

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10. 11. 12. 13. 14. 15. 16. 17. 18. 19. 20. 21. 22. 23. 24. 25. 26. 27. 28. 29. 30. 31. 32. 33. 34. 35. 36. 37. 38. 39. 40. 41. 42. 43. 44. 45. 46. 47. 48. 49. 50. 51. 52. 53. 54. 55. 56. 57. 58. 59. 60. 61. 62. 63. 64. 65. 66. 67. 68. 69. 70. 71. 72. 73. 74. 75. 76. 77. 78. 79. 80. 81. 82. 83. 84. 85. 86. 87. 88. 89. 90. 91. 92. 93. 94. 95. 96. 97. 98. 99. 100.

370

HAUNTED ENGLAND:  
DICKENS AND THE GOTHIC IMAGINATION

"Is our poor English Existence wholly becoming a Nightmare; full of mere Phantasms?"

--Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (1843)



HAUNTED ENGLAND:  
DICKENS AND THE GOTHIC IMAGINATION

By  
PETER THOMAS MATTHEWS, B.A.

A Thesis  
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree  
Master of Arts

McMaster University  
September 1982

MASTER OF ARTS (1982)  
(English)

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE:     Haunted England: Dickens and the Gothic  
           Imagination

AUTHOR:    Peter Thomas Matthews, B.A.   (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. H.J. Ferns

NUMBER OF PAGES:   v, 245

## ABSTRACT

Historically, the Gothic, both in its plastic and literary manifestations, may be broadly defined as a reactive aesthetic movement--reactive against classicism, Reason and, most importantly, social convention. Typically, the Gothic imagination, as exhibited in eighteenth-century Romantic fiction, seeks out sensations which are morally and psychologically aberrant, and experiences which are sometimes flagrantly anti-social, these predilections expressing a grave mistrust of the status quo and, at the same time, an angst at having lost a coherent ethical framework. This thesis attempts to gauge the artistic, intellectual and emotional impact of the Gothic tradition on Dickens the social critic. My intent essentially is to set Dickens within the general context of dark Romanticism, to demonstrate how he exploits the "horrid" imagery (ghosts, corpses, corruption) and melodramatic narrative technique of Gothic romance quite as competently as any sensation novelist, yet turns them to the account of a dedicated Victorian social conscience. I focus primarily on Bleak House, probably Dickens's most emphatically "Romantic" novel, but also take some note of his earlier and later career.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. John Ferns, whose patience and guidance through these long months have been greatly appreciated.

I also wish to express my deepest love and gratitude to my parents, who acted daily as my sounding board, and whose forbearance in allowing me to scatter my notes all over their house was truly phenomenal.

# T A B L E    O F    C O N T E N T S

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| INTRODUCTION   | 1   |
| Notes to Introduction  | 8   |
| I.    THE GOTHIC IMPULSE   | 10  |
| Notes to Chapter I   | 49  |
| II.   A NIGHTMARE WORLD  | 54  |
| Notes to Chapter II  | 183 |
| EPILOGUE: A NOTE ON DICKENS'S LATER CAREER<br>AND CONCLUDING REMARKS | 192 |
| Notes to Epilogue  | 215 |
| APPENDIX: THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF <u>BLEAK HOUSE</u>                    | 216 |
| Selected Illustrations   | 233 |
| Notes to Appendix  | 238 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY   | 240 |

## INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Snagsby is so perpetually on the alert, that the house becomes ghostly with creaking boards and rustling garments. The 'prentices think somebody may have been murdered there, in bygone times. Guster holds certain loose atoms of an idea (picked up at Tooting, where they were found floating among the orphans), that there is buried money underneath the cellar, guarded by an old man with a white beard, who cannot get out for seven thousand<sup>1</sup> years because he said the Lord's prayer backwards.

Although she will be shortly and unceremoniously hauled up the narrow staircase "like a grand piano",<sup>2</sup> struck senseless by the awfulness of her husband's supposed extra-marital crimes, at present Mrs. Snagsby makes an effective domestic goblin. There is perhaps no great odds between her solid and spectral manifestations. Both trenchantly exhibit the cast-iron hysteria--a composite of stock shrewishness, debased evangelicalism and middle-class paranoia--which ensures the Cursitor Street ghost a place of honour in what is generally styled Dickens's amazing gallery of grotesques. Though her inscrutable vigilance graces only a few small recesses in a massive work, the omniscient Mrs. Snagsby, in common with all of Dickens's most formidable comic monsters, attains a certain awesomeness that raises her to the heights of the sublimely ridiculous. The world of Bleak House teems with such prodigies, but these represent considerably more than evidence of the author's wicked sense of the absurd. Like gargoyles in some ruined Gothic cathedral, the devils--

and a few of the angels--of Dickens's London betray in their pinched faces, frozen grins and twisted bodies the withering touch of a cursed social order. The simile is not an idle one. Most impressively in Bleak House, yet hardly less explicitly in numerous other works, Dickens devises a contemporary Gothic out of the haunted vista of Victorian civilization. The gloomy machinery so fashionable half a century earlier in the "horrible fictions" of Mrs. Radcliffe and "Monk" Lewis is reactivated and refurbished to effect a chilling indictment of the condition of industrialized England.

In a rare statement of policy in the preface to Bleak House, Dickens claims, suggestively if somewhat ambiguously, to have "purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things".<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Snagsby's fearsome apparitions and the terrible secret beneath the cellar demonstrate, amusingly enough, the potentially fabulous character of the everyday. Yet, as the allusion to Tooting implies,<sup>4</sup> far more malignant phantasms than the law-stationer's little woman are abroad in the land.

It would be both reductive and misleading to label Bleak House simply a Victorian Gothic. Every student of Dickens knows or ought to know, with what difficulty the inimitable Boz may be pigeonholed; perhaps more than any other English novelist, he reflects the diversity of popular culture. Probably Bleak House bears the same relation to

the "horrid" productions of the Minerva Press as do Jane Eyre or Moby Dick or The House of the Seven Gables, all of which, it is commonly thought, are not Gothic novels, yet clearly owe a great deal to the Gothic mode for their fantastic plots, morbid imagery and brooding characterizations. Still, no full-length consideration of this significant strain in Dickens has, to my knowledge, been attempted. In light of the general recognition of Dickens's fascination with the occult, with mesmerism and the psychology of dreams, and other superrational phenomena, such reticence may seem surprising. But not entirely mystifying. If Dickens's ascension to the Elysium of critical respectability can be said to date from Edmund Wilson's seminal study, "The Two Scrooges" (1941),<sup>5</sup> the Gothic novel still awaits its epoch. Though it appears doubtful that Walpole, Radcliffe, Lewis and the other literary necromancers will ever number among the immortals of the great tradition, they scarcely deserve the almost universal contempt and neglect which was their unlucky lot until comparatively recently. Several critics have undertaken to salvage the Gothic romance from the ghetto of questionable literature by insisting (sometimes speciously) upon its psychological complexity,<sup>6</sup> but a widespread reluctance to couple racy and reputable fiction--particularly when, as in the case of Dickens, the reputation is fairly new--yet manifests itself.

Those critics willing and able to overcome customary



prejudices face another, perhaps more vexing, discouragement. While the plenitude of ogres and ersatz haunted castles in the Dickens canon compels attention, the essential nature of the master's art nonetheless seems in direct conflict with certain notable Gothic predilections. Dickens, nearly everyone agrees, is a man with a message, the archetypal (and by far the most extraordinary) crusading social novelist. Victorian society, with its numbing institutions and gross inequities, is quite literally Dickens's whole world and, in a sense, his only subject. Like most Englishmen overawed by the unprecedented urbanization and mechanization of the 1840's, he envisaged all aspects of human existence within the context of an ever-intensifying collective life. Such an attitude in some measure accounts for the notorious--or celebrated--"flatness" of his characters.<sup>7</sup>

The Krooks and Jellybys lost in a London fog are not creatures of any great depth or intricacy, but grim farceurs in a comedy--a tragicomedy--of corrupted social humours. Notwithstanding fairly frequent instances of keen penetration (the hideous, obsessive dreams of the murderous Jonas Chuzzlewit; Steerforth's pathetic sexual brutality; Esther Summerson's Calvinistic guilt, unevenly managed yet often strangely convincing), Dickens's players are, as a rule, devoid of interiors.<sup>8</sup>

The Gothic romance, by comparison, almost gleefully exposes the secret passions of its overwrought protagonists,

whether these wretched souls be criminal monks or palpitating maidens-in-distress. The diabolical hero-villains of these pieces enact the direst fantasies amid black forests, solitary wastes and mouldering crypts, hellish landscapes where bourgeois moral standards become irrelevant. Such wild and lonely regions, in mysterious psychic harmony with the temper of the denizens, insinuate values and emotions unmistakably anti-social if not, at times, positively subversive. Between the private agonies of The Monk (1794) and the boisterous public spirit evident in Bleak House (1852-53) lies an apparent philosophical chasm, all the distance between ruminative Romanticism and extrovert Victorianism. A mid-century maverick like Charlotte Brontë, whose governesses and gentlemen suffer excruciating--and indelicate--mental torments, more obviously marks a perpetuation of the Gothic tradition than Dickens the social reformer.<sup>9</sup>

