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## Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*

### I

CHANCERY COURT in *Bleak House* (1852–53) makes a certain difference in Dickens's representation of social discipline. This representation had hitherto been restricted to places of confinement which, as much as they referred to a disciplinary society committed to the manufacture and diffusion of such enclosures, also carried an even more emphatic allusion to the space between them: a space of freedom or domestic tranquillity that was their "other." The often ferocious architecture that immured the inmates of a carceral institution seemed to immure the operations practiced on them there as well, and if the thick, spiked walls, the multiple gateways, the attendants and the administrators assured the confinement of those within, they seemed equally to provide for the protectedness of those without, including most pertinently the novelist and his readers. Embodied in the prison, the workhouse, the factory, the school, discipline became, quite precisely, a *topic* of Dickensian representation: a site whose redoubtable but all the more easily identified boundaries allowed it to be the target of criticism to the same extent that they isolated it from other, better sites. The topic of the carceral in Dickens—better, the carceral as topic—thus worked to secure the effect of difference between, on the one hand, a confined, institutional space in which power is violently exercised on collectivized subjects, and on the other, a space of "liberal society," generally determined as a free, private, and individual domain and practically specified as the family. Yet clear though the lines of demarcation were, it was alarmingly easy to cross them. After all, what brought carceral institutions into being in the first place were lapses in the proper management of the family: in its failure to constitute itself (the problem of illegitimate or orphaned children and the institutional solution of foundling hospitals and baby farms) or in its failure to sustain itself by means of a self-sufficient domestic economy (the problem of poverty and debt and the institutional responses of workhouses and debtor's prisons). And in the portrayal of its hero in the workhouse, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) dramatized the shameful facility with which such institutions might mistakenly seize upon what were middle-class subjects to begin with. Still, if to witness the horror of the carceral was always to incur a debt of

gratitude for the immunities of middle-class life, then to sense the danger from the carceral was already to learn how this debt had to be acquitted. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Liberal society and the family were kept free from the carceral institutions that were set up to remedy their failures only by assuming the burden of an immense internal regulation. If discipline was confined to the carceral, then, this was so in order that it might ultimately be extended—in the mode of what was experientially its opposite—to the space outside it.

Chancery Court in *Bleak House* forces upon this representation the necessity of a certain readjustment. In the first place, an essential characteristic of the court is that its operations far exceed the architecture in which it is apparently circumscribed. The distinctive gesture of the carceral—that of locking up—makes little sense here when, at the end of the day, what is locked up is only “the empty court” and not “all the misery it has caused.”<sup>2</sup> Though the court is affirmed to be situated “at the very heart of the fog” (2), this literally nebulous information only restates the difficulty of locating it substantially, since there is “fog everywhere” (1). The ultimate unlocalizability of its operations permits them to be in all places at once. “How many people out of the suit, Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt, would be a very wide question” (5), but it would perhaps also be a moot one, since nearly all the characters we meet in the novel are in the cause, either as parties to it or administrators of it, even those like Esther who seem to have nothing to do with it. And the suit is as long as it is wide, the immense spatial extension of its filiations being matched by the long temporal duration that unfolds under its “eternal heading” (5). Dickens’s satire on the inefficiency of the court begins to seem a feeble, even desperate act of whistling in the dark, for the power organized under the name of Chancery is repeatedly demonstrated to be all too effective. Like the fog and dirt that are its first symbols, this power insinuates itself by virtue of its quasi-alchemical subtlety. To violent acts of penetration it prefers the milder modes of permeation, and instead of being densely consolidated into a force prepared to encounter a certain resistance, it is so finely vaporized—sublimated, we should say, thinking of alchemy and psychoanalysis together—that every surface it needs to attack is already porously welcoming it. Unlike, say, the power that keeps order in Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), this power does not impose itself by physical coercion (though, as the case of Gridley reminds us, it does dispose of carceral sanctions for those who hold it in contempt). Rather, it relies

