

BRITISH WRITERS *Classics*



VOLUME II

BLEAK HOUSE
COPENHAGEN
CROW
DANIEL DERONDA
DON JUAN
FRANKENSTEIN
HESPERIDES
JANE EYRE
THE LORD OF THE RINGS
THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE
MRS. DALLOWAY
THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GREY
PLAIN TALES FROM THE HILLS
POSSESSION
THE RING AND THE BOOK
THINGS FALL APART
VANITY FAIR
WAITING FOR GODOT
WATERLAND

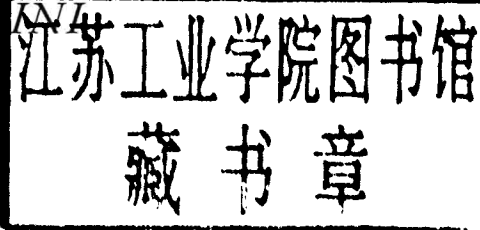
EDITED BY JAY PARINI

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British Writers Classics, Volume II

Jay Parini, Editor in Chief

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Introduction

This is the second volume in a series that we hope will continue for a long time. It represents a further development of *British Writers*, which had its origin in a sequence of monographs called *The Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers*. These biographical and critical monographs were incisively written and informative, treating ninety-seven American writers in a format and style that attracted a devoted following. It proved invaluable to a generation of students and teachers, who could depend on the reliable and interesting critiques of major figures that were offered in those pages.

The idea of reprinting the Minnesota pamphlets occurred to Charles Scribner, Jr. Soon four volumes entitled *American Writers: A Collection of Literary Biographies* (1974) appeared, and it was widely acclaimed by students, teachers, and librarians. To this was added *British Writers*, a parallel series that deals with major writers from the United Kingdom and Anglophone countries, such as Ireland, South Africa, India, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The series continues, with volumes added yearly as supplements and retrospectives. The articles in these collections all consider the whole career of an important writer, supplying biographical and cultural context as well as taking careful look at the shape of the individual achievement.

This new series provides substantial articles that focus on a single masterwork of British or Anglophone literature, whether it be a novel, a volume of stories, a play, a long poem or sequence of poems, or a major work of autobiography or nonfiction. The idea behind the series is simple: to provide close readings of landmark works. These readings, written by well-known authors and professors of literature, will in each case examine the text itself, explaining its internal dynamics, and consider the cultural, biographical, and historical dimensions of the work. Some effort will be made to place the work within the author's overall career, though the main focus in each essay will be on the chosen text.

In the past twenty-five years or so, since the advent of post-structuralism, the emphasis in most critical writing has been largely theoretical. What was called "close reading" during the days of the so-called New Criticism—a movement that had its origins in formalist criticism of the twenties and thirties, and which reigned supreme in university English departments for several decades—was often immensely useful to students and teachers, who wanted careful and detailed analyses of individual texts. Every effort has been made in these articles to provide useful and patient readings of important works without sacrificing theoretical sophistication.

Our hope is that students and teachers, as well as the general reader, will find these articles both informative and stimulating. Each essay will introduce a

reader to a major text and offer a subtle analysis of its formal properties without ignoring the historical and cultural dimensions of the work. The bibliographies attached to the end of each article offer a guide to further reading on each work.

This second volume of *British Writers Classics* is largely concerned with novels. We take up a fair number of novels that must be considered central to the British tradition of literary fiction, and a fair number of these were written during the nineteenth century, when the novel as a genre came into its own, and when novelists were just discovering the range and power of fiction. (It was also a time, of course, when the audience for fiction expanded dramatically with the increase in literacy that ushered in the modern era.) The novels discussed from this era are *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Bleak House*, *Vanity Fair*, *Daniel Deronda*, and *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. We also look at Kipling's first collection of Anglo-Indian stories, *Plain Tales from the Hills*. Each of these must be considered a touchstone of English fiction.

We also explore several key novels from the twentieth century, including *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Possession*, and *Waterland*. As anyone can see, the range of works discussed is broad, though each text can lay claim to cultural significance. Each of these texts has also managed to attract a wide audience—another factor in their inclusion here.