Obstacles of this sort, grounded in assorted critical misconceptions, likely explain the comparative want of interest in what I believe to be a profitable line of enquiry. Perhaps for similar reasons, the scattered treatments of Dickens's Gothicism which have been ventured are, on the whole, unsatisfyingly sketchy.<sup>10</sup> Walter C. Phillips's early monograph, Dickens, Reade, and Collins, Sensation Novelists (1919), furnishes much useful historical background on the Newgate novel and other gaudy sub-genres of the 1830's, yet hazards only the most cautious judgements

regarding Dickens's contiguity to the ebbing tale of terror. And, in the usual manner of nascent Dickensian commentary, the tone is frequently apologetic.<sup>11</sup> Earle Davis's The Flint and the Flame (1963) supposes a far higher level of technical sophistication and, in a few straightforward pages, identifies some prominent Gothic motifs in Oliver Twist, Barnaby Rudge and Edwin Drood, but once again stops short of pursuing the implications of these discoveries.<sup>12</sup>

Rather more thoughtful and enlightening than either study is Lawrence Frank's recent article, "The Intelligibility of Madness in Our Mutual Friend and The Mystery of Edwin Drood" (1976).<sup>13</sup> Somewhat discursively and not altogether persuasively, Frank endeavours to establish the mature Dickens as an artist of profound existential concerns who exploits the mechanics of a debased fictional form in an exploration of the labyrinths of modern consciousness. If his psycho-symbolical perspective is occasionally dubious, it affords stimulating insights into such interesting newfangled notions as Dickens's apprehension of urban alienation and (a related issue) his use of the doppelgänger. While Frank offers no minute account of the novelist's Gothic renovations, he provides a satisfactory point of departure in a canny extended metaphor: the city of Dickens "is a Gothic castle haunted by incubi and grotesques of various kinds, expressing the social and psychological terrors of Victorian society".<sup>14</sup> Dickens's stylized neo-Gothic, com-

pounded of the mysteries and monstrosities of a superannuated system, reconciles to some extent the incongruities of fevered dark Romanticism and earnest Victorianism. In the thick of the rust, must and cobwebs of Bleak House, the lurid lights of the macabre and the steadfast flame of social conscience come together and blaze.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Charles Dickens, Bleak House (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 355. All subsequent references to Bleak House are likewise taken from the Oxford Illustrated edition.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 361.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup>Approximately 180 children died in a cholera outbreak at the Tooting baby-farm in 1849. Poor sanitary conditions were cited, and the owner was tried for manslaughter.

<sup>5</sup>See The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

<sup>6</sup>The earliest studies of Gothic romance, variable in their critical worth, are Edith Birkhead's The Tale of Terror (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921), Eino Railo's The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1927) and Montague Summers's peevish and idiosyncratic The Gothic Quest (London: Fortune Press, 1938). Later, more sophisticated commentaries include Devendra P. Varma's The Gothic Flame (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), Robert Kiely's The Romantic Novel in England (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), G.R. Thompson's valuable anthology, The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974), Coral Ann Howells's Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction (London: The Athlone Press, 1978) and Elizabeth MacAndrew's The Gothic Tradition in Fiction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979). Shorter studies include Lowry Nelson Jr.'s "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel", Yale Review, LII (December 1962), 236-257, and Robert D. Hume's "Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel", PMLA, LXXXIV (March 1969), 282-290. The most suggestive treatment of the whole spectrum of dark Romanticism is likely to remain the late Mario Praz's The Romantic Agony, trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

<sup>7</sup>The term is, of course, E.M. Forster's. See Aspects of the Novel (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927), p. 105.

<sup>8</sup>I refer here chiefly to Dickens's early and middle novels. The brooding and bitter fictions of the 1860's

evinced a far more sustained (and conventionally Gothic) interest in the mechanisms of the human mind--especially the criminal mind (see Epilogue)--though, of course, Dickens's sense of social injustice remains acute.

<sup>9</sup>See Robert B. Heilman, "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic", in Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr., eds., From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), pp. 118-132.

<sup>10</sup>Some minor articles on the subject: Larry Kirkpatrick, "The Gothic Flame of Charles Dickens", Victorian Newsletter, XXXI (Spring 1967), 20-24; Ann Ronald, "Dickens' Gloomiest Gothic Castle", Dickens Studies Newsletter, VI (1975), 71-75. See also Judith Wilt, Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 108-113.

<sup>11</sup>Walter C. Phillips, Dickens, Reade, and Collins, Sensation Novelists: A Study in the Conditions and Theories of Novel Writing in Victorian England (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962, orig. ed. New York, 1919).

<sup>12</sup>Earle Davis, The Flint and the Flame: The Artistry of Charles Dickens (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963), pp. 85-91.

<sup>13</sup>Lawrence Frank, "The Intelligibility of Madness in Our Mutual Friend and The Mystery of Edwin Drood", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 5 (1976), 150-195.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

# I

## THE GOTHIC IMPULSE

### 1.

Near the end of his career, Dickens wrote to Wilkie Collins outlining a precipitate catastrophe for the Christmas story on which they were collaborating:

I have a general idea which I hope will supply the kind of interest we want. Let us arrange to culminate in a wintry flight and pursuit across the Alps, under lonely circumstances, and against warnings. Let us get into all the horrors and dangers of such an adventure under the most terrific circumstances, either escaping from or trying to overtake (the latter, the latter I think) someone, on escaping from or overtaking whom the love, prosperity, and Nemesis of the story depend. There we can get Ghostly interest, picturesque interest, breathless interest of time and circumstance, and force the design up to any powerful climax we please. If you will keep this in your mind as I will in mine, urging the story towards it as we go along, we shall get a very avalanche of power out of it, and thunder it down on the readers' heads.

The thrilling tale that ensued, No Thoroughfare, proved an outstanding--and predictable--popular success in both printed and dramatized forms. Dickens's (and, we must suppose, Collins's) crassly calculating, not over-subtle solicitation of his audience's affections efficiently guaranteed the triumph of what is, in truth, a mediocre piece of work. He was overfond of garish "effects". Unhappy with the sluggish pace of No Thoroughfare in its theatrical version, he required that an especially explosive juncture in the plot be accomp-

anied by the roar of a waterfall--such an expedient would neatly maximize "the mystery and gloom of the scene".<sup>2</sup> Doubtless he would have readily and even eagerly conceded the traditional charge of melodrama, prizing "the noisy and profitable applause of crowded pit and gallery" over "the quiet approval of the judicious", as one contemporary critic lamented.<sup>3</sup> The familiar Dickensian blood and thunder, often egregiously artificial but at times startlingly effective, materially sustains, for good or ill, the demonic dynamism of all the novels after Pickwick. It is probably no accident that the rousing climax of Dickens's and Collins's exotic entertainment bears at least a superficial resemblance to the penultimate movement of Bleak House--the frantic, phantasmagorical pursuit of Lady Dedlock across wintry wastes and cheerless cityscapes. Whatever their relative artistic merits, both chases provoke mainly a visceral response. Dickens was presumably sensible and appreciative of his own elaborately suspenseful prototype for the sensational contrivances of a latter day.

Another eminent model of incendiary excitement may have presented itself to Dickens's recollection. Victor Frankenstein's rabidly determined stalking of a legendary misbegotten superman over ice floes and boundless glacial fields forms both the crisis and part of the framing device of Mary Shelley's famous Gothic fiction. The quintessentially Romantic moral and intellectual issues that Mrs. Shel-



ley raises (the book is subtitled "The Modern Prometheus", an epithet which no doubt gratified her husband) the common-sensical Dickens could not have found interesting, yet the distance between Bleak House and Frankenstein is perhaps not so very great. Either novel may be described as, in an important sense, reader-oriented. Certainly all fiction, all literature, purposes to engage its particular public on some level, but the novels of Dickens and the earlier horror-mongers make a broad, continuous and clamorous emotional appeal. The impulse to involve one's audience utterly, to exploit its sympathies without compunction, to spellbind by fair means or foul, is a salient feature of the Gothic imagination. The skillful "terrorist" sedulously studies his appalling effects expressly to arouse a wide spectrum of pleasurable painful feelings: awe, pity, fear, dread, loathing and (Dickens's contribution) indignation. Collins's crude but accurate formula for authorial success--"Make 'em laugh; make 'em cry; make 'em wait"<sup>4</sup>--only weakly conveys this semi-pornographic delight in manipulating an acquiescent readership.