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on being voluntarily assumed by its subjects, who, seduced by it, addicted to it, internalize the requirements for maintaining its hold. "Fog everywhere." What Chancery produces, or threatens to do, is an organization of power which, ceasing entirely to be a *topic*, has become topography itself: a system of control which can be all-encompassing because it cannot be compassed in turn. Writing in the nineteenth century, John Forster would not be the last critic of *Bleak House* to notice how "the great Chancery suit, on which the plot hinges, on incidents connected with which, important or trivial, all the passion and suffering turns, is worked into every part of the book."<sup>3</sup> Yet though we see nothing but the effects of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, everywhere present, affecting everyone, everything, we never come close to seeing what the suit is all about, as though this were merely the pretext that allowed for the disposition and deployment of the elaborate channels, targets, and techniques of a state bureaucracy. The interminable process of interpretation to which the original will gives rise, literally maddening to those who bring to it the demand that it issue in final truths and last judgments, is abandoned rather than adjudicated. If Chancery thus names an organization of power that is total but not totalizable, total *because* it is not totalizable, then what is most radically the matter with being "in Chancery" is not that there may be no way out of it (a dilemma belonging to the problematic of the carceral), but, more seriously, that the binarisms of inside/outside, here/elsewhere become meaningless and the ideological effects they ground impossible.

Furthermore, the nature of Chancery necessarily affects the nature of the resistance to it. Whereas the topic of the carceral, localizing disciplinary practices that thereby seemed to require only local remedies, always implied a feasible politics of reformism, the total social reticulation of Chancery finds its corresponding oppositional practice in the equally total social negation of anarchism. Repeatedly, the court induces in the narration a wish for its wholesale destruction by fire: "If all the injustice it has committed, and all the misery it has caused, could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre—why, so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce!"(7). Even the elision of agency managed by the passive voice (who, exactly, would burn the court?), stopping short of any subjective assumption of the action, mirrors perfectly the court whose operations are in no one's control. The wish, moreover, may be considered fulfilled (albeit also displaced) when Mr. Krook, who has personified the Chancellor and Chancery from the first, dies of spontaneous combustion. It is as though apocalyptic suddenness were the only conceivable way to put an end to Chancery's meanderings, violent spontaneity the only means to abridge its elaborate procedures, and mere combustion the only response to its accumulation of paperwork. One of the least welcome implications of an all-inclusive system, such as Chancery is implied to be, is that even opposition to it, limited to the specular forms of reflection and inversion, merely intensifies our attachment to the perceptual grid constructed by its practices.

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Ultimately, the text oscillates between two seemingly incompatible sets of assumptions about the nature of Chancery's power—

ery's power—one deriving from the perception of total domination, the other still attached to the topic of the carceral. Thus, just as the satire on the inefficiency of the court contradicts the demonstrated power of such inefficiency, so too the anachronism of Chancery, upheld as "a slow, expensive, British, constitutional sort of thing" (13) by such fossils as Sir Leicester, counters the newness of the phenomenon that Dickens is describing under that name: the expanded development of the Victorian state bureaucracy that is at least as current as the novel's official exhibit of modernity in the Detective Police.<sup>5</sup>

All the evidence of Chancery's totalizing effects—of its productivity as an all-englobing system of power—is equivocal in such ways, as the text at once claims that this system is and isn't efficient, is and isn't everywhere, can and cannot be reformed. In the literal sense of giving utterance to a double discourse, *Bleak House* is a contradictory text. Yet as we continue to consider the operation of such "contradiction" in the text, we should be wary of prejudging it, in a certain Marxist manner, as the "symptom" of an ideological bind, obligingly betrayed to our notice in the text's taken-for-granted "distanciation" from its own program.<sup>6</sup> We need rather to be prepared to find in the source of "incoherence," the very resource on which the text draws for its consistency; in the ideological "conflict," a precise means of addressing and solving it; in the "failure" of intention on the part of the text, a positively advantageous *strategy*.

## II

Of all the mysteries that will crop up in *Bleak House*, not the least instructive concerns the curious formal torsion whereby a novel dealing with a civil suit becomes a murder mystery, and whereby the themes of power and social control are passed accordingly from the abyssal filiations of the law into the capable hands of the detective police. By what kinds of logic or necessity is the law thus turned over to the police, and the civil suit turned into the criminal case? For if Jarndyce and Jarndyce provides the ground from which mysteries and the consequent detections originate, it is certainly not because the suit is itself a mystery. In one sense, it is so illegible that we don't even have a sense, as we should with a mystery, of what needs to be explained or, more importantly, of what might constitute either the clues or the cruxes of such an explanation. In another, the suit may be read fully and at leisure: in the reams of dusty warrants, in the tens of thousands of Chancery-folio pages, in the battery of blue bags with their heavy charges of paper—in all the archival litter that has accumulated over the dead letter of the original will. Dickens's presentation offers either too little or else too much to amount to mystery. Besides, nothing about the suit is secret or hidden, unless we count the second will found late in the novel, and this hardly brings us closer to a judgment. All that is even unavailable are the dead legator's intentions.