Three poets are included here, represented by studies of their major long poems or poem-sequences. Robert Herrick's *Hesperides* was an important contribution to seventeenth century poetry. The same could be said for Byron's *Don Juan*, a major Romantic poem, and *Crow* by Ted Hughes, one of the most savagely powerful sequences of the postwar era. In each case, a good deal of background material is provided to make these complex works accessible.

Two plays are discussed: *Waiting for Godot* and *Copenhagen*. Beckett's play remains a seminal work of modern drama, one of the most widely performed and widely imitated theatrical texts of all time. Michael Frayn's recent play about the reunion in Copenhagen during World War Two of physicists Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg has been a huge hit and has quickly established itself as a contemporary classic.

Our hope is that these articles will encourage readers to return to the texts, thoughtfully, and better informed than they were before. That is, after all, one of the traditional functions of criticism. My own sense is that we have achieved a good deal in this first volume, and that readers will go away pleased and edified.

—JAY PARINI

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Charles Dickens's Bleak House



NEIL POWELL

CHARLES DICKENS PLANNED his most ambitious novel, *Bleak House*, in 1851, during the renovation of his recently acquired London home, Tavistock House; but he was unable to start writing until the building work was finished and he could move in. The delays drove him frantic; the chaos was unbearable. Having fled to Broadstairs, on the Kentish coast, Dickens told his old friend Henry Austin: "I am perpetually wandering (in fancy) up and down the house and tumbling over the workmen . . . I smell paint in the sea. Phantom lime attends me all day long" (p. 388). The door between his study and the drawing-room was to be painted with dummy books, to create an illusion of continuous shelves, and Dickens amused himself by inventing titles for them: for instance, *The Gunpowder Magazine*, *Noah's Arkitecture*, *Cat's Lives* (in nine volumes), and *History of a Short Chancery Suit* (in twenty-one volumes). Houses, ghostly presences, strange meetings on staircases, and the law's delays in the Court of Chancery were all to find their way into his new book.

In other respects, however, *Bleak House* would be a novel notably purged of autobiographical themes. Charles Dickens, the

second of eight children, was born in Portsmouth in 1812; his father was a clerk in the Navy Office and his childhood years in Chatham, Kent, were both peaceful and promising, thanks to the encouragement of his teacher, William Giles. But in 1822 John Dickens was transferred to London and the family's fortunes swiftly declined: he ended up in the debtors' prison, the Marshalsea, while Charles was sent to earn his living at Warren's blacking factory. He subsequently resumed his education and in 1827 became a solicitor's clerk; by 1833, he was parliamentary correspondent for *The Morning Chronicle*. A hopeless four-year courtship of Maria Beadnell was succeeded by his marriage to Catherine Hogarth in April 1836, the month in which the first installment of *The Pickwick Papers* appeared; this was followed by a succession of novels, including *Oliver Twist* (1838), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), *Barnaby Rudge* (1841) and *Dombey and Son* (1848). *David Copperfield* (1850) essentially tells the story of its author's own early life; when he turned to his next novel, *Bleak House* (1853), he could draw on altogether different resources.

He thoroughly researched and made extensive use of two particular kinds of source material

(much of it helpfully assembled in A. E. Dyson's "Casebook" critical anthology on *Bleak House*). On the one hand were accounts of London poverty, such as those in Friederich Engels's *The Working Class in England in 1844*, Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, and the Simon Report into the "Sanitary Condition of the City" of 1850. In Engels he found the description of St Giles—"Scarcely a whole window-pane can be found, the walls are crumbling, doorposts and window-frames loose and broken, door of old boards nailed together, or altogether wanting in this thieves' quarter, where no doors are needed, there being nothing to steal"—on which he based Tom-all- Alone's. From Simon he drew background information on fatal diseases (including smallpox) among the urban poor, as well the "putrefactive process" in the "saturated soils" of old city burial-grounds. Dickens's other source—to which his own experience in law and journalism drew him—was the continuing debate on the Court of Chancery in *The Times* during 1850 and 1851, which has been discussed by John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson in "The Topicality of *Bleak House*" (reprinted in Dyson, pp. 105–131). An article of 24 December 1850 is much to the point: "If a house be seen in a peculiarly dilapidated condition, the beholder at once exclaims, 'Surely that property must be in Chancery'," the writer reported; "the lingering and expectant suitors waste their lives as well as their substance in vain hopes, and death robs them of their wished-for triumph, if ruin have not already rendered it impossible." And, on 28 March 1851: ". . . the Court of Chancery is a name of terror, a devouring gulf, a den whence no footsteps return. . . A suit in that court is endless, bottomless, and insatiable." In addition, *The Times* supplied Dickens with further material about the living conditions of the poor: its leading article of 4 September 1851 argued that "In English towns generally half the attainable period of life is lost to all who are born. . . The destroying agent is typhus fever, generated by localised filth and excessive moisture. . . ."