Dickens, G.K. Chesterton long ago perceived, is driven by two primitive urges in his fiction: "to make the flesh creep and the sides ache".<sup>5</sup> If we include his habitual desire to cloud the eyes and clog the nose, the list is substantially complete. The regular rounds of laughing and crying and waiting exacted of the devotee may prompt the

exasperated critic to protest that Dickens sometimes appears to be running a lucrative wholesale dealership in sentiment and suspense. Something like the notoriously spun-out death of Little Nell possibly justifies such cynicism, but we should remember that Dickens luxuriated in vicarious grief at least as much as any of his readers.<sup>6</sup> And, despite the modern taste for the art of concealing art, we really cannot deny his supremacy as a melodramatist. Whatever the engines governing them, Dickens's scenes of pathos or terror frequently inspire a genuine and powerful empathy with their variously oppressed participants. His Victorian celebrity was, we know, largely founded on the heartrending poignancy (along with the abundant good humour) of his situations. Yet, even at its most perfunctory, Dickens' theatrical emotionalism is scarcely to be distinguished from the angry awareness of moral delinquency which informs the majority of his novels. A carefully orchestrated set piece such as the death of Jo, the street waif in Bleak House, swells from a mournful, whispered prayer to a thundering rhetorical arraignment of all callous authority ("Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen....And dying thus around us every day").<sup>7</sup> While these bitter tears are by no means inapposite, our major interest is, of course, creeping flesh. As will, I hope, eventually become clear, Dickens's Gothic daggers can excoriate (where needed) as dextrously as his more highly regarded rapier wit. But his choice of this

predominantly affective artistic medium as the pattern for extended stretches of Bleak House was not merely fortuitous. Given the ethos underlying the Gothic school, given the Victorian temperament, given the expectations of the reading public and his own rather gruesome proclivities, Dickens's periodic employment of ghoulish designs follows virtually as a matter of course.

## 2.

The history of the Gothic style, in its successive plastic, pictorial and fictional manifestations, is a disjointed narrative of creeping decadence, a quickening descent from the celestial to the diabolical. Several ages of decisive cultural change intervene between the medieval genesis of the Gothic and its brief, fiery renaissance in the late eighteenth-century yet, in spite of the most serious ideological differences, a continuity of sorts may be discerned. We need not belabour the point or exaggerate its importance. Clearly, the anonymous artisan dutifully carving out saints' heads and winged beasts in odd corners of Chartres or Notre Dame would have none of the flamboyant iconoclasm of Matthew Lewis or de Sade or Byron or Dickens. And, for his part, Dickens had no passive reverence for feudal privilege. Still, the centuries are not unbridgeable. Even the most drastic episodes of The Monk seem obscurely fraught with metaphysical meaning; even the most solemn Gothic edifice kindles a violent emotional reaction.

Though he brusquely condemned the voluptuous horrors of Gothic literature, Coleridge recognized the irresistible psychological force of the echoing vault, pointed arch and soaring spire:

On entering a cathedral, I am filled with a devotion and with awe; I am lost to the actualities that surround me, and my whole being expands into the infinite; earth and air, nature and art, all swell up into eternity, and the only sensible impression left is 'that I am nothing!'<sup>8</sup>

The poet's painful ecstasy is no mere Romantic vagary. In his renowned speculative thesis, Form in Gothic (1912), Wilhelm Worringer defines the unique quality of medieval architecture as "exalted hysteria"--an anxious longing for a level of existence unworried by the particularities of time and space.<sup>9</sup> The uneasy Christian desire for utter annihilation of identity and irrevocable union with the Godhead mysteriously infuses the stones of the Gothic sanctuary which somehow lose all impression of mass and, as if in an extravagant mystical gesture, strain ever upwards. Indeed, with its high walls, mighty portals and gold and jewelled ornaments, Christ's Church on Earth functions as a monumental emblem, more precisely an icon, of the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem.<sup>10</sup>

A comparable emphasis on physical setting (although one with disparate ends) we have already noted in the wilds of Gothic romance and in Dickens. There is something not quite real or, alternatively, something too real about the quasi-medieval castles and cloisters of the tale of terror.

In like manner, an undefinable, extraterrestrial energy charges the atmosphere of the genuine Gothic structure. Ponderous yet oddly ethereal, Gothic architecture stands precariously poised between flesh and fantasy, the realms of the actual and the ideal. Abbot Suger, medieval aesthete and patron of the arts, noted this singular balance in his pet project, the abbey-church of Saint-Denis which, he declared, inhabits "some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of heaven".<sup>11</sup>

Typically, Gothic art induces--is certainly meant to induce--a millennial fervour not unmingled with terror. It is this almost brutal rapture, forcibly yet deftly achieved, which, roughly speaking, distinguishes the Gothic from that other great western cultural model, the classical. The concreteness, compactness, smoothness and conspicuous symmetry characteristic of Greek and Roman art connote an exalted pride in human ingenuity, intellectual certitude, security, control. The sedate columns and graceful arches of the Attic style elicit a perfectly reasonable response. I do not wish to suggest (though it has sometimes been suggested) that the visual Gothic is, comparatively, little more than an insane jumble of stained-glass and sculpted caprices. Eclecticism should not be construed as chaos; the intricate microcosm of the medieval cathedral expresses a remarkable spiritual and emotional coherence entirely ex-

traneous to the strict decorum of the ancient temple. The pious sensationalism that goes so far to unify religious art of the Middle Ages is well exemplified in the compelling iconographic image of the bleeding Christ prominent in late-Gothic pictorial representation.<sup>12</sup> The detailed, cruelly realistic pietàs and crucifixes of church panel and altar piece deliberately arrest the spectator, engross him in a wrenching imaginative identification with his tormented Saviour.<sup>13</sup> Classical art was never as ambitious or as intense. "One must have taste to be sensible of the beauties of Grecian architecture," author and antiquarian Horace Walpole observed; "one only wants passions to feel Gothic."<sup>14</sup>

Walpole's own passions were, however, more those of the dilettante than the disciple. If every thirteenth-century ecclesiastic esteemed Gothic construction as the portentous shadow of the Everlasting--"transcendentalism in stone"<sup>15</sup>--the languid deist of the eighteenth was, for a while at least, satisfied to count it pleasantly eccentric antique whimsey. The ruined abbey and the subterranean vault, picturesque relics of a bygone order, bred among certain quixotic connoisseurs a sentimental nostalgia which, despite vehement opposition in some quarters, ultimately burgeoned into a full-scale aesthetic movement. This so-called Gothic Revival<sup>16</sup> swept across the continent in the latter half of the century, blasting acknowledged values in the arts and fanning the flames of intellectual

revolution. In England, it resulted, first of all, in the metamorphosis of the national style of architecture. Innumerable counterfeit cathedrals and citadels overcast the landscape. Country gardens favoured melancholy ruins, sometimes genuine, more often synthetic. Walpole built and occupied a diminutive stone fortress on Strawberry Hill in order to indulge his chivalric fantasies in perpetuity. A few years later, the epicurean William Beckford fashioned the no less gorgeous (though structurally unsound) feudal daydream of Fonthill Abbey.<sup>17</sup> But what delighted the wistful visionary scandalized the conservative. John Evelyn's denunciation of Gothic "rudeness" seems almost paranoic:

The Goths and Vandals, having demolished the Greek and Roman Architecture, introduced in its stead a certain fantastical and licentious Manner of Building which we have since called Modern or Gothic. Congestions of heavy, dark, melancholy and monkish Piles, without any just Proportion, Use or Beauty, compared with the truly ancient, so as when we meet with the greatest Industry, and expressive Carving, full of Fret and lamentable Imagery; sparing neither Pains nor Cost. A judicious Spectator is rather distracted or quite confounded than touched with that Admiration, which results from the true and just Symmetry, regular Proportion, Union, and Disposition.<sup>18</sup>

If a note of hysteria infects this account, it sounds most distinctly in the two qualifiers, "licentious" and "monkish". The implication is, I think, nearly unequivocal: because it contravenes artistic propriety and, in some obscure sense, social usage, because it agitates rather than improves, the Gothic must be reviled.