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Yet Chancery can never dispense with the judgments that it also never dispenses. Though the project of interpretation is virtually annulled in the workings of its formalism ("the lantern that has no light in it"), the *promise* of interpretation, as that which initiates and facilitates this formalism, remains absolutely necessary.

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And at the practical and technical level of such operations, the promise of judgment becomes the lure of advertising, extended by venalities such as Vholes to promote the purchase and exercise of their services.

Perhaps the most interesting effect of all produced by the promise, however, considerably exceeds these theoretical and practical functions. If Chancery exploits

the logic of a promise by perpetually maintaining it as *no more than such*, then the suit must obviously produce as much frustration as hopefulness. Accordingly, one consequence of a system that, as it engenders an interpretative project, simultaneously deprives it of all the requirements for its accomplishment is the desire for an interpretative project that would *not* be so balked. This desire is called into being from within the ground of a system that, it bears repeating, resists interpretation on two counts: because it cannot be localized as an object of interpretation, and because it is never willing to become the agency or subject of interpretation. What such a desire effectively seeks, therefore, is a reduced model of the untotalizable system and a legible version of the undecidable suit. What such a desire calls for, in short, both as a concept and as a fact, is the detective story.

The detective story gives obscurity a name and a local habitation: in that highly specific "mystery" whose ultimate uncovering motivates an equally specific program of detection. If the Chancery system includes everything but settles nothing, then one way in which it differs from the detective story is that the latter is, precisely, a *story*: sufficiently selective to allow for the emergence of a narrative and properly committed, once one has emerged, to bringing it to completion. In relation to an organization so complex that it often tempts its subjects to misunderstand it as chaos, the detective story realizes the possibility of an easily comprehensible version of order. And in the face—or facelessness—of a system where it is generally impossible to assign responsibility for its workings to any single person or group of persons, where even the process of victimization seems capricious, the detective story performs a drastic simplification of power as well. For unlike Chancery, the detective story is fully prepared to affirm the efficacy and priority of personal agency, be it that of the criminal figures who do the work of concealment or that of the detective figures who undo it. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the desire for the detective story first emerges from within the legal community itself, in Tulkinghorn and Guppy, since lawyers, having charge of the system, are most likely to be aware of the extent to which they merely convey a power which is theirs only to hold and not to have. It is entirely suitable that those who continually *exercise* this power—in the root sense, that is, of driving it on—should be the first to dream of *possessing* it, so that the calling of Mr. Tulkinghorn, for instance, "eke solicitor of the High Court of Chancery" (11), becomes "the acquisition of secrets and the holding possession of such

power as they give him, with no sharer or opponent in it" (511). At the other end of the legal hierarchy (though not, one may be sure, for long), Mr. Guppy prepares for a similar vocation:

Mr. Guppy suspects everybody who enters on the occupation of a stool in Kenge and Carboy's office, of entertaining, as a matter of course, sinister designs upon him. He is clear that every such person wants to depose him. If he be ever asked how, why, when, or wherefore, he shuts up one eye and shakes his head. On the strength of these profound views, he in the most ingenious manner takes infinite pains to counter-plot, when there is no plot; and plays the deepest games of chess without any adversary. (272)

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Guppy's counter-plotting "when there is no plot" may be seen as the usefully paranoid attempt of an ambitious clerk to grasp the power of the legal system over him by turning everybody in it into his personal enemy. It may also be seen as the desperately fanciful effort of an otherwise bored office worker to overwrite the impersonal and inconsequential tedium of his tasks with lively dramas centered on himself. In either case, it suggests precisely the sense in which the non-narrative system of Chancery generates narratives both to grasp its evasiveness and equally to evade its grasp.

Yet within this perspective, one must register the general failure of the amateur detectives in *Bleak House* to impose a will to truth and power. Anecdotally, their stories all reach a final point of checkmate.

The profound reason for the anecdotal failure of these stories is that they are undertaken as individual projects. That individuality not only must debilitate the power of the will-to-power, but also qualifies the general validity of the production of truth.

It is not enough to say that, if the detective story is meant to be an individual rendition of an order and a power that are social and institutional in nature, then a great deal must be lost in the translation. For that loss to be registered as *its* loss, in its formal incompleteness, its cognitive inadequacy, and its political failure, what must also be asserted is the priority assumed by social and institutional categories over the individual projects that they will ultimately reabsorb.

