguistic fictions. The metaphors in their names reveal the fact that they are not real people or even copies of real people. They exist only in language. This overt fictionality is Dickens' way of demystifying the belief, affirmed in Plato's *Cratylus*, that the right name gives the essence of the thing. Along with this goes the recognition throughout *Bleak House* that a man's name is a primary way in which he is separated from his privacy and incorporated into society. "Lady Dedlock," says Tulkinghorn in a reproachful reminder of her crime and of her responsibility to the name she has wrongly taken, "here is a family name compromised" (48). Just as Dickens names his characters and helps them do their duty as emblems by borrowing labels for them from other contexts, and just as Miss Flite gives her birds allegorical names which juxtapose the victims of Chancery (Hope, Joy, Youth and so on), its effects (Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, etc.), and its qualities or the instruments of its deadly fictions (Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon and Spinach), so the characters have been appropriated by society, named members of it, and cannot escape its coercion.

If the metaphors in the names in *Bleak House* are functional, it is also significant that so many characters have more than one name – nicknames, aliases or occupational names. The effect of these nominal displacements, as the reader shifts from one to another, is to mime in the permutations of language that movement within the social system which prevents each person from being himself and puts him beside himself into some other role. Young Bartholomew Smallweed is "metaphorically called Small and eke Chick Weed, as it were jocularly to

express a fledgling" (20). Captain Hawdon takes the alias of "Nemo," "nobody," as if he were trying to escape the involvement in society inevitable if one has any name at all. Gridley is known in the court he haunts as "The man from Shropshire." Tony Jobling takes the alias of Mr Weevle. Jo is called "Toughy" or "the Tough Subject," names pathetically inappropriate. George Rouncewell is "Trooper George." Mr Bagnet is "Lignum Vitae," and Mr Kenge the lawyer has been given the splendid name of "Conversation Kenge." Ada and Richard are "the Wards in Jarndyce," and Miss Flite calls Esther "Fitz-Jarndyce," suggesting thereby not only her relationship to her guardian, John Jarndyce, but also the figurative similarity between her situation as an illegitimate child and the situation of Ada and Richard as wards of the court.

In the context of the sinister connotation of multiple naming in *Bleak House* there is something a little disquieting, in spite of its loving intent, in the way Mr Jarndyce gives Esther a multitude of nursery rhyme and legendary pseudonyms, including the name of a fifteenth-century witch: "Old Woman," "Little Old Woman," "Cobweb," "Mrs Shipton," "Mother Hubbard," "Dame Durden." To give someone a nickname is to force on her a metaphorical translation and to appropriate her especially to oneself. This is precisely Jarndyce's selfishness in planning to make Esther his wife, which after all would be another form of renaming. Nor can he protect Esther from her involvement in society by way of her birth. Perhaps her first experience of this is her receipt of a letter from Kenge and Carboy which takes her, as so many characters in the novel are taken, into the legal language which turns her into an object: "We have arrnged for your being forded, carriage free, p^r eight o'clock coach from Reading . . ." (3). A fit emblem for the violence exercised over the individual by language and other social institutions is that terrifying form of helplessness Esther endures when she lies ill with the smallpox caught from Jo, who caught it from Tom-all-Alone's, the Jarndyce property ruined because it is in Chancery, or perhaps from the place where her unknown father lies buried, "sown in corruption" (11). "Dare I hint," asks Esther, "at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which *I* was one of the beads! And when my only prayer was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing?" (35).