Evelyn speaks for an older generation, one which had



endured decades of civil unrest, a Popish Plot, a plague and an urban conflagration, and which yearned for stability at any price. Moderates could only welcome the return to Reason and the reinstatement of traditional principles that the Augustan Age heralded. Accordingly, they were obliged to censure an illogical, multifarious and somewhat promiscuous artistic style, which reeked of Romanism besides. Rationalists felt happiest not in a cathedral, but in a bright little room of neat proportions. It was precisely this prosaic circumscription that depressed the Gothic revivalists. They were not, to begin with, either pro-Catholic or anti-establishment to any remarkable degree. The scores of lascivious monastics, sadistic prioresses and tyrannical feudal lords that interminably molest the unsullied heroines of Gothic romance argue no great love for archaic institutions, whether sacred or political.<sup>19</sup> Still, the bizarre artifacts and vulgar superstitions of former times, if not always agreeable in themselves, remained enchanting, colourful fossils to ponder. As Walpole affectingly explains to George Montagu, the attraction of antiquity lies in its otherworldly remoteness:

Visions, you know, have always been my pasture; and so far from growing old enough to quarrel with their emptiness, I almost think there is no wisdom comparable to that of exchanging what is called the realities of life for dreams. Old castles, old pictures, old histories, and the babble of old people, make one live back into centuries that cannot disappoint one. One holds fast and surely what is past.<sup>20</sup>

More or less for his own amusement, Walpole trans-



lated his amiable dream of the Dark Ages into the stiff but phenomenally popular Castle of Otranto (1764), generally considered to have inaugurated the Gothic cult in fiction. Otranto is rather a cardboard castle, replete with such curios as a colossal magic helmet, an animated painting and a statue with a nose-bleed, and it is no more disconcerting than The Eve of St. Agnes. We may nonetheless draw an important inference: Walpole's expressed need to escape imaginatively into a romantic oblivion through these artificial stimulants betrays a radical boredom with dull contemporaneity, the stodgy age of neo-classicism and banal commercial interests. Most of the Gothic revivalists seem to have shared this attitude of indefinite social reaction. Beckford expresses the ennui of the period in his wonted tone of narcissistic defiance:

I refuse to occupy my mind with impertinent society ...the encroachments of Fashion...solemn Idleness and approved Dissipation...I will break my shackles, however splendid, and maintain my Allegiance...I will seclude myself if possible from the world, in the midst of the Empire. I am determined to enjoy my dreams, my phantasies and all my singularities, however discordant to the worldlings around. In spite of them, I will be happy, will employ myself in trifles, according to their estimation; and instead of making myself master of the present political state of America...I will read, talk, dream of the Incas, of their gentle Empire and solemn worship of the sun, the charms of Quito and the majesty of the Andes...[My attention] shall never be turned toward a Philadelphian Meeting House.<sup>21</sup>

Neither Walpole nor Beckford intended or much desired to make an overt criticism of Enlightenment "fashions"; they wanted only to be left alone with their dreams. Yet, in

their passion for the poetry and mystery they fancied they saw in the past, the dreamers were inadvertent rebels against Reason.

Dickens could never contemplate the golden days of merry old England with much relish. The bloody despotism that weighed men down through centuries was, to his mind, too shameful to be glamourized in any manner, even at the greatest distance in time. The antiquarian cant of the fatuous Mrs. Skewton in Dombey and Son is a bitter parody of all such fond and foolish retrospection:

"Those darling bygone times, Mr. Carker...with their delicious fortresses, and their dear old dungeons, and their delightful places of torture, and their romantic vengeance, and their picturesque assaults and sieges, and everything that makes life truly charming! How dreadfully we have degenerated!"<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Carlyle, Dickens perceived little humanity and no nobility in the Middle Ages, except the rugged, natural sort that he detected in isolated figures like Wat Tyler, leader of the Peasants' Revolt.<sup>23</sup> His opinion of medieval popery (those "dear old Priests, who were the most warlike of men"),<sup>24</sup> and indeed of all formal worship, was just as peremptory. And, although evidence proves scarce, he does not appear to have favoured Gothic art.<sup>25</sup> These sentiments are admittedly not very encouraging, but Dickens connects with the Gothic sensibility in intriguing and often unexpected ways. For if, while the idle romancer takes refuge in a shadowy world, Dickens throws himself into the complex muddle of modern life, the attack is not essentially differ-

ent from the retreat. A distrust of the status quo and an antipathy to the spirit of the times principally actuate either maneuver.

The artistic preferences of the rising Romantic generation were, however, granted a form of official sanction in spite of their distressingly anarchic temper. In 1757, Edmund Burke published his influential Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, advancing some lofty conceptions immediately seized upon by the Gothic movement. The work is something of an anomaly--an empirical study which ultimately proclaims the superiority of the irrational and the intangible. It nevertheless represents the first sustained assault on neo-classical values. The essence of Burke's argument traditionalist critics found incredible or merely silly:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.<sup>26</sup>

Burke's insistence on intensity of feeling as the cardinal criterion for aesthetic discrimination was neither alarming nor even exceptionally original in the Age of Johnson, graciously tolerant of unconventionality--within limits. The novel of sensibility, of course, wrung its readers dry in a concerted effort to affirm the moral ascendancy of a tender heart over cold intellect. What ruffled and, in some

cases, repelled Burke's contemporaries was his perverse enthusiasm (not entirely without precedent)<sup>27</sup> for obnoxious, indeed almost insupportable sensations. The delightful terror--or terrible delight--which Burke specifies as the appropriate response to sublime stimuli inhabits a frame of reference fundamentally discrete from the communal context of eighteenth-century benevolism. The bourgeois audience that cordially melted over the misfortunes of The Conscious Lovers (1722) or The Man of Feeling (1771) tactfully advertised its own genteel virtue in its tears; demonstrative disinterestedness was reckoned not only manly but socially cohesive as well. Yet, when confronted with the sublime, the susceptible spectator goes into a freezing mood, suffering exquisite pangs rather out of season in polite society. Transfixed in an attitude of paralyzed astonishment by objects of terror (which, however, remain sufficiently extrinsic to mitigate any real pain), he feels his being overwhelmed, his rational faculties suspended; he is alone and adrift. Burke's exhaustive, slightly ludicrous cataloguing of the situations creative of such ungovernable emotion particularly underscores this last point. Sublimity discovers itself mainly in horizons of solitude and obscurity; Burke lists darkness, vastness, vacuity, silence and a sense of infinity as its major sources. And since fear of extinction is tacit in every species of terror, hints of death's wormy circumstance (ghosts, the howls of wild anim-

als, fulsome odours, even poisonous snakes) equally extort the highest and deepest passions.

By these curious standards, the writhing figures and murky panoramas of Fuseli and Piranesi were judged masterly, the metrical memento mori of Collins and Gray enthralling. And in this climate, supernatural fiction flourished. Charmed by foreignness and precious gloom wherever they found them, pre-Romantics like Walpole and Ann Radcliffe speedily assimilated Burke's thesis and dedicated their literary careers to illustrating it over and over again. The pallid heroine of The Castle of Otranto, the hapless Isabella, gasps through the lower depths of the dreadful citadel in typical fashion:

An awful silence reigned throughout those subterraneous regions, except, now and then, some blasts of wind that shook the doors she had passed, and which, grating on the rusty hinges, were re-echoed through that long labyrinth of darkness. Every murmur struck her with new terror...She trod as softly as impatience would give her leave,--yet frequently stopped and listened to hear if she was followed. In one of those moments she thought she heard a sigh. She shuddered, and recoiled a few paces. In a moment she thought she heard the step of some person. Her blood curdled...Every suggestion<sup>28</sup> that horror could inspire rushed into her mind.

The distracted damsels of Gothic romance might appear to constitute the lunatic fringe of the cult of sensibility, yet their fits of swooning, however hair-trigger or perfunctory, fulfill a basic need largely ignored in the earlier, more didactic fiction. Only Mrs. Radcliffe, with one foot still in the Enlightenment, declaims against excessive

feeling (though she images it often enough). Even so, she is hardly to be classed with level-headed Jane Austen, scrutinizing the restless imagination and heaving bosom of Catherine Morland with rich amusement. Under Burke's tutelage, most terror novelists were thoroughly persuaded of the inadequacy of reason to cope with certain shocking phenomena. In the new electric atmosphere, the flashing forth of unfathomable instinct seemed the only way to connect with the ultimate.

Isabella's ordeal represents a mild and comparatively crude attempt to evoke sublime passions in the reader. As such, it should not be supposed a dangerous breach of hidebound Augustan ethics--Walpole was, after all, more concerned with sensual gratification than outright intoxication. But as the age wore down into bloody insurrection, as the visions of the dreamer grew mangled and freakish, whispers of dissent became roars of despair. The Gothic fantasist of the 1790's showed what previously could only be imagined, picturing atrocities worthy of the pit itself. This descent into hell is something more than an abdication of neo-classical propriety. Gothic melodrama, in its final phase, fiercely repudiates all normality, all certainty; it is boldly (if fitfully) nihilistic. The romance writers of a momentous decade screamed--"screamed in complete reaction to everything stuffy and probable", as Kenneth Clark says.<sup>29</sup> They flouted ordinary morality; on occasion they even con-

sorted with Lucifer.