Even as a failure, however, the project of detection enjoys a certain dangerous efficacy. For it fails in every respect except that of catching on. Its weakness as an individual enterprise becomes a demonstrable strength as the number of individuals undertaking it increases and it thereby acquires a certain social distribution and consistency. As a *common* individual project, detection poses a threat to the social and institutional orders that continue to doom it to failure as a single undertaking.

From beginning to end, the project sanctions the unwholesomely deviate erotic desire that inspires it and that it releases into action. The unsavory sexual secrets in which this desire, having been liberated, is ultimately gratified, are themselves subversive of socially given arrangements. Regularly involving a double transgression, of class as well as conjugal boundaries, they give scandal to the twin unities that Dickens puts at the basis of a decent social order, family and station. To disclose these secrets, moreover, exacerbates their scandalous effects, as when what Mrs. Snagsby thinks she knows leads her to seek a marital separation, and what Tulkinghorn tells Lady Dedlock prompts her public flight. In a context where home and family are the chief bulwarks against drifting into the interminable circulations of Chancery Court, the kind of individuality implied and exfoliating in the project of detection must seem ultimately anarchic. Born, as Tulkinghorn's case makes particularly clear, when the law is taken into one's own hands, it gives birth to the familiar rivalrous, *sauve-qui-peut* world of which the tension between Tulkinghorn and Guppy is an early symptom, and in which the murderous personal arrogations of Mademoiselle Hortense are, though shocking, perfectly proper.

We begin to see why the detective narratives require to come under the management of a master-agency charged with the task both of suppressing their successes (in fostering extreme threats to social order) and also of supplying their failures (to provide a widely available, consoling simplification of this order). We begin to understand, in other words, the profound necessity of the police in *Bleak House*. Though Chancery Court, to make itself tolerable, produces a desire for the detective story, as for that which will confer on it the legibility of a traditionally patterned meaning, this desire, far from issuing in an order that can be comfortingly proffered and consumed as the essence of the chaos that is Chancery's appearance, threatens to reduplicate such chaos in the yet more explicit form of social disaggregation. What keeps the production of this desire from being dangerously excessive—what in fact turns the dangerous excess back into profit—is that the detective story, following the same logic whereby it was produced among the effects of Chancery, produces among *its* effects the desire for its own authoritative version and regulatory agency. Out of control to the point that, at Tulkinghorn's murder, the very principle of sense-making appears to have gone "stark mad" (665), the detective story eventually asks to be arrested by the Detective Police.

The police not only repress but also, profoundly, satisfy the desire to which Chancery gives rise. For in addition to doing the negative work of correcting for the socially undesirable consequences of amateur projects of detection, it performs the positive work of discharging for society as a whole the function that these amateur projects had assumed unsuccessfully: that of providing, within the elusive organization of Chancery, a simplified representation of order and power. The novel's shift in focus from Chancery Court to the Detective Police encompasses a number of concomitant shifts, which all operate in the direction of this simplification: from civil law and questions of liability to criminal law and less merely legal

questions of guilt; from trivial legal hair-splitting to the urgency of the fact, beyond such disputing, of murder; from a cause with countless parties represented by countless attorneys in an anonymous system, to a case essentially reduced to two personal duels, between the criminal and his victim and between the criminal and the detective; from long, slow, to all appearances utterly inefficient procedures to swift and productive ones; and finally, from an institution which cannot justify its power to one which, for all the above reasons, quite persuasively can. It is as though every complaint that could be made about the one institution had been redressed in the organization of the other, so that one might even argue, on the basis of Dickens's notorious willingness to serve as a propagandist for the New Police, that the excruciating *longueurs* of Chancery existed mainly to create the market for Mr. Bucket's expeditious *coups*.<sup>10</sup> Along these lines, one might even want to read, in the police activity that develops over the dead body of the law ("or Mr Tulkinghorn, one of its trustiest representatives" [305]), Dickens's exhilarated announcement of the agencies and practices of social discipline that, claiming to be merely supplementing the law, will come in large part to supplant it.<sup>11</sup> Yet to the extent that we stress, in the evident archaism of Chancery, the emergence of a new kind of bureaucratic organization, and in the blatantly modern Detective Police (instituted only ten years before the novel began to appear), a harkening back to a traditional and familiar model of power, then we need to retain the possibility that Dickens's New Police still polices, substantively as well as nominally, *for* the law, for the Chancery system, and that, as a representation, it serves a particular ideological function within this system, and not against it. Made so desirable as a sort of institutional "alternative" to Chancery, the police derive their ideological efficacy from providing, within a total system of power, a *representation of the containment of power*. The shift from Chancery to the police dramatically localizes the field, exercise, and agents of power, as well as, of course, justifies such power, which, confined to a case of murder and contained in a Mr. Bucket, occupies what we can now think of as the right side. And when the novel passes from adulatory wonder at the efficiency of the police to sad, resigned acknowledgment of its limits (such as emerges in Hortense's last exchange with Bucket), the circumscription of power, reaching the end to which it always tended, has merely come full circle.