Perfect image of the alienation the characters of *Bleak House* suffer by being named members of society! The figure of a moving ring of substitution, in which each person is not himself but part of a system or the sign for some other thing, is used throughout the novel to define those aspects of society Dickens attacks. The evil of Mrs Jellyby's "telescopic philanthropy" or of Mrs Pardiggle's "rapacious benevolence" is

that they treat people not as individuals but as elements in a system of abstract do-gooding. Mrs Pardiggle has "a mechanical way of taking possession of people," "a show . . . of doing charity by wholesale, and of dealing in it to a large extent," and a voice "much too business-like and systematic" (8). The world of aristocratic fashion is a "brilliant and distinguished circle" (12), "tremendous orb, nearly five miles round" (48), just as London as a whole is a "great tee-totum . . . set up for its daily spin and whirl" (16). Within her circle Lady Dedlock lives imprisoned "in the desolation of Boredom and the clutch of Giant Despair": substituting one place for another in a perpetually unsuccessful attempt to escape from her consciousness of the false self she has assumed. "Weariness of soul lies before her, as it lies behind . . . but the imperfect remedy is always to fly, from the last place where it has been experienced" (12).

A similar metaphor is used in the satire of representative government. It underlies that brilliant chapter in which the ruling classes gather at Chesney Wold to discuss the dissolution of Parliament and the formation of a new Government. (John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson in the article cited above discuss the references here to Disraeli, Russell and the Parliamentary crises of the early fifties.) Representative government is another form of delegation. Each Member of Parliament acts as the synecdochic sign for his constituents. Dickens, as is well known, had little faith in this form of government. The relation between representative and represented is always indirect. Any authentic correspondence between sign and signified is lost in the process of mediation. When Sir Thomas Doodle undertakes to form a new ministry he "throw[s] himself upon the country," but this throwing is only figurative, "chiefly in the form of sovereigns and beer." This has the advantage over direct appeal to the voters that "in this metamorphosed state he is available in a good many places simultaneously, and can throw himself upon a considerable portion of the country at one time" (40). In the practice of Parliamentary government the People are no more than "a certain large number of supernumeraries, who are to be occasionally addressed, and relied upon for shouts and choruses, as on the theatrical stage" (12). The actual business of governing is carried on by a small group of leaders of the two parties, Lord Coodle, Sir Thomas Doodle and so on down to Poodle and Quoodle on one side, Buffy, Cuffy, Duffy, Fuffy, Guffy and so on on the other. The comic names admirably suggest not only the anonymity of these men but the fact that each may replace any of the others. They exist, like the letters of the alphabet which Krook or Charlie Neckett so painfully learn, as the possibility of an inexhaustible set of permutations and combinations in which Noodle would replace Moodle; Puffy, Muffy; Puffy, Poodle; or Nuffy, Noodle, and nothing would be

changed at all. Government is a circular game of substitutions like the nursery rhyme based on the letters of the alphabet beginning "A was an apple-pie."

This nursery rhyme, incorporated into another reference to the basic elements of language and to naming as the absorption of the particular into a system, is referred to in John Jarndyce's analysis of the Court of Chancery. Chancery, he says, is a dance or round. It proceeds through interminable linguistic substitutions replacing one declaration by another and never getting closer to any end. People, once they are named parties to a suit, are swept into the ring, as Esther is caught in her dream necklace, and can never hope to escape. No other text identifies so well the structure of *Bleak House* as a work of literature and also the structure of the society it describes. "It's about a Will, and the trusts under a Will – or it was, once," says Jarndyce.

It's about nothing but Costs, now. We are always appearing, and disappearing, and swearing, and interrogating, and filing, and cross-filing, and arguing, and sealing, and motioning, and referring, and reporting, and revolving about the Lord Chancellor and all his satellites, and equitably waltzing ourselves off to dusty death, about Costs. . . . Law finds it can't do this, Equity finds it can't do that; neither can so much as say it can't do anything, without this solicitor instructing and this counsel appearing for A, and that solicitor instructing and that counsel appearing for B; and so on through the whole alphabet, like the history of the Apple Pie. And thus, through years and years, and lives and lives, everything goes on, constantly beginning over and over again, and nothing ever ends. And we can't get out of the suit on any terms, for we are made parties to it, and *must be* parties to it, whether we like it or not. (8)

"Nothing ever ends" – an important thematic stand of the novel is the special mode of temporal existence in an unjust society, or perhaps under any social order. Such an order has replaced realities by signs, substances by shadows. Each sign, in such a "system," refers not to a reality but to another sign which precedes it and which is pure anteriority in the sense that it refers back in its turn to another sign. A sign by definition designates what is absent, something which may exist but which at present is not here, as the cross on the top of St Paul's Cathedral, "so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach," is a "sacred emblem" indicating the apparent absence of God from Jo's life (19). A sign which refers back to another sign designates what is in its turn another absence. Gridley, the "Man from Shropshire," protests against the explanation of his suffering that blames it all on that code of equity which Conversation Kenge calls "a very great system, a very great system" (62). "There again!" says Gridley.