That Teutonic charnel-house, Lewis's The Monk, probably marks the apogee of the ferocious Schauer-Romantik school; it is, in many respects, the most appalling--and the most revealing--of Gothic fictions. Amid the nauseous decay of the sepulchre, the guilty villain ritually prepares to ravish the latest variant of the persecuted maid:

By the side of three putrid half-corrupted Bodies lay the sleeping Beauty. A lively red, the fore-runner of returning animation, had already spread itself over her cheek; and as wrapped in her shroud She reclined upon her funeral Bier, She seemed to smile at the Images of Death around her. While He gazed upon their rotting bones and disgusting figures, who perhaps were once as sweet and lovely, Ambrosio thought upon Elvira, by him reduced to the same state. As the memory of that horrid act glanced upon his mind, it was clouded with a gloomy terror. Yet it served but to strengthen his resolution to destroy Antonia's honour.<sup>36</sup>

Since it happens that predator and prey are unwitting brother and sister, this grisly scene commands a repulsive interest beyond simple voyeurism. With evident enjoyment--and insidious technique--the novelist lures the reluctant reader into the clandestine nether regions of sexual pathology. Here is Beauty that must die, yet the abhorrent spectacle scarcely encourages a Keatsian melancholy. We cringe at the brazen suggestion of displaced necrophilia, at the obscene association of sex and death. These two great taboos of western culture Lewis violates so flagrantly that jaded audiences of the time were jolted and deliriously fascinated. Coleridge, perhaps the most vociferous critic



of the novel, expressed pain and disgust at its indecencies, which "furnish a mormo for children, a poison for youth and a provocative for the debauchee";<sup>31</sup> but even he could not dispute the prodigious power and the fecundity of Lewis's riotous imagination. In his uninterrupted pursuit of outrageous stimulation, Lewis evinces something of the wanton genius of the pornographer.

Not surprisingly, the prophet of libertinism, Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade, commended The Monk in the warmest terms--its perversions must have appeared perfectly compatible with his own supremely daring "moral philosophy". Neither religious faith nor the veneer of respectability can subdue the beast within; the devil in the flesh possesses Ambrosio as calamitously as it enthralls the pederastic bishops of Les 120 journées de Sodome (1785). But while de Sade jubilantly proclaims the natural law--or lawlessness--of the voluptuary, Lewis ultimately reverts to a more humanistic and somewhat more viable position. So as not to estrange his audience utterly, he registers frequent protests against Ambrosio's crimes and affords his hero-villain a sporadic conscience entirely wanting among the preposterous ideological puppets of the Marquis. In a way, Lewis legitimizes his malefactor, conferring upon him a psychological veracity which permits a degree of reader identification in spite of all our scruples. We are asked to understand Ambrosio, even to sympathize with him to some



extent, because he is the victim of circumstances. As Lewis explicates in a remarkably incisive profile, the fetid atmosphere of the cloister has effectively stifled the monk's better self:

Instead of universal benevolence He adopted a selfish partiality for his own particular establishment: He was taught to consider compassion for the errors of Others as a crime of the blackest dye: The noble frankness of his temper was exchanged for servile humility; and in order to break his natural spirit, the Monks terrified his young mind, by placing before him all the horrors with which Superstition could furnish them: They painted to him the torments of the Damned in colours the most dark and terrible, and fantastic, and threatened him at the slightest fault with eternal perdition. No wonder, that his imagination constantly dwelling upon these fearful objects should have rendered his character timid and apprehensive. Add to this, that his long absence from the great world, and total unacquaintance with the common dangers of life made him form of them an idea far more dismal than the reality. While the Monks were busied in rooting out his virtues, and narrowing his sentiments, they allowed every vice which had fallen to his share, to arrive at full perfection. He was suffered to be proud, vain, ambitious, and disdainful: He was jealous of his Equals, and despised all merit but his own: He was implacable when offended, and cruel in his revenge. Still in spite of the pains taken to pervert them, his natural good qualities would occasionally break through the gloom cast over them so carefully: At such times the contest for superiority between his real and acquired character was striking and unaccountable to those unacquainted with his original disposition... The fact was, that the different sentiments, with which Education and Nature had inspired him, were combating in his bosom: It remained for his passions which as yet no opportunity had called into play, to decide the victory. Unfortunately his passions were the very<sup>32</sup> worst Judges, to whom he could possibly have applied.

Ambrosio's grievous case history might be interpreted simply as an obligatory impeachment of Romish authority, yet the painstaking precision of the analysis bespeaks a tangible

concern with issues of greater consequence and immediacy. Though Lewis, primarily an exoticist, is never more than a casual sort of moralist, The Monk intermittently resembles a Rousseauistic plea for personal freedom--not libertinism but liberty. Indeed, the report of Ambrosio's ill-advised "schooling" reads like a condensed Émile--in reverse. Immanent in this tragic account of miseducation are a serious mistrust of the artificial institutions that warp wholesome natural impulses and at least an elementary awareness of the evils of "system".

In supplying a specific rationale for his villain's garish iniquities, Lewis is fairly atypical among Gothic novelists, most of whom traffic in more arbitrary vice. But his final judgement of the criminal is conventionally harsh: whatever the deplorable effects of nurture, Ambrosio remains wholly responsible for his sins. Like Beckford's wicked caliph Vathek or Maturin's wretched Melmoth or almost any of Byron's cosmic adventurers, Lewis's unhappy overreacher, unrepentant at last, must be numbered among the damned. Yet, as Byron above all knew, the notion of perdition exerts an extraordinary influence over the Romantic mind: a Lucifer or a Cain shrieking desperate defiance at a tyrannical God seemed an apt and, in some respects, attractive anti-hero for the mutinous coming generation. And the curse of a Prometheus untainted by unholy ambition was sublimer still:

Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind,  
 All that thou canst inflict I bid thee do;  
 Foul Tyrant both of Gods and Human-kind,  
 One only being shalt thou not subdue.  
 Rain then thy plagues upon me here,  
 Ghastly disease, and frenzying fear;  
 And let alternate frost and fire  
 Eat into me, and be thine ire  
 Lightning, and cutting hail, and legioned forms  
 Of furies, driving by upon the wounding storms,

Aye, do thy worst. (Prometheus Unbound, I, i, 262-272)

There is obviously a considerable moral discrepancy between Shelley's idealized rebel-hero and Lewis's ugly anarch, and it may be as Robert D. Hume maintains, the incongruity of the transcendental Romantic imagination (as represented by Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge, though not Byron) with the angst of Gothic fancy.<sup>33</sup> The Romantic approaches the higher order of the numinous and the eternal through an intuitive faculty which resolves all ambiguities at length (though not without many preliminary struggles); the Goth-icist lingers ignorantly on the brink of the irrational and sees only madness and death--but plunges in anyway.

The ambivalent beauty of destruction is, of course, the central point of Burke's Enquiry. The peculiar innovation of the Gothic sensibility was to find a form of divertissement in the contemplation of nonbeing--the intense inane. "I fell into a void...and I am falling back into a void," wrote Madame du Deffand, articulating the delicious languor of cosmic despair.<sup>34</sup> The same kind of malaise, an almost masochistic fixation on dissolution, suffuses Keats's famous sonnet, "Why did I laugh to-night?". Such meta-

physical anxiety may, I think, be attributed in some measure to the religious doubt which surfaced at the end of the eighteenth-century, after an extended period of secularization. It is not incredible that the Romantic soul, in a fit of melancholia, should feel "sad and alone" in a universe without apparent meaning, and worse, without God: "O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan,/To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain." With its Byronic heroes and stupendous chasms, the Gothic romance often evidences a comparable theological terror. The ambience of the most telling of these fictions is frighteningly godless: if the deity exists at all, He has long ago forsaken the frenetic worlds of The Monk and Melmoth the Wanderer (1820). To feel cut off from divine truth, irremediably and everlastingly, is the shared hell of the agnostic and the despairing sinner. And indeed, in the absence of God, the desolate Faustian villain ineluctably falls victim to consuming demons.

Alienation is then the lethal complaint of the damned Gothic hero, and the terror novelist, incipient symbolist that he is, rarely leaves it in the abstract. Cavern and castle and all the nameless phenomena of the Gothic milieu vividly convey in their strangeness and secrecy a devastating psychological and moral isolation. The oppressive catacombs to which Ambrosio removes himself with the unfortunate Antonia in the climactic scene of The Monk

signify his painful apartness from regular human commerce. Oddly enough, his alienation is, in one sense, sociologically credible--the disassociation of public image and private act which induces feelings of falseness and emptiness in the Abbot of the Capuchins generally conforms to the classical Marxian pattern. But, more crucially, Ambrosio's awful solitude augurs his total spiritual ruination. Hopeless of grace, the miserable monk eventually consigns his soul to the arch-fiend and, beyond all help, awaits obliteration. His frame shattered on the jagged rocks where Satan has hurled him, the outcast suffers lacerations inexpressible--yet purely premonitory. In the final lines of the novel, Gothic and Biblical horrors converge in as harrowing a vision of apocalypse as occurs in fiction:

Blind, maimed, helpless, and despairing, venting his rage in blasphemy and curses, execrating his existence, yet dreading the arrival of death destined to yield him up to greater torments, six miserable days did the Villain languish. On the Seventh a violent storm arose: The winds in fury rent up rocks and forests: The sky was now black with clouds, now sheeted with fire: The rain fell in torrents; It swelled the stream; The waves overflowed their banks; They reached the spot where Ambrosio lay, and when they abated carried with them into the river the Corse of the despairing Monk.<sup>35</sup>

## 3.

The romance could not sustain such intensity for long. As cheerfully as the reading public devoured them, Lewis's poisonous prodigies (and their many facsimiles) appeared the height--to some, the nadir--of literary decad-

ence, and inevitably a reaction set in. If the Gothic novel at last succumbed to its own excesses, Northanger Abbey (1803, published 1818) drove the final nail into its coffin. But if the body perished, the spirit survived throughout the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth, in the Brontës, Hawthorne, Melville, James, Faulkner--and Dickens. Yet to regard Wuthering Heights (1847) or The Altar of the Dead (1895) as tales of terror is to diminish and distort their achievement. The horrid archetypes that Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis established in a rather desultory fashion later Romantic novelists sharpened and magnified to attain a powerful symbolic resonance which redeems the claptrap. The eerie fog that permeates every corner of London in the famous opening of Bleak House is more than "atmosphere"--an ineffectual Gothic mist; this implacable November weather sickens men's brains and freezes their hearts.