CHRONOLOGY

1812	Charles Dickens born at Portsmouth, 7 February, second child of John Dickens, a naval clerk, and his wife Elizabeth (née Barrow).
1817	Family moves to Chatham, where John Dickens works at the Royal Dockyards.
1822	Family moves to London.
1824	John Dickens in Marshalsea Prison; Charles sent to work at Warren's blacking factory; then attends Wellington House Academy.
1827	Clerk to Ellis and Blackmore, solicitors, Gray's Inn.
1832	Parliamentary reporter, <i>The Mirror of Parliament</i> .
1833	Parliamentary reporter, <i>The Morning Chronicle</i> .
1836	Publishes <i>Sketches by Boz</i> ; marries Catherine Hogarth.
1837	<i>The Pickwick Papers</i> published.
1838	<i>Oliver Twist</i> published.
1838	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i> published.
1841	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i> and <i>Barnaby Rudge</i> published.
1842	Visits North America and publishes <i>American Notes</i> .
1844	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i> published.
1848	<i>Dombey and Son</i> published.
1850	Founds <i>Household Words</i> , which he continues until 1859, and publishes <i>David Copperfield</i> .
1853	<i>Bleak House</i> published.
1854	<i>Hard Times</i> published.
1856	Buys Gad's Hill Place.
1857	<i>Little Dorrit</i> published.
1859	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i> published.
1861	<i>Great Expectations</i> published.
1865	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i> published.
1867	Second American reading tour.
1870	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i> published in monthly installments but remains incomplete when Dickens dies on 9 June.

In these and several other ways, *Bleak House* is an intensely topical novel. Its continuing vein of parliamentary satire can be tracked to histori-

BLEAK HOUSE

cal events: the hiatus at the start of chapter 40, for instance, in which “Lord Coodle would go out, Sir Thomas Doodle wouldn’t come in, and there being nobody in Great Britain (to speak of) except Coodle and Doodle, there has been no Government” (p. 638), took place after the fall of Russell’s administration in February 1851. The appearance of Dickens’s literary acquaintances—Leigh Hunt as Skimpole, Walter Savage Landor as Boythorn—and of various thinly disguised charitable persons (such as Mrs Caroline Chisholm, of the Family Colonization Loan Society) further anchors the novel in its time and place. So too does the triumphant conversion of Dickens’s friend Inspector Field, the subject of several essays in *Household Words*, into Inspector Bucket, who is probably the first detective in English fiction—a distinction often wrongly assigned to Sergeant Cuff in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868). Such correlations between the novel and its origins will help to account for the immense energy and urgency of this huge book, but they should not obscure the fact that *Bleak House* is much greater than its topicality and enjoyable without reference to it.

Dickens struggled to choose a title for so wide-ranging a novel. Most of his candidates were variations on “Tom-all-Alone’s,” the name of a derelict house near Chatham, remembered from his Kentish childhood, which he now transferred to the London slums. Interestingly, he supplemented many of these with over-restrictive subtitles: “The Solitary House where the Grass Grew,” “The Solitary House where the Wind Howled,” or “The Ruined House that Got into Chancery and Never Got Out.” Penultimately, he abandoned Tom-all-Alone’s and came up with the impossibly cumbersome “Bleak House and the East Wind: How They Both Got into Chancery and Never Got Out.” At this point, he must have realized that wind was exactly the opposite of the novel’s dominant image, fog, and settled simply for “Bleak House.”

After finishing *Bleak House*, Dickens turned his attention from London poverty and the interminable processes of the law to the state of industrial England in *Hard Times* (1854). Other major novels—including *Little Dorrit* (1857), *Great Expectations* (1861) and the book which most obviously rivals *Bleak House* in scope and scale, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865)—followed. Exhausted both by writing and by his extensive international reading tours, Dickens died at Gad’s Hill, the house near Rochester he had bought in 1856, in June 1870 at age 58.