### III

The police thus allow for the existence of a field outside the dynamic of power and free from its effects. Once installed in this realmless realm, one could cease to internalize—as the desperate, hopeful psychology of compulsion—the lures of the Chancery system; from within it, one could bear witness to the possibility of a genuine criticism of that system, one that would no longer be merely the sign of the impossibility of withdrawing from it. Shifting focus from Chancery Court to the Detective Police, the novel works toward the recovery of this place elsewhere, in a two-pronged strategy whose other line of attack lies in Esther's absolute refusal to be touched by the suit and in the constitution of Bleak House that her refusal enables. For in point of fact the "outside" of power is specified as a domestic space, occupied by an ideal of the family. Not the least evil of the Chancery system in this respect was that, in it, police and family blurred into one another. As an apparatus of power



concerned to impose, protect, and extend itself, Chancery naturally included a policing function, but it had the aspect of a family as well, not only because the suits that came before it arose from family disputes, but also because (as when it put its wards Ada and Richard under the guardianship of John Jarndyce) it sanctioned families of its own. In effect, the emergence of Bleak House on the one hand and Mr. Bucket (who, though Mrs. Bucket is as fond of children as himself, has none) on the other achieves the extrication of the family from the police, a disarticulation into separate domains of what it was a trick of Chancery's domination to have knitted seamlessly together.

We mustn't be surprised, however, if there is a trick to this new arrangement too—and perhaps a far better one. When Mr. Bucket escorts Mr. Snagsby through Tom-all-Alone's (much as Inspector Field took Dickens with him on his tours of duty), the detective's thoroughgoing knowledge of the place as well as the extreme deference shown to him by its inhabitants (who call him "master") indicate the degree to which the police have saturated the delinquent milieu. If the saturation doesn't appear to have much curtailed delinquency, or even, strangely, to have prevented Tom-all-Alone's from continuing to serve as a refuge for those wanted by the police, these perhaps were never the ends of police penetration. What such penetration indubitably does secure is an apparent containment of crime and power together, which both become visible mainly in a peripheral place, "avoided by all decent people" (220).<sup>12</sup> The *raison d'être* of Tom-all-Alone's is that it *be* all alone, as the text is prepared to admit when it speculates "whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company" (220). Yet the marginal localization of the police thus achieved is subjected to a dramatic ambiguity as soon as, beyond ensuring the circulation of vagrants like Jo or the apprehension of murderers who, doubly exotic, come from foreign parts and the servant class both, the police pass into the fashionable upper-class world of Chesney Wold or even the

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just barely respectable shooting gallery of Mr. George. Though disturbed by Bucket's nighttime visit, heralded only by the glare of his bull's-eye, the denizens of Tom-all-Alone's are neither surprised nor shamed by what is evidently a very familiar occurrence. Compare their dull acceptance to Sir Leicester's appalled imagination:

Heaven knows what he sees. The green, green woods of Chesney Wold, the noble house, the pictures of his forefathers, strangers defacing them, officers of police coarsely handling his most precious heirlooms, thousands of fingers pointing at him, thousands of faces sneering at him. (743–44)

Compare it even to Mr. George's sharp mortification:

'You see . . . I have been handcuffed and taken into custody, and brought here. I am a marked and disgraced man, and here I am. My shooting-gallery is rummaged, high and low, by Bucket; such property as I have—'tis small—is turned this way and that, till it don't know itself . . .' (705)

The sense of scandal that informs both passages, even as it acknowledges that the police can break out of their limits to become a total, all-pervasive institution like Chancery, reinforces our perception of the boundaries that ordinarily keep them in their place. It qualifies the police intervention in either case as an exceptional state of affairs, warranted only by the exceptional circumstances that call it into being.