The system! I am told, on all hands, it's the system. I mustn't look to individuals. It's the system. I mustn't go into Court, and say, "My Lord, I beg to know this from you – is this right or wrong? Have you the face to tell me I have received justice, and therefore am dismissed?" My Lord knows nothing of it. He sits there, to administer the system. (15)

In spite of Dickens' sympathy for Gridley's indignant outrage, the whole bent of *Bleak House* is toward indicating that it is in fact the systematic quality of organized society which causes Gridley's suffering – not a bad system of law, but any system, not a bad representative government, but the institution itself, not the special evil of aristocratic family pride, but any social organization based on membership in a family. As soon as a man becomes in one way or another part of such a system, born into it or made a party to it, he enters into a strange kind of time. He loses any possibility of ever having a present self or a present satisfaction, loses any possibility of ever going back to find the origin of his present plight, loses the possibility of ever escaping from his present restless state or of making any end to it other than "dusty death." This intolerable experience of time is dramatized with admirable explicitness, not only in the Chancery suit which can never end except in its consumption in costs, but also in the unhappy life of Richard Carstone. If no proper "Will" or explicable origin of Jarndyce and Jarndyce can ever be found (there are in fact three wills in the case), Richard as a result lives in perpetual deferring or postponement, never able to settle down to a profession or to commit himself to a present project. He dwells in a continual expectation of a settlement which can never come: "Everything postponed to that imaginary time! Everything held in confusion and indecision until then!" (37). "The uncertainties and delays of the Chancery suit" have made him unlike his natural self and have "imparted to his nature something of the careless spirit of a gamester, who [feels] that he [is] part of a great gaming system" (17). "Now?" asks Richard. "There's no now for us suitors" (37). If there is no now there is also no past or future for people who have been forced to accept their membership in a pattern of signs without substance. Each element in such a game refers to other elements in it, in a perpetually frustrated movement which can hope for no end. The other nightmare of Esther's dream expresses this perfectly: "I laboured up colossal staircases, ever striving to reach the top, and ever turned, as I have seen a worm in a garden path, by some obstruction, and labouring again" (35).

Miss Flite, mad as she is, is close to the truth about Chancery when she says, "I expect a Judgment. On the day of Judgment. And shall then confer estates" (14). The only escape from the circle of signs would be the end of the world or death, that "beginning the world" which Richard

undertakes at the moment he dies, but "Not this world, O not this! The world that sets this right" (65). Dickens here, as in his work throughout, suggests an absolute incompatibility between this world and the far-off supernatural world. The many deaths in *Bleak House* have a significance somewhat different from that in many novels. In fiction generally, according to Walter Benjamin, the reader enjoys vicariously a finality he can never experience directly in his own life, my death being on principle an end I shall never be able to view in retrospect. In a novel, says Benjamin, the "meaning" of each character's life "is revealed only in his death," and "what draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about."⁶ Certainly there are in *Bleak House* many deaths to read about. Their peculiarity is that they are not satisfactory ends for the lives of those who die. Each character who dies passes suddenly from one world to another, leaving his affairs in the world as unsettled and as unfinished as ever. Krook dies without discovering the secrets in his papers. Gridley dies without resolving his suit, as Richard is killed by the final frustration of his hopes for an end to his case. Tulkinghorn dies without being able to use the power he has gained over Lady Dedlock. Jo's death is elaborately portrayed as the final example of his "moving on." The deaths in *Bleak House* constitute only in a paradoxical way "ends" which establish the destinies of those who die. Their deaths define them once and for all as people whose lives were unfinished, as people who never achieved the peace of a settlement. Their lives had meaning only in reference to the perpetually unsettled system of which they were part.