BLEAK HOUSE

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Bleak House is a novel about nothing less than the entire fabric of mid-nineteenth-century England, its connections and its disconnections.

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?

(p. 256)

Connections are what the fortunate possess—we speak of people as being “well-connected” or “connected by marriage”—and the unfortunate, the disenfranchised, lack; at another level, they are what the novelist must invent or discover to hold his novel together. Dickens is as ruthless as Grandfather Smallweed, whom he describes as “a horny-skinned, two-legged, money-getting species of spider” (p. 332), and as prodigious as Sir Leicester Dedlock, who “like a glorious spider, stretches his threads of relationship” (p. 446), in spinning his own web of connections: there are moments in *Bleak*

House when even the most admiring reader will greet with weary dismay the revelation that one more character is another's long lost relative. Sometimes this interconnectedness is a source of astonishment to individuals at the very heart of it: "Why, Esther!" says John Jarndyce smilingly, after a visit from Sir Leicester Dedlock, "our visitor and you are the two last persons on earth I should have thought of connecting together!" (p. 685). Meanwhile, beyond the connections of kinship and coincidence, there is at the core of the book a further tangle: the hopeless and (for at least nine hundred pages or so) seemingly interminable Chancery case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Dickens was attempting, as Edgar Johnson puts it, "an anatomy of modern society. *Bleak House* articulates its institutions, from government and law to philanthropy and religion—on every level, from Sir Leicester Dedlock's Lincolnshire estates to the rotting tenements of Tom-all-Alone's—as a corrupt and entangled web of vested interests and power" (*Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, p. 385).

But *Bleak House* is also a novel of disconnections, of curious and sinister ends, as Jo the crossing-sweeper knows all too well: "They dies everywhere," said the boy. "They dies in their lodgings—she knows where; I showed her—and they dies down in Tom-all-Alone's in heaps. They dies more than they lives, according to what I see" (p. 492). Those whose final disconnections shape the novel's course include not only impoverished victims such as Jo and Gridley, the "man from Shropshire," but Krook (who in this connective world turns out to have been Mrs Smallweed's brother), Lady Dedlock (who dies precisely because she is discovered to be Esther's mother), the enigmatic lawyer Tulkinghorn, and the ward-in-Jarndyce Richard Carstone; Esther and her maid Charley both narrowly escape dying of smallpox. Krook's death by spontaneous combustion—as bizarre an end as any in English fiction—is mirrored by the eventual conclusion of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, when it is found that the entire estate has been

absorbed by legal costs. In each case, there is literally nothing left: the disconnections are total.

The web like construction of *Bleak House*—and the tangled, shadowy use Dickens makes of it—ought to warn us against expecting too much in the way of a conventional linear plot. In fact, the novel has two main strands of plot, both of which are notably arbitrary in nature. One is the mystery of Esther Summerson and her parentage: it is essentially a fairy story, in which a pauper is discovered to have been a princess all along, except that its conclusion is bleakly ironic. The fact that Esther is found to be Lady Dedlock's daughter is irrelevant to her own happiness (neither John Jarndyce's nor Allan Woodcourt's love for her depends on it) and ruinous to her mother's. Moreover, as a source of suspense for the reader, it lasts for little more than half the novel: Lady Dedlock's disclosure in the woods at Chesney Wold—"O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother!"—occurs in chapter 36 (p. 579), and the remainder of this plot consists of her doomed attempts to keep the secret from her husband and the fashionable world. The other main plot strand is feebler still, for although the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce manages to touch almost everyone in the book, its whole point is that no one knows what on earth it is about: "it was about a Will when it was about anything," John Jarndyce explains to Esther, but "[i]t's about nothing but Costs, now" (p. 118). It is simply there, an inscrutable time-wasting cause, eating up money and lives. Krook recalls Tom Jarndyce's "restless habit of strolling about," talking about Chancery to anyone who would listen: "'For,' says he, 'it's being ground to bits in a slow mill; it's being roasted at a slow fire; it's being stung to death by single bees . . . it's going mad by grains'" (p. 71). And yet it is the backbone of the book, and so when "the suit lapses and melts away" (p. 975) the novel must end too.