In a rambling piece entitled "Travelling Abroad" (from The Uncommercial Traveller [1861]), Dickens confesses to a very odd obsession: "Whenever I am in Paris, I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never want to go there, but am always pulled there."<sup>36</sup> With all the gusto of the true voyeur, he then proceeds to sketch the bloated, obscenely comic physiognomies of the Parisian dead. The weakness is one the Gothicismist could certainly appreciate. It is the same impulse which drew him, against his better judgement, to the scenes of notorious crimes,<sup>37</sup> and which

constrained him to repeat his public performance of the murder of Nancy so often that it quite possibly hastened his death.<sup>38</sup> We have seen how much Dickens enjoyed titillating his readers with terrific incident, yet his stratagems are, in one sense, completely ingenuous. He may have yielded to the debased literary prejudices of the masses, but his own stomach for cheap thrills rivalled--and probably surpassed--that of his audience. Somewhat like Beckford's debauched priestess Carathis (though without her deadpan flippancy), Dickens exulted in "dead bodies, and everything like mummy".<sup>39</sup> In life as well as art, he took an almost prurient interest in forbidden acts and dirty secrets--the aberrant periphery of experience.

His hankering after ghosts and ghoulishness may strike us as rather puerile--not really what we expect of a major artist--yet, in his greatest fictions, Dickens transfigures such unpromising raw material. In any case, his approach to these morbid imaginings is not invariably solemn; he seems to have been genially aware of the absurdity of his vice. John Forster, Dickens's confidante and biographer, wrote of the novelist's sensation-seeking: "...such was his interest generally in things supernatural, that, but for the strong restraining power of his common sense, he might have fallen into the follies of spiritualism."<sup>40</sup> It may have been this common sense as much as Victorian reticence that prevented Dickens's fiction from entering the



stomach-churning bedlam of-the blackest Gothic romance. For if he kept abreast of all the latest reported ectoplasmic visitations, and indeed claimed one or two for himself,<sup>41</sup> he was also, as Jane Welsh Carlyle testified, a marvellous conjuror--the best one she ever saw.<sup>42</sup> At least occasionally, we may glimpse a vein of humour and innocent gaiety in Dickens's avowed penchant for the preternatural. His night-fears, like Charles Lamb's, appear to have originated in the "witch-ridden pillow" of infancy.<sup>43</sup> If we are to believe Dickens's story, a sadistic nurse inaptly named Mercy forcibly detained the young Charles each bedtime while she fed his imagination with revolting tales of magic and mystery.<sup>44</sup> Before he was six, he had learned by rote the amazing legends of Captain Murderer (who chopped up all his wives and baked them in pies), and of Chips, the shipwright (who sold himself to the Devil). "If we all knew our own minds," says Dickens, "...I suspect we should find our nurses responsible for most of the dark corners we are forced to go back to, against our wills."<sup>45</sup>

The tone may be jocular, but he is perfectly in earnest. It is a critical commonplace by now that Dickens's turbulent childhood had a powerful impact on his subsequent career, and the instructive narratives of this "female bard" must take their place alongside the better-known facts of his early biography as shaping influences. Dickens's decided taste for the horrific was further cultivated by his child-



hood reading. As R.D. McMaster observes, he was "a reader of uncommonly bad literature at an early age".<sup>46</sup> The Copperfield library--Roderick Random, Peregrine Pickle, Humphry Clinker, Tom Jones, The Vicar of Wakefield, Don Quixote, Gil Blas, Robinson Crusoe, The Arabian Nights and Tales of the Genii--indicates a fairly orthodox enthusiasm for established, more or less respectable classics, mostly in the picaresque mold and, except for the last two, not overly sensational. Understandably, Dickens made no corresponding public admission of his youthful craving for pulp literature. Nonetheless, during his two and a half years (1824-26) at Wellington House Academy, he subscribed to a penny weekly the full title of which faithfully reflects its content: The Terrific Register; or, Records of Crimes, Judgements, Providences, And Calamities. This comprehensive journal, Dickens discovered, could always be counted on for "a pool of blood, and at least one body";<sup>47</sup> although the editors strike a posture of pious moralizing, it is, in truth, a child's treasury of nastiness, depicting in gloating detail such novelties as murder, cannibalism, incest, torture and (interestingly enough) spontaneous combustion.<sup>48</sup>

The Terrific Register was probably Dickens's first sample of Gothic nightmare in printed form and we may presume that he savoured the choicer horrors of the genre in due course. Unfortunately, Dickens's critical utterances

tend to be rather laconic, and little primary evidence of a special familiarity with the Gothic emerges anywhere in his writings. In a sense, this deficiency hardly matters--Dickens employs the creepy motifs of the Gothic tale so steadily and so cogently that we can make the connection ourselves. At any rate, some palpable proof does exist: Dickens's passing reference to "the owner of the gigantic helmet" in a note to Forster demonstrates an acquaintance with Otranto.<sup>49</sup> And the import of Eugene Wrayburn's astonished expletive--"Mysteries of Udolpho!"<sup>50</sup>--on encountering Lizzie Hexam in the unlikely company of Mr. Riah (one of Dickens's rare sympathetically observed Jews) is unmistakable.

In any event, Dickens knew the nineteenth-century scions of the Gothic thoroughly well. Like everyone, he admired Sir Walter Scott, and like every man and boy of a melodramatic turn of mind, he read Newgate novels--though not without certain qualms. If anything at all links Waverley (1814) and the modish Jack Sheppard (1839), it is a mutual ambition to localize the mysteries of Udolpho, to focus fantastic intrigue in a setting more historically plausible than the nebulous antique never-never land of Gothic romance. Scott's novel, sub-titled 'Tis Sixty Years Since, fuses superstition and social realism so artfully that Highland folk culture is mythologized. The plot derives from Scottish history (specifically the Jacobite up-

rising of 1745), the moody embellishments from ballad and legend, yet the castle-dwelling clans and robber chieftains are also variations on a Gothic theme. And the same may be said of the amiable cutthroats of the Newgate school. William Harrison Ainsworth, sensation novelist and friend of Dickens, describes a new domestic form of romance in his preface to Rookwood (1834):

I resolved to attempt a story in the bygone style of Mrs. Radcliffe (which had always inexpressible charms for me), substituting an old English squire, an old English manorial residence, and an old English highway man for the Italian marchese, the castle, and the brigand of the great mistress of Romance.<sup>51</sup>

The Waverley and Newgate novels equally epitomize the metamorphosis, one might say, the modernization of the tale of terror into something resembling the romance of common life. If Rob Roy and Dick Turpin are still too good (or bad) to be true, they at least occupy a credible time frame and ride about in recognizable social circumstances. Doubtless, Dickens took note of these advances: Scott is surely the presiding genius of Barnaby Rudge (1841) and, despite Dickens's protestations, Oliver Twist (1838) is a Newgate novel--with a difference.