Bleak House itself has exactly the same structure as the society it exposes. It too assimilates everything it touches into a system of meaning. In the novel each phrase is alienated from itself and made into a sign of some other phrase. If the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is a "masterly fiction" (3, 65), and if many characters in the novel spend their time reading or writing, *Bleak House* is a masterly fiction too, and Dickens too spent his time, like Mrs Jellyby, covering paper with ink, his eye fixed not on his immediate surroundings but on an imaginary world. The novel too has a temporal structure without proper origin, present, or end. It too is made up of an incessant movement of reference in which each element leads to other elements in a constant displacement of meaning. *Bleak House* is properly allegorical, according to a definition of allegory as a temporal system of cross references among signs rather than as a spatial pattern of correspondence between signs and referents. Most people in the novel live without understanding their plight. The novel, on the other hand, gives the reader the information necessary to understand why the characters suffer, and at the same time the power to understand that the novel is fiction rather than mimesis. The novel calls

attention to its own procedures and confesses to its own rhetoric, not only, for example, in the onomastic system of metaphorical names already discussed, but also in the insistent metaphors employed throughout.

Each character in *Bleak House* is not only named in metaphor but speaks according to his own private system of metaphors. Moreover, he is spoken of by the narrators in metaphors which recur. Nor are these metaphors allowed to remain "buried." In one way or another they are brought into the open. Their figurative quality is insisted upon. In this way the reader has constantly before him one version of the interpretative act whereby nothing is separately itself, but can be named only in its relation to some other thing. Dickens is master of an artificial style which makes its artifice obvious. Among the innumerable examples of this the following contains the linguistic texture of the novel in miniature: "The Mercuries, exhausted by looking out of window, are reposing in the hall; and hang their heavy heads, the gorgeous creatures, like overblown sun-flowers. Like them too, they seem to run to a deal of seed in their tags and trimmings" (48). The nominal metaphor (Mercuries) has been used throughout to label the Dedlock footmen. To this is here added a second figure, a metaphor of a metaphor. These Mercuries are like gorgeous sunflowers. To name them in this way has a double effect. It invites the reader to think of real footmen being described by the narrator in ornately witty language. This language names them as something other than themselves, but it also calls attention to its own wit, uncovers it by playing with it and extending it. The reader knows it is "just a figure of speech." The footmen are not Mercuries, nor are they sunflowers. These are ways of talking about them which bring them vividly before the reader and express the narrator's ironic scorn for aristocratic display. At the same time, the figures and figures within figures remind the reader that there are no real footmen in the novel. The Mercuries have only a linguistic existence. They exist as metaphors, and the reader can reach them only through Dickens' figurative language. This is true for all the characters and events in the novel. The fabric of Dickens' style is woven of words in which each takes its meaning not from something outside words, but from other words. The footmen are to be understood only in terms of Mercury, Mercury only in terms of sunflowers. This way of establishing fictional reality matches the kind of existence the characters in the novel have. They too are helpless parts of a structure based on words.

Does the novel propose any escape from this situation, or is it a wholly negative work? How might one step outside the ring? Esther Summer-son and John Jarndyce are the chief examples in *Bleak House* of Dickens' commitment to a Christian humanism compounded of belief in "the

natural feelings of the heart" (55), in unselfish engagement in duty and industrious work, in spontaneous charity toward those immediately within one's circle, and of faith that Providence secretly governs all in this lower world. This Providence will reward the good with another existence not cursed by the shadow of indefinite postponement. John Jarndyce has "resolutely kept himself outside the circle" of Chancery (37), holding himself free of its false hopes in an heroic effort of detachment. "Trust in nothing but in Providence and your own efforts" (13), he tells Richard. He uses his apparently inexhaustible money to do good quietly to those around him, loving all, asking nothing in return, and purging himself ultimately from his one selfishness, the desire to take Esther as his wife. He is Dickens' most successful version of that recurrent personage in his fiction, the benevolent father-figure.