To understand the greatness of this huge and ambitious novel, we shall need to concentrate

BLEAK HOUSE

less on its linear progress than on the significance Dickens attaches to his carefully chosen locations and, above all, his extraordinary cast of characters.

BLEAK HOUSES

The book begins in fog and ends in sunlight: it opens in London, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, and it ends in Yorkshire, in the second of two places called Bleak House. And the first thing to say about the places in this novel is that almost all of them are bleak, apart from the two houses which bear that ominous name: they, on the contrary, are scenes of the most radiant happiness. Dickens's symbolism of place, therefore, is not straightforward nor without irony.

The opening chapter is justly famous and has been much analyzed. It is an achievement in advance of its time: the density is reminiscent of Henry James, the spectral city, of James Joyce. Dickens's paradoxical achievement is to describe in immense detail a world where detail is foggily invisible; and this fog, which seems to be centered on Temple Bar ("that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation") and the Lord Chancellor himself (he is "at the very heart" of it), reaches out to embrace the whole of London, as well as "the Essex Marshes" and "the Kentish heights." It is—like poverty, disease, and the fog-bound case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce—a spreading contagion. Moreover, it is a state which the Londoner-lawyers we meet readily accept as their natural, habitual environment. When Esther arrives in the capital, in chapter 3, she is greeted by Mr. Guppy, a "young gentleman who had inked himself by accident," corresponding to the blurry and murky weather, and who cheerfully assures her: "This is a London particular." A little later, when Mr. Guppy gives Esther, Ada, and Richard directions to Mrs Jellyby's, he is magnificently oblivious to the fact that the places he names cannot actually be seen:

"Only round the corner," said Mr Guppy. "We just twist up Chancery Lane, and cut along Holborn, and there we are in four minutes time, as near as a toucher. This is about a London particular now, ain't it, miss?" He seemed quite delighted with it on my account.

(p. 51)

With this we are swiftly conveyed to the dirty, disorganized home of Mrs Jellyby, the "telescopic philanthropist," who lives with her ragged family and her distant benevolence in "a narrow street of tall houses, like an oblong cistern to hold the fog."

Hers is the first, and in some ways the mildest, of Dickens's grotesque London locations. Of a very different order is Krook's "Rag and Bottle Warehouse," at which, as Esther comments, "Everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold" (p. 67); it has "the air of being in a legal neighbourhood, and of being, as it were, a dirty hanger-on and disowned relation of the law" (p. 68). Krook himself has a more elevated view of the matter: "they call me the Lord Chancellor, and call my shop Chancery," he explains, because "I have so many old parchments 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 bear to part with anything I once lay hold of. . . ." (p. 70). His shop's correlation to the actual Court of Chancery even extends to his lodgers: one, Miss Flite, is a hopelessly impoverished suitor in the court; the other, known only as Nemo (we subsequently discover him to be Captain Hawdon), a transcriber of legal documents. It is characteristic of Dickens to be fascinated as well as appalled by this scene of cobwebbed stagnation: readers of *Great Expectations* will recall a similar ambivalence in his approach to Satis House.

Krook's premises establish the dominant motifs for a cluster of other London locations: poverty, dereliction, gloom, and confusion. Nearby, in Cook's Court, Cursitor Street, is Snagsby's, the law stationer's, once Peffer and

Snagsby's; but Peffer "has been recumbent this quarter of a century in the churchyard of St Andrews, Holborn" and "smoke, which is the London ivy, had so wreathed itself round Peffer's name, and clung to his dwelling-place, that the affectionate parasite quite overpowered the parent tree" (p. 155). In Bell Yard, "a narrow alley" towards the Strand, above a chandler's shop, are Gridley, "the man from Shropshire" and, above him, the fatherless children of Harold Skimpole's debt-enforcing pursuer Neckett. A further short distance away is Tom-all- Alone's, "a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people. . . . these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery" (p. 256). All these places are close to the law courts, as are the far more respectable but no less sinister chambers of Mr. Tulkinghorn (Dickens stresses the proximity, as the crow flies, by having an actual crow "skim westward over the leaden slice of sky belonging to Cook's Court" (p. 158) across Chancery Lane to Lincoln's Inn Fields). Meanwhile, Tulkinghorn's rather less successful legal colleague, Mr. Vholes, occupies an office in Symond's Inn, which is "squeezed up in a corner, and blinks at a dead wall"; there, "[a] smell as of unwholesome sheep, blending with the smell of must and dust, is referable to the nightly (and often daily) consumption of mutton fat in candles, and to the fretting of parchment forms in greasy drawers" (p. 621). The taint of Krook's rag-and-bottle shop, which is also the taint of Chancery, infects each of these closely linked locations.