The difference is that Dickens perceives little or no honour among thieves. The sentimental idealizations of roguery which Ainsworth, Bulwer Lytton and a vast readership delighted in, Dickens found offensive and even morally pernicious. It was disheartening to him that so many averted their eyes from the squalid actualities of English life:

A Massaroni in green velvet is quite an enchanting creature, but a Sikes in fustian is unsupportable. A Mrs. Massaroni, being a lady in short petticoats and a fancy dress, is a thing to imitate in tableaux and have in lithograph on pretty songs; but a Nancy, being a creature in a cotton gown and cheap shawl, is not to be thought of. It is wonderful how Virtue turns from dirty stockings, and how Vice, married to ribbons and a little gay attire, changes <sup>her</sup> name, as wedded ladies do, and becomes Romance.<sup>52</sup>

Nancy, with her scrubbed language and heart of gold, may now seem another sort of romantic stereotype, but her seediness was, at the time, an impressive breakthrough. For, in portraying things as they really are (more or less), Dickens scores a significant moral victory. In a sense, what chiefly attracted him to the Gothic and its sensational progeny in the first place was their prominent incredibility. Even at its most tasteless, the Romantic novel handily disengages itself from the workaday world of fact--its subject is always, as Henry James says, "experience liberated"<sup>53</sup>--and some basic part of Dickens's imagination responded to this freedom. No doubt it was Dickens the man-of-the-theatre (precisely, Dickens the ham actor) who revelled in the bombast and bluster of Gothic fiction, the histrionic hyperbole that made even the cherished, lively volumes of Fielding and Smollett look wan.<sup>54</sup> Yet, however much he loved thundering it down on his readers' heads, unalloyed melodrama was seldom enough for Dickens. Though gloriously horrid and compulsively readable, the tale of terror was also naïve and, in some respects, irresponsible literature, or so it appeared to Dickens. The crafty romancer, continues

James, cuts the cable of the balloon of experience "for the fun of it", and without our detecting him.<sup>55</sup> Dickens is certainly as wily, and as little interested in literalism, as any Gothic fantasist, but (let us persevere, for the moment, in James's metaphorical vein) his balloon is weighed down with conscience, and remains at long tether from the earth.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's well-known estimate of Dickens's "naturalism", "solid and substantial,...and just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth",<sup>56</sup> confirms the customary view of Dickens as the prime social realist of the Victorian Age. Few would dispute the claim, yet the issue is perhaps not so simple. If even the minutiae of Dickens's fictional world appear boldly lifelike, if indeed his vision is so acute as to seem almost obtrusive, it may be that his extraordinary realism is extraordinary in quite another sense. "When he imagined a street, a house, a room, a figure," G.H. Lewes remarked, "he saw it not in the vague schematic way of ordinary imagination, but in the sharp definition of actual perception."<sup>57</sup> Again and again in those curiously defensive prefaces to the novels, Dickens strikes the identical keynote: despite all charges to the contrary, he tells the plain truth--about Nancy, about spontaneous combustion, about the nature of things in general. Yet it is a truth observed with virtually a hallucinatory clarity, a reality fantastically height-

ened. It is, of course, a dwelling upon the romantic side of familiar things.

The romance, Hawthorne affirmed

--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he think fit, also, he may so manage his atmospherical medium as to bring out or mellow the lights and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture.<sup>58</sup>

Hawthorne regretted his own inability to reproduce the loose, baggy factuality of the English social novelists, yet the mythopoeic lights and darks of Bleak House recall the "magic moonshine" of The House of the Seven Gables (1851) more nearly than either author may have realized. The marvellous in Hawthorne is apt to seem cold, austere, morosely Calvinistic, that in Dickens hectic, grotesquely comic and even somewhat tawdry; both artists nonetheless achieve a commensurate compromise between the commonplace and the occult, always strictly adhering to a core of moral, symbolic and psychological truth. Interestingly, Walpole also professed to leaven his castle-spectres with a kind of verisimilitude, however questionable the result. In the preface to the second edition of The Castle of Otranto, he explains:

Desirous of leaving the powers of fancy at liberty to expatiate through the boundless realms of invention, and thence of creating more interesting situations, [the author] wished to conduct the mortal agents in his drama according to the rules of probability; in short, to make them think, speak and act,

as it might be supposed mere<sup>59</sup> men and women would do in extraordinary positions.

There is, however, nothing especially credible about Walpole's bellowing lords and recoiling ladies. Dickens (and Hawthorne too, in another way) comes much closer to perfecting an oxymoronic literary hybrid: if not quite realistic romance then, at any rate, romantic realism.

For Dickens, as perhaps for Victorian fiction as a whole, realism of any sort was generally indivisible from didacticism. While, on the face of it, it might appear somewhat of a hollow triumph, Dickens's major feat in rehabilitating the Gothic form is to discipline the horrors, to press them into the service of his reforming zeal. As we have seen, the tale of terror cannot fairly be judged unequivocally amoral but Dickens, whether impervious or simply indifferent to the amorphous metaphysical distresses of some of the later romancers, lends it more immediate relevance, more obvious point, than ever before. In essence, he treats the Gothic mode as a vehicle through which he may transmit his sense of social iniquity. By this juncture, it should be apparent that Dickens obtained a not inconsiderable amount of emotional satisfaction from congress with ghouls. What may be less intelligible is the fascination which the vulgar Gothic held for him aesthetically. But neither is this so strange. For, however semi-conscious the resolve, the Gothic remains throughout its long history, strongly reactive: against classicism, against reason, against social



usage. Its range of metaphorical association is, indeed, so indomitably anti-social, and its manipulative technique so absorbing, that Dickens's persistent use of the Gothic as a component part of his virulent social critique, though possibly surprising, is perfectly just.

At first, the goblins can be banished without much ado--they are harmless enough. In the still of the night, Samuel Pickwick timorously peruses "A Madman's Manuscript", one of several interpolated Gothic tales in Pickwick (1836-37), before dozing off, yet wakes cheerful and refreshed, "his thoughts and feelings...as light and gay as the morning itself".<sup>60</sup> These isolated gory legends, most of them rather ineptly told, signify nothing, except maybe a momentary fright, to the characters in the novel, who sensibly shrug them off like so many bad dreams. And such primitive terrors mean very little more to us. Still, without necessarily assenting to Edgar Johnson's (also Edmund Wilson's) hypothesis that they "are deeply significant of [Dickens's] submerged griefs and fears",<sup>61</sup> we may wonder why the novelist chose to depress his early comic masterpiece with these drear black patches. Conceivably, Dickens, brashly self-assured if a trifle overhasty, was seizing an invaluable opportunity to display his versatility before the world. And likely, he was following the example of his forerunners in the picaresque tradition, Cervantes and Fielding, both of whom habitually counterpoint their comic action with



grim fables of domestic tragedy. Dickens's own leaden narratives run the whole gamut of bathetic melodrama, yet these odd eruptions of madness hardly threaten to blot out the sun. Mainly, they brace one for the increasingly skillful--and terrifying--nightmares that overcast nearly every one of Dickens's subsequent novels to some degree until the very end. The dark clouds of imagination only slowly gather force. But even in Pickwick, there are evils that will not fade away with the dawn, nor yet quite with the salving grace of laughter. These are, of course, the evils spawned in social corruption. The Chancery prisoner whom Mr. Pickwick encounters in the Fleet, whose spirit has been steadily drained away over twenty years of incarceration, is, as he himself understands, one of the English walking dead, as alone and disconsolate as any Gothic felon:

"If I lay dead at the bottom of the deepest mine in the world, tight screwed down and soldered in my coffin, rotting in the dark and filthy ditch that drags its slime along beneath the foundations of this prison, I could not be more forgotten or unheeded than I am here. I am a dead man; dead to society, without the pity they bestow on those whose souls have passed to judgement."<sup>82</sup>

Affecting though they may be, the prison scenes are merely stitched into the fabric of the novel--and the seams still show. The loose, improvisatory style of Dickens's early work is often very attractive, but as often the discursiveness somewhat dilutes the social point as it unavoidably slackens the tension. Certainly, even in his later, tighter fiction, Dickens always allows himself a little

elbowroom for sudden inspiration, yet the mature novels exhibit an imposing structural and symbolical coherence that gives them disturbing reverberations. Without such lucid organizing principles, the motley constituents of Oliver Twist--its Mayhew-like descriptions of the London poor, its hokey plot complications, its brutal violence (as intemperate as anything in The Terrific Register)--never wholly coalesce into the desolate vision of urban inferno attained in Bleak House and Hard Times. The enterprising young author was not yet so high-flying. Still, the novel remains a superlative piece of yellow journalism. If Pickwick and Oliver Twist and also Nicholas Nickleby each put one in mind of a string of many-coloured beads, some humorous, some sentimental, some Gothic, one bead dropped, another picked up, without much attention to order, this is not exactly to their discredit: the good-natured jumble suggests the youthful exuberance of a writer plying his craft every way he knows how.

Elements of formal structure do, however, insinuate themselves into Dickens's next novel, The Old Curiosity Shop (1840-41). Whether by art or accident, Little Nell's touching odyssey across the English countryside and towards death resembles a latter-day Pilgrim's Progress,<sup>63</sup> and the echoes of Christian allegory afford the narrative shape. But the novel also includes Gothic iconography which, as it turns out, is much the same thing. "In writing the book," Dickens

noted, "I had it always in my fancy to surround the lonely figure of the child with grotesque and wild, but not impossible companions, and to gather about her innocent face and pure intentions, associates as strange and uncongenial as the grim objects that are about her when her history is first foreshadowed."<sup>64</sup> Nell is both spotless Gothic heroine and sugary Victorian angel, and the queer confederates that hover over her, the Punch and Judy men, the waxworks makers, and the slimy Brasses, often appear the modern equivalent of good and bad genii as well as baroque concretizations of Bunyan's moral abstractions. Towering above them all (despite his diminutive stature) is Daniel Quilp, a leering, cackling demon and a scenery-chewing Gothic villain--the superior malevolence of the novel. Quilp is animated by greed not lust; even so, the antithesis of this ogre and the child-paragon clearly recalls the primary situation of most Gothic romance. It is Dickens's own whimsical rendition of an essentially Manichean archetype.