Esther has been much maligned by critics for her coy revelations of how good she is, how much she is loved, and for her incorrigible habit of crying for joy. Nevertheless, she is in fact a plausible characterization, more palatable perhaps if one recognizes the degree to which the other narrator is an ironic commentary on her language, her personality, and her way of seeing things. She has reacted to the harsh teaching of her godmother's "distorted religion" (17) ("It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!" [3]) by resolving "to be industrious, contented and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself" (3). The emotional logic of this reaction is well known by now, and it is acutely rendered by Dickens, though we would perhaps be less inclined than he to admire its indirections. As opposed to Mrs Pardiggle's abstract and wholesale philanthropy, Esther thinks it best "to be as useful as I [can], and to render what kind services I [can], to those immediately about me" (8). She is conspicuously unwilling to engage in that form of the will to power which infects so many others in the book, the desire to decipher signs and to ferret out secrets. "Duty, duty, Esther" (38) is her motto. She strikes out "a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance" (38), ringing herself into her household tasks with a merry peal of her bundle of keys. These are the symbol of her power to "sweep the cobwebs out of the sky," like the little old woman in the nursery rhyme, and to bring order everywhere she goes.

Even so, the interpretation of Jarndyce and Esther cannot be so straightforward. Perplexing puzzles and inconsistencies remain. What is the source of Jarndyce's money? It must come by inheritance and through his membership in the Jarndyce family, since he is never shown lifting a finger to earn any of it. This kind of inheritance, however, is shown throughout the novel to involve a man, in spite of himself, in the evils of "system." Moreover, there are many ways to exercise power

over others. Not the least effective of these is self-abnegation. There is a kind of coercion in Jarndyce's goodness. He gives Esther to Allan Woodcourt without consulting her in the matter, and there is something a little unsettling about the fact that the new Bleak House, exact duplicate of the old, built secretly by Jarndyce for Esther and Allan, is another example of that theme of doubling which has such dark implications elsewhere in the novel. The patterns created by the lives of the good characters correspond rigorously to the patterns in the lives of the bad. This is as true for Esther as for Jarndyce. If Chancery is a "system" which sweeps everything it encounters into its dance, Esther, in another disquieting detail, is said by Harold Skimpole to be "intent upon the perfect working of the whole little orderly system of which [she is] the centre" (37). If old Mr Turveydrop's falseness is expressed by the fact that he forms himself after the Prince Regent and is a "Model of Deportment," Bucket praises Esther's courage when they are tracking down her mother by saying, "You're a pattern, you know, that's what you are, . . . you're a pattern" (59).

Bleak House is a powerful book, an extraordinary work of Dickens' creative power. It is also to some degree a painful book. The pain lies partly in its prevailing darkness or bleakness, its presentation of so many admirably comic creations who are at the same time distorted, grotesque, twisted (Krook, Grandfather Smallweed, Mrs Jellyby, Chadband, Guppy, Miss Flite – what a crew!). It is painful also because of its self-contradictions. Like the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce it remains unfinished at its end, a tissue of loose ends and questions rather than of neatly resolved patterns. As in all Dickens' work, there is at the center of *Bleak House* a tension between belief in some extra-human source of value, a stable center outside the shadows of the human game, and on the other hand the shade of a suspicion that there may be no such center, that all systems of interpretation may be fictions.