The geographical compactness of his London scenes, almost all of which can be identified in the *A-Z* street atlas, is important for Dickens's plotting in the later stages of the novel; five more locations are within a few minutes' walk of the Inns of Court. Mr. Turveydrop's Academy is in Newman Street, a decent enough address, but it occupies part of "a sufficiently dingy house" shared with "a drawing-master, a coal-merchant (there was, certainly, no room for his coals), and a lithographic artist" (p. 222). George's Shooting Gallery is in "the curious region lying about the

Haymarket and Leicester Square, which is a centre of attraction to indifferent foreign hotels and indifferent foreigners, racket-courts, fighting-men, swordsmen, footguards, old china, gaming-houses, exhibitions, and a large medley of shabbiness and shrinking out of sight" (pp. 349–50); Dickens's affection for the random oddities of the Victorian city is once again self-evident. Further away, but no distance at all for a fit man like Trooper George, is the musical instrument shop of his friend and former army colleague, Matthew Bagnet: it is across the river, near the Elephant and Castle, which even a non-Londoner will immediately recognize as an unpromising place to sell musical instruments. To the north of the Inns of Court lies "a rather ill-favoured and ill-savoured neighbourhood, though one of its rising grounds bears the name of Mount Pleasant;" and there, "in a little narrow street, always solitary, shady, and sad, closely bricked in on all sides like a tomb" (p. 332), live the Smallweed family. Lastly, a little to the west is Somers Town, where Harold Skimpole—who is as innocent of money as Grandfather Smallweed is obsessed by it—lives in a house whose condition comes as no surprise to Esther, or to the reader:

It was in a state of dilapidation quite equal to our expectation. Two or three of the area railings were gone; the water-butt was broken; the knocker was loose; the bell handle had been pulled off a long time, to judge from the rusty state of the wire; and dirty footprints on the steps were the only signs of its being inhabited.

(p. 672)

This remarkable catalogue of decaying and derelict places—to which may be added, as a symbolic extension of London, the brickmaker's cottage near St Albans—forms the novel's solid foundation, its recurring ground bass.

But there is another world in the novel, infinitely more grand though every bit as gloomy:

BLEAK HOUSE

While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire. The rain is ever falling, drip, drip, drip, by day and night, upon the broad flagged terrace-pavement, The Ghost's Walk. The weather is so very bad, down in Lincolnshire, that the liveliest imagination can scarcely apprehend its ever being fine again. Not that there is any superabundant life of imagination on the spot, for Sir Leicester is not here (and, truly, even if he were, would not do much for it in that particular), but is in Paris, with my Lady; and solitude, with dusky wings, sits brooding upon Chesney Wold.

(p. 103)

This little paragraph—the opening one of chapter 7—is a fine example of Dickens's technique at its most subtly suggestive. It is all about absence. It begins with Esther, who has never been to Chesney Wold and has, as far as we are aware at this point in the novel, no connection with it; it ends with the Dedlocks, who are not there either. In between, we have the weather (the London fog has organized itself into rain) and the unforgettable image of The Ghost's Walk, with which Dickens introduces an entirely new dimension to *Bleak House*: the idea of the past coming back to haunt the present. We are told almost nothing, and yet we sense almost everything, about Chesney Wold: its name, its weather and its ghosts are more than enough.