The representation of the police, then, is not just organized by a comforting principle of localization; it is also organized within the fear-inspiring prospect of *the possible suspension of this principle*. One may read the resulting ambiguity in the very character of Mr. Bucket. The fact that the representation of the police is virtually entirely confined to the portrayal of this one character is already revealing of the strategy of containment whereby the topic of the police is constituted. Chancery Court required dozens of lawyers in the attempt to represent it, and even then the attempt had always to remain unequal to a system whose essential anonymity resisted being seized as character. The police, however, can be adequately rendered in the character of a single one of its agents, and this fact, among others, makes it a superior institution. Whereas the law is impersonal and anonymous, the law enforcement is capable of showing a human face—if that is the word for the mechanically recurring tics and character-traits that caused Inspector Bucket to be received at the time of the novel's publication as one of Dickens's most "delightful" creations.<sup>13</sup> Yet if police power is contained in Bucket, Bucket himself is *not* contained in the way that characters ordinarily are.

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Another way to bring out the ambiguity that invests the established limits of the police is to ask: on behalf of whom or what does the Detective Police do its policing?

All the ambiguities about the police, of course, serve to establish a radical uncertainty in the nature of private, familial space. "As [Mr. Bucket] says himself, what is public life without private ties? He is in his humble way a public man, but it is not in that sphere that he finds happiness. No, it must be sought within the confines of domestic bliss" (675–76). But as we know, Bucket here maintains the difference between public (institutional) and private (domestic) spheres as part of a successful attempt to neutralize it. The difference on which he affably insists allows him to be welcomed into the Bagnet household, where at the proper moment—no longer as a new friend of the family, but now a public official—he can arrest their friend and guest Mr. George. Is the private sphere autonomous or not? The representation of the police in *Bleak House* permits us to answer the question either way: to insist, when this is necessary, on the elsewhere opened up by the localization of the police (who considerably police, among other things, their own limits); or to suggest, when this is desirable, the extent to which this elsewhere is constantly liable to being transgressed by the police. The police simultaneously produce and permeate (produce as permeable) the space they leave to be "free."

If, therefore, we need to say that, in its representation of bureaucracy and the police, *Bleak House* regularly produces a difference between these institutions and the domestic space outside them, we must also recognize that it no less regularly produces this difference *as a question*, in the mode of the "problematic." The bar of separation and even opposition that it draws between the two terms is now but-

tressed, now breached, firm and fragile by turns. On one hand, Chancery is a total system of domination, engendering resistances whose mere inversions or duplications of its injunctions only entrench its power more deeply. On the other hand, Chancery's domination seems to cease precisely at the points where one elects to erect bulwarks against it such as Esther's Bleak House. Or again: if the police represent a reduction of the domination of Chancery, and thus permit a domestic autonomy, it is also suggested that the police, as all-encompassing as Chancery, can at any moment abolish that autonomy. Or still again: the police are other, better than Chancery, but they are also the organ that polices on its behalf and thus works to preserve it. We cannot too strongly insist that these "paradoxes" are not merely confusions or historical contradictions that tug and pull at a text helpless to regulate them, but rather productive ambiguities that facilitate the disposition, functioning, and promotion of certain ideological effects, some of which we have already suggested. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] If *Bleak House* baffles us in the first few hundred pages by featuring a profusion of characters who seem to have nothing to do with one another, a miscellany of events whose bearing on a possible plot is undecidable, and even two separate systems of narration that are unequal and unrelated, it simultaneously encourages us to anticipate the end of bafflement and the acquisition of various structures of coherence: in the revelation or development of relationships among characters; in the emergence of a plot whereby the mysteries of the text will be enlightened and its meanings fully named; and in the tendency of the two narrations to converge, as Esther's account comes to include characters and information that at first appeared exclusively in the anonymous one. In other words, the novel dramatizes the liabilities of fragmentation and postponement within the hopeful prospect that they will eventually be overcome. We consume the enormous length of a novel like *Bleak House* in the belief that it is eminently digestible—capable, that is, of being ultimately rendered in a readerly *digest*: a final abridgment of plot and character which stands for—and so dispenses with—all that came before it. From the standpoint of this promised end, the massive bulk of the novel will always have concealed the perfectly manageable and unmonstrous proportions of a much shorter, tauter form.