In *Bleak House* this tension is dramatized in a way appropriate for a novel which focuses on the theme of interpretation. It lies in the contrast between Esther's way of seeing the world and that of the anonymous narrator. Skimpole, Chadband, Mrs Jellyby and the rest each dwell hermetically sealed within an idiosyncratic system of language. In particular, Skimpole's light-hearted reading of the world as designed for his delectation and amusement, expressed with great verve by Dickens, is a frighteningly plausible reversal of Esther's commitment to duty and responsibility. Esther's language too is a special perspective, perhaps a distorting one, as is the view of the other narrator. Each has his characteristic rhetoric, a rhetoric which interprets the world along certain lines. To Esther the course of her life seems secretly governed by a divine Providence. She sees this most concretely in the benign presences she

glimpses in the landscape around Chesney Wold: "O, the solemn woods over which the light and shadow travelled swiftly, as if Heavenly wings were sweeping on benignant errands through the summer air" (18). To the other narrator no such presences are visible. He sees a world darkening toward death, a world in which it is always foggy or raining. His vision, for example in the description of Tom-all-Alone's in Chapter 46, may be defined as nihilistic:

Darkness rests upon Tom-all-Alone's. Dilating and dilating since the sun went down last night, it has gradually swelled until it fills every void in the place. . . . The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-all-Alone's, and Tom is fast asleep. (46)

Which of these is a misinterpretation? Perhaps both are? Though the happy ending of *Bleak House* may beguile the reader into accepting Esther's view as the true one, the novel does not resolve the incompatibility between her vision and what the other narrator sees. The meaning of the novel lies in this irresolution.

Like many other nineteenth-century writers Dickens was caught between his desire to reject what he found morally objectionable or false about Christianity, in particular its doctrine of original sin, and his desire to retain some form of Christian morality. This retention was for Dickens, as for others in his time, the only protection against nihilism. *Bleak House* presents the reader with a sick, decaying, moribund society. It locates with profound insight the causes of that sickness in the sign-making power, in the ineradicable human tendency to take the sign for the substance, and in the instinctive habit of interpretation, assimilating others into a private or collective system of meaning. At the same time the novel itself performs a large-scale act of interpretation. If there were no interpretation there would be no novel. It frees itself from the guilt of this only by giving the reader, not least in its inconsistencies, the evidence necessary to see that it *is* an interpretation.

On the one hand the distorted Christianity of Esther's aunt is firmly repudiated. Against her, "Watch ye therefore! lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping," is set Jesus' forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery: "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her!" (3). On the other hand, the novel apparently sustains Lady Dedlock in her remorse, in her somewhat narrowly Christian interpretation of what from another point of view, abundantly suggested in the novel, is her natural and good love for Captain Hawdon. A later generation might see marriage as one of the perfidious legalities distorting the natural feelings of the heart. In fact in Dickens' own day Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity*, George Eliot in her liaison with George Henry Lewes, perhaps even in her fiction, and Anthony Trollope

in such a novel as *Dr Wortle's School* saw individual acts of love as sanctifying the legal institution of marriage rather than the other way around. Lady Dedlock's mystery and the mystery of Chancery are so closely intertwined that the reader may be enticed into thinking that the solution of the one is the solution of the other. Some "illicit" act like fornication must lie at the origin of Jarndyce and Jarndyce and be the explanation of the suffering it causes, visiting the sins of the fathers on the children, generation after generation. The novel persuasively shows, however, that nothing lies at the origin of Jarndyce and Jarndyce but man's ability to create and administer systems of law. Such systems give actions and documents a meaning. It would seem, nevertheless, that the Ten Commandments fit this definition of evil as well as the laws and precedents governing Chancery. Both the particular commandments against which Lady Dedlock has sinned and the system of Chancery have jurisdiction over the relations of man to woman, parent to child. Between its commitment to a traditional interpretation of these relations and a tendency to put all interpretation in question as the original evil *Bleak House* remains poised.

Notes

1. In *Dickens at Work* (1957), and *The Dickens World* (1941), respectively.
2. Numbers in parentheses after quotations refer to chapters in the novel.
3. See p. 940, Penguin edition.
4. *The World of Charles Dickens*, (1970), p. 234.
5. See Roland Barthes, "Proust et les noms," *To Honor Roman Jakobson* (The Hague, 1967), pp. 150-8.
6. *Illuminations* (New York, 1969), p. 101.