Finally, there are three more houses which need to be mentioned in this tour of the novel's geography. Two of them bear the book's title. John Jarndyce's Bleak House, which had been called The Peaks when it originally belonged to his great uncle, the suicidal Tom Jarndyce, is near St Albans. It is, from the moment we (and Esther) first see it, an image of easy, unconstrained domesticity, "one of those delightfully irregular houses where you go up and down steps out of one room into another, and where you come upon more rooms when you think you have seen all there are, and where there is a bountiful provision of little halls and passages, and where you find still older cottage-

rooms in unexpected places, with lattice windows and green growth pressing through them" (p. 85). This description continues for two pages, so there is no mistaking Dickens's determination to create a scene of natural happiness which is in every respect the opposite of fog-bound London. The other Bleak House, at the very end of the book, is in effect John Jarndyce's wedding-present to Esther and Allan Woodcourt: approached via "a pretty little orchard, where the cherries were nestling among the green leaves, and the shadows of the apple-trees were sporting on the grass" (p. 962), it is almost impossibly edenic in its idealized goodness. Between these two comes Lawrence Boythorn's house which, in direct contrast to the neighboring Chesney Wold, is also a place of tranquility and plenty: "everything about the place wore an aspect of maturity and abundance. . . Such stillness and composure reigned within the orderly precincts of the old red wall, that even the feathers hung in garlands to scare the birds hardly stirred. . . ." (p. 288). It is a commonplace to remark that these somewhat oversugared pastoral retreats in Dickens are a response to his own ruined childhood; but Boythorn's home, which is emblematic of his goodness (and which he lends to Esther for her convalescence), ought to remind us of a literary antecedent, the strikingly similar house and garden of the admirable Mr. Wilson, who turns out to be the hero's father, in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*. The sources of *Bleak House* are both various and surprising.

To focus on some of the major characters in *Bleak House*, I shall now need to make a few rough-and-ready distinctions. There are the "Emblems and Hypocrites," who represent clear if often indefensible values and interests; the "Pursuers and Victims," who drive forward the book's narrative movement; and a somewhat problematic group, including Esther herself, who embody Dickens's own moral perspectives. In such an immense and fluid novel as this, some will necessarily belong in more than one of these

arbitrary divisions, which should nevertheless serve as helpful starting-points.

EMBLEMS AND HYPOCRITES

Krook is the clearest instance in *Bleak House* of a purely emblematic figure: he is so much an emblem that, as we have seen, he is indistinguishable from the place he inhabits. He possesses few human attributes beyond generalized malice: he is defined by the objects he has collected around him, by his unfortunate lodgers, and by his malevolent cat. Viewed in this light, his grotesque death seems altogether apt, for he is less a person than part of the atmosphere into which, as Dickens gleefully demonstrates, he is assimilated. Mr. Snagsby thinks the greasy air comes from tainted chops grilling at the Sol's Arms, while Mr. Guppy at first surmises that a chimney is on fire and then discovers a "thick, yellow liquor . . . a stagnant, sickening oil" (p. 516) dripping from the window-sill; and thus Krook melts away, exactly like a Chancery case, in "Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died" (p. 519). After his death, when the Smallweeds arrive with "[a]n air of haste and excitement," Grandfather Smallweed thanks Mr. Guppy "for discharging the melancholy office of discovering the ashes of Mrs Smallweed's brother": the word "ashes" has a special resonance in this context, and the revelation that Krook could have been related to anyone at all is astonishing. "We were not on terms," Grandfather Smallweed explains, and adds, exactly echoing Miss Flite's original description of her landlord, "He was eccentric—he was very eccentric" (p. 529).

An inquest is promptly held and Krook's remains are absurdly despatched in a "much admired" six-foot coffin; Jo, though absent and already ill on this occasion, had been present at the inquest (or, as he has it, "Inkwhich") which followed the law-writer's death in the same house:

Name, Jo. Nothing else that he knows on. Don't know that everybody has two names. Never heerd of sich a think. Don't know that Jo is short for a longer name. Thinks it long enough for him.—He don't find no fault with it. Spell it? No. He can't spell it. No father, no mother, no friends. Never been to school. What's home? Knows a broom's a broom, and knows it's wicked to tell a lie. Don't recollect who told him about the broom, or about the lie, but knows both. Can't exactly say what'll be done to him arter he's dead if he tells a lie to the gentlemen here, but believes it'll be something wery bad to punish him, and serve him right—and so he'll tell the truth.