[REDACTED] In short, the novel encourages a series of deferential cathexes—all the more fundamental for being unconscious—onto various instances of authority. What is promoted in the process is a paternalism that, despite the dim view the novel takes of the power-structures of the British state, can only be useful in maintaining such structures. To submit to the novel's duration is already to be installed within an upbeat ethic of endurance. If, as

we speculated above, the novel trains us to abide in Chancery-like structures—by getting us to wait, as it were, in its very long lines—, it does this only insofar as it is organized as a *reformed* Chancery, a Chancery that can moralize its procrastinations in a practice of delayed gratification. Recklessly, the Court demanded an attendance so futile that it inspired dangerously anarchistic fantasies of destruction. More prudently, the novel, urging us to wait, also promises (to use the very formula of prudence) that we shall wait *and see*.

It can be further argued that, as it arouses a desire for expeditious, conclusive solutions, but only represents a single agency capable of providing them, the novel subtly identifies the reader's demand for closure with a general social need for the police, thus continuing (with only a considerable increase of cunning) the apologetics for the new forces of order that Dickens began as an essayist in *Household Words*.

The novel, however, is just as little anxious to appear an agency of the police as it was to resemble a relay of the Chancery system. The relatively friendly treatment that *Bleak House* accords to the Detective Police is qualified by a number of reservations about the nature and effects of its power. Most of these, like the other aspects of the police, are carried in the characterization of Inspector Bucket.

The moral horror of crime, which Dickens preserves (among other things) in his sensationalistic treatment of it, must be irrelevant—might even be counterproductive—to the professional dispassion required for the task of apprehending the criminal. This task may no doubt be considered itself a moral one. But the game function of detection thoroughly dominates whatever ethical ends it presumably serves; and, as Bucket himself can assure Sir Leicester, his profession has placed him utterly beyond the possibility of being scandalized:

'... I know so much about so many characters, high and low, that a piece of information more or less, don't signify a straw. I don't suppose there's a move on the board that would surprise me; and as to this or that move having taken place, why my knowing it is no odds at all; any possible move whatever (provided it's in a wrong direction) being a probable move according to my experience. . . .' (726)

The ethical perspective survives only in the faint melancholy with which Bucket, truly the "modern prince" in this respect, appears to regret the necessity of his own

pessimism; or in the personal askesis that, when every consequence of desire proves criminal, is perhaps the only humane response remaining. Nonetheless, the melancholy is hardly sufficient to prevent him from eliciting the very weaknesses that are the object of its contemplation. The momentary collaboration between Skimpole and Bucket revealed at the end of the novel, an alliance of two species of moral indifference, throws no more discredit on the aesthete who delivers a dangerously ill child over to the police for no better reason than a bribe, than on the officer who extends the bribe for no better reason than to cover his client's prying. Even the askesis surrenders its moral truth to the extent that it is the very evidence of Bucket's amoral professionalization. As Tulkinghorn's fate exemplifies, amateur detectives run amok because they are motivated by personal desires for possession. Renunciation is thus for the professional detective a positive qualification, much as what Bucket appears to lament as his barren marriage shows a clear profit as an amicable and highly efficient business partnership.

## VII

Even in what otherwise would be her triumph, when the recognition of her merit has assumed public proportions, Esther Summerson retains her modest blindfold: "The people even praise Me as the doctor's wife. The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake" (880). And to Allan's affirmation that she is prettier than ever she was, she can only respond:

I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now. But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most benevolent face that ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—. (880)

Just as earlier Esther could barely speak of Allan, or her desire for him, so now, at the moment this desire is returned, she can only stammer. With her unfinished sentence, *Bleak House* "ends." Though one easily supplies what Esther keeps from saying ("even supposing I have my beauty back"), the modesty that consigns this assertion to silence is, to the last, radically inconclusive. Like woman's work, which is the external means to Esther's social recognition, the labors of modesty, its inner correlative, are never done.

What might be a matter for grief or grievance, however, as Esther's "neurotic" inability to relinquish her self-doubt in the hour of success, also means that the energy that has gone into consolidating and sustaining one Bleak House after another will not be dissipated in the complacency of enjoyment or relaxation. The text has posed the origin of Esther's self-doubt in the question of her proper place in a family structure (her illegitimacy), and this origin has shaped her tacit ambition to install herself securely within such a structure. Given a twist, however, by the psychology of modesty through which it is obliged to pass, the ambition attains to a

frustration that is exactly proportionate to its achievements. Esther never ceases to earn her place, as though, were she to do so, she might even at the end be displaced from it. Yet there is a twist to the frustration too, as Esther's endless modesty finds its non-neurotic social validation in the family that, no less precarious than her own sense of identity, requires precisely such anxious and unremitting devotion for its survival. Or, as these relations might be generally summarized: the insecurity of the family subject is indispensable to counter the instability of the family structure, of which it is an effect.