(p. 177)

Like Krook, Jo is an emblem; and, like him, he is an image of contagion. In Jo's case, however, since he is forever being "moved on," the contagion moves on with him. As his self-description before the coroner suggests, he is more cause than character: others' kindnesses—Esther's, George Rouncewell's—will be measured against his misfortunes. He remains destitute and uncomprehending—"We never know nothink. I never knowd what it wos all about" (p. 733)—and his death provokes Dickens to the most passionate anger he displays in the entire book: "Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day" (p. 734). The point is wholly justified, but the tone suffers as the polemicist momentarily elbows the novelist out of the way.

It is Jo's bad luck, and the subject of Dickens's most sardonic humor, that he was born in London instead of in some remote country where he might have been the grateful recipient of telescopic philanthropy:

He is not one of Mrs Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borriboola-Gha; he is not softened by distance and unfamiliarity; he is not a genuine foreign-grown savage; he is the ordinary home-made article. Dirty, ugly, disagreeable to all the senses, in body a common creature

of the common streets, only in soul a heathen. Homely filth begrimes him, homely parasites devour him, homely sores are in him, homely rags are on him; native ignorance, the growth of English soil and climate, sinks his immortal nature lower than the beasts that perish. Stand forth, Jo, in uncompromising colours! From the sole of thy foot to the crown of thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee.

(p. 724)

In one sense this is scathingly ironic for, quite apart from Esther and George, who attempt to help him, a surprising number of people are interested in Jo: to Bucket, Snagsby, and Tulk-inghorn, he is the vital witness who (to his bewilderment, though not the reader's) will eventually have seen three separate incarnations of Lady Dedlock, while to the evangelical Mr. Chadband he is a fit subject for conversion. But in another sense, there is indeed nothing interesting about him: he is simply an emblem of the London poor, equally invisible to the wealthy Dedlocks and to the telescopically charitable Mrs Jellyby.

The connection—or, more usually, the failure of connection—between urban poverty and those who might alleviate it is the great subterranean theme of *Bleak House*: Dickens's most consistent satire is directed towards the hypocrites who, while they appear to make life better, actually do exactly the opposite—Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle, Chadband, Turveydrop, and Skimpole. The two charitable ladies have much in common: both fix their attention on distant good deeds at the expense of their own families. But Mrs. Jellyby, altogether the more subtly drawn character, is in her combination of obsession and absent-mindedness one of Dickens's finest comic creations:

"You find me, my dears," said Mrs Jellyby, snuffing the two great office candles in tin candlesticks which made the room taste strongly of hot tallow (the fire had gone out, and there was nothing in the grate but ashes, a bundle of wood, and a poker), "you find me, my dears, as usual, very busy; but that you will excuse. The African project

at present employs my whole time. It involves me in correspondence with public bodies, and with private individuals anxious for the welfare of their species all over the country. I am happy to say it is advancing. We hope by this time next year to have from a hundred and fifty to two hundred healthy families cultivating coffee and educating the natives of Borriboola-Gha, on the left bank of the Niger."

(p. 53)

As her long-suffering daughter Caddy remarks, on the eve of her own marriage to Prince Turveydrop (an occasion noticed by her mother merely as an inconvenience, since she will now have to employ a boy to help her): "Ma and Africa, together, upset the whole house. . . . Ma's ruinous to everything." Meanwhile Mr. Jellyby, who has acquired the habit of opening his mouth without saying anything, manages to utter a momentous piece of advice to his daughter: "Never have a Mission, my dear child" (p. 481).

Mrs. Jellyby is monstrously wrong-headed, and John Jarndyce finds her a great provoker of the east wind ("I am much obliged to Mrs Jellyby. O dear me! This is a very trying wind!" [p. 217]), but Mrs. Pardiggle is a hectoring bully, as Esther observes: "She was a formidable style of lady, with spectacles, a prominent nose, and a loud voice, who had the effect of wanting a great deal of room. And she really did, for she knocked down little chairs with her skirts that were quite a great way off" (p. 124). Her five disgruntled and mutinous sons, by whom she is invariably accompanied, have been coerced into donating their pocket-money to causes ranging from the Tockahoopo Indians to the Great National Smithers Testimonial, while the youngest ("who was stolidly and evenly miserable") has enrolled in the Infant Bonds of Joy: "It was not merely that they were weazen and shrivelled—though they were certainly that too—but they looked absolutely ferocious with discontent" (p. 125). Whereas Mrs. Jellyby confines her charitable attentions to distant subjects, Mrs. Pardiggle has "a mechanical way