The instability of the family, therefore, is constitutive of its very maintenance. As Jacques Donzelot has shown, the nineteenth-century family develops within two registers, which he calls *contract* and *tutelage*. Contract indicates the free and easy family autonomy ensured through "the observance of norms that guarantee the social usefulness of [its] members"; whereas tutelage designates the system of "external penetration" of the family, transformed into an object of surveillance and discipline. The two registers are positive and negative dimensions of a single policy of incentive: if the family satisfactorily performs its social tasks, then it is granted the liberty and autonomy of contract; but should it fail to pay back the privileges thereby conferred upon it in the proper accomplishment of responsibilities, then it must fall back into the register of tutelage.<sup>23</sup>

The theme of internal disruption, on the other hand, addresses its message to the family itself, which had better do its utmost to stay together or else face the misery of being dispersed or colonized by remedial institutions. In the first instance, Dickens advises society to police for the family, which would thereby be safeguarded as the home of freedom; in the second, he counsels the family to police itself, that it might remain free by becoming its own house of correction. The two apparently incompatible themes, informing the representation of the family throughout Dickens's work, are in fact complementary. Likewise, the "practical" recommendations attached to each find their mutual coherence precisely in the way that they cancel one another out. For if society reformed itself so that state institu-

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tions would, if not wither away, become minimal and humane, then there would no longer exist an outside threat to consolidate the family in the face of its internal dangers; and to the extent that the family could successfully repress these dangers itself, it would only reproduce such institutions in their worst aspects. With the disappearance of social discipline, the emancipated family would prove in greater need of it than ever; and in the enjoyment of its unobstructed independence, it would restore the discipline from which it was meant as an asylum, either in its own practice or in that of the institutions that would inevitably make their reappearance upon its breakdown.

Neither the social nor the familial “policing of the family,” therefore, can be carried very far without giving rise to the very regimentation it was supposed to curtail. In this respect at least, Dickens’s vigorous reformism makes better sense as an undeclared defense of the status quo: the social recommendations would merely be the weights (like most weights, not meant to be carried very far) to preserve the family in its present delicate balance. For the family’s freedom is founded in the possibility of its discipline, and thus to enjoy the former means to have consented to the latter. Esther’s insecurity, we said, works to oppose the instability of the family structure from which it results. It supplies the constant vigilance wanted to keep the contractual family from lapsing into the subjection of tutelage. It is equally true, however, that Esther’s insecurity *confirms* the family in its faultiness. In the same degree as it propagates the worry and anxiety needed to maintain the family, it keeps alive the ever-present danger of its fall. The novel everywhere publishes the same fear of falling and implies the same urgency about holding one’s place. The “outside” of power regularly incurs the risk that it may be annexed—or worse, may already have been annexed—by the “inside.” So, for instance, the family will sometimes be shown for only a slight modulation of Chancery bureaucracy (comfortably domesticated with the Jellybys), or of the police (one of whose different voices can be heard in Mrs. Pardiggle, the “moral Policeman” who regiments her own family in the same spirit she takes others “into custody” [107]). And the risk touches us more nearly than do these unadmirable characters, for even the excellent Bagnets rely on an explicitly military order, and Esther herself may be only better directed than Mrs. Jellyby when she sits at her desk “full of business, examining trademen’s books, adding up columns, paying money, filing receipts, and . . . making a great bustle about it” (122). Envisioning the family now as a firm counterweight to social institutions, now as a docile function of them, here as the insuperable refuge from the carceral, there as the insufferable replica of it, the novel poses the question of the family, which it thereby designates as the object of struggle. Rather as Esther takes up this question as the necessity of founding and keeping Bleak House, so the novel extends the question to its readers, both as a principle of hope and an exhortation, as it were, to work at home. Mr. Bagnet’s famous catchword formulates what is no less the objective than the condition of the family in Dickens’s representation of it: “Discipline”—within the domestic circle as well as outside it—“must be maintained.”