Little Nell's companions, Dickens insists, however outrageous, must never be "impossible", that is, preter-human or extraterrestrial. His practicality, we have seen, rescued him from the follies of spiritualism. Very likely, it was this same faculty--one might call it tough-mindedness--which enabled him to appreciate that he could stir audiences far more deeply, hit home far more eloquently, in the representation of recognizable human activity than in

shadow-plays of astounding supernatural occurrence. Of all Dickens's extended fictions, only the Christmas stories of the 1840's, A Christmas Carol, The Chimes and, most especially, The Haunted Man, have much traffic with the genuinely uncanny, and these ghostly little books are pretty plainly intended as seasonal jeux d'esprit, despite their solemn overtones. Ordinarily, though, Dickens's is a remarkably down-to-earth Gothic. Lest this term sound unduly paradoxical, we should remember the bywords, "the romantic side of familiar things". For if, in his major novels, Dickens manages to curb his appetite for the overtly supernatural, he supplies a generally acceptable substitute: "things" are described as if they were supernatural phenomena, as if they were--monstrous. The Gothic becomes a metaphorical device, another dramatic weapon in Dickens's arsenal, as Earle Davis puts it,<sup>65</sup> though not always a reliable one.

No doubt, losses are involved. Dickens cannot honestly be said to evoke primal horror too often, and it is probably true that he softens the Gothic, taking the raw edge off in the very act of refining it. Yet Dickens's macabre metaphors radiate an obsessive power of their own. In the great series of microcosmic "problem" novels that commences with Dombey and Son (1846-48), he strikes off image after prophetic image of universal social gangrene with a finesse and virtuosity well beyond the ken of Radcliffe or Lewis, even in their heyday. The railroad, crack-

ing open the sordid cityscape as if for the first time, Dickens transmutes into a billowing leviathan, Victorian embodiment of the triumphant monster, Death:

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, plunging down into the earth again, and working on in such a storm of energy and perseverance that amidst the darkness and whirlwind the motion seems reversed, and to tend furiously backward, until a ray of light upon the wet wall shows its surface flying past like a fierce stream. Away once more into the day, and through the day, with a shrill yell of exultation, roaring, rattling, tearing on, spurning everything with its dark breath, sometimes pausing for a minute where a crowd of faces are, that in a minute more are not, sometimes lapping water greedily, and before the spout at which it drinks has ceased to drip upon the ground, shrieking, roaring, rattling through the purple distance!

Louder and louder yet, it shrieks and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal; and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowded gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. As Mr. Dombey looks out of his carriage window, it is never in his thoughts that the monster who has brought him there has let the light of day in on these things, not made or caused them. It was the journey's fitting end, and might have been the end of everything; it was so ruinous and dreary.

Yet Dickens stretches his social-Gothic technique still further than this semi-impressionistic sweep of an ulcerated landscape. Five years later, in Bleak House, the fog has lowered, and it really does seem the smoking finish to everything.

-NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime (2nd ed.; London: Macmillan, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>See Edgar Johnson, Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952), p. 1099.

<sup>3</sup>George Brimley, Review of Bleak House in The Spectator (September 24, 1853), p. 923.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted in Phillips, Dickens, Reade, and Collins, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup>G.K. Chesterton, Charles Dickens (London: Methuen & Co., 1906), p. 109.

<sup>6</sup>For an interesting account of the "wave of grief" that inundated both Dickens and his readers on the passing of Little Nell, see Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, pp. 303-304.

<sup>7</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 649.

<sup>8</sup>Quoted in Varma, Gothic Flame, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup>Wilhelm Worringer, Form in Gothic, trans. Herbert Read (London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1927), p. 73.

<sup>10</sup>George Henderson, Gothic (Middlesex: Penguin, 1967), p. 73.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 160-170.

<sup>13</sup>One should not press the parallel too far, yet in their harrowing immediacy these awful icons presage the rather more ignoble corpses of Gothic romance.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Howells, Love, Mystery, and Misery, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Varma, Gothic Flame, p. 16. The term is Sir Herbert Read's.

<sup>16</sup>The standard account of this cultural transformation is Kenneth Clark's The Gothic Revival (1928) (New York:

Harper & Row, 1962).

<sup>17</sup>The chimerical character of this immense edifice only underscored its weak construction. Its central tower, 300 feet high, collapsed in 1800.

<sup>18</sup>See Parentalia; or, Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens (London, 1750), p. 308.

<sup>19</sup>Notwithstanding such inbred anti-papist sentiment, the medieval resuscitation may later have inadvertently helped to fuel the Oxford Movement. See Clark, Gothic Revival, pp. 153-155.

<sup>20</sup>Horace Walpole, The Letters of Horace Walpole, ed. Mrs. Paget Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), VI, 387-388.

<sup>21</sup>See Lewis Melville, The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill (London: William Heinemann, 1910), pp. 65-66.

<sup>22</sup>Charles Dickens, Dombey and Son (1846-48) ed. Alan Horsman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 375.

<sup>23</sup>See Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "Sir Leicester Dedlock, Wat Tyler, and the Chartists: The Role of the Ironmaster in Bleak House", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 113-131.

<sup>24</sup>Dickens, Dombey, p. 375.

<sup>25</sup>Gothic architecture in Dickens is almost invariably dreary and depressing rather than sublime. Note especially Chesney Wold in Bleak House and the grim cathedral of Cloisterham in Edwin Drood. The romantically pictured chapel that Little Nell visits near the end of The Old Curiosity Shop is perhaps the exception.

<sup>26</sup>Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757) ed. James T. Boulton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 39.

<sup>27</sup>The bloodthirstier of the Jacobean dramatists--Tourneur, Webster, Middleton and Ford--at times demonstrate comparable predilections.

<sup>28</sup>Horace Walpole, The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story (1764) in Peter Fairclough ed., Three Gothic Novels (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), p. 61.



- <sup>29</sup>Clark, Gothic Revival, p. 44.
- <sup>30</sup>Matthew Lewis, The Monk (1794) ed. Howard Anderson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 379.
- <sup>31</sup>Quoted in Railo, Haunted Castle, p. 93.
- <sup>32</sup>Lewis, The Monk, pp. 237-238.
- <sup>33</sup>See Hume, "Gothic versus Romantic", p. 289.
- <sup>34</sup>Quoted in Mario Praz, "Introductory Essay" in Three Gothic Novels, p. 9.
- <sup>35</sup>Lewis, The Monk, p. 442.
- <sup>36</sup>Charles Dickens, "Travelling Abroad" in The Uncommercial Traveller (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 64.
- <sup>37</sup>See Collins, Dickens and Crime, pp. 253-254.
- <sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 265-272.
- <sup>39</sup>William Beckford, Vathek (1786) in Three Gothic Novels, p. 187.
- <sup>40</sup>John Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens (1872-74) ed. J.W.T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), p. 840.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid., pp. 348, 841.
- <sup>42</sup>See Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 468.
- <sup>43</sup>Charles Lamb, The Essays of Elia (1823) (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1929), p. 79.
- <sup>44</sup>Charles Dickens, "Nurse's Stories" in The Uncommercial Traveller, pp. 148-158.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 150.
- <sup>46</sup>R.D. McMaster, "Dickens and the Horrific", The Dalhousie Review, 38 (1958), 18.
- <sup>47</sup>John Forster, Life, p. 43n.
- <sup>48</sup>See Trevor Blount, "Dickens and Mr. Krook's Spontaneous Combustion", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 1 (1970), 183-211; Harvey Peter Sucksmith, "The Secret of Immediacy: Dickens's Debt to the Tale of Ter-



ror in Blackwood's", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XXVI (1971), 145-157.

<sup>49</sup>Charles Dickens, The Letters of Charles Dickens, ed. Madeline House and Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), II, 238-239.

<sup>50</sup>-----, Our Mutual Friend (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 405.

<sup>51</sup>William Harrison Ainsworth, Preface to Rookwood (London: George Routledge & Co., 1857), p. xxxiii.

<sup>52</sup>Charles Dickens, Preface to 3rd edition of Oliver Twist (1841) ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. lxiii.

<sup>53</sup>Henry James, The Art of the Novel (New York: Scribner's, 1934), p. 33.

<sup>54</sup>One of the most illuminating accounts of Dickens's theatricality--his self-conscious use of rhetoric and melodrama--is Robert Garis's The Dickens Theatre (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

<sup>55</sup>James, Art of the Novel, p. 34.

<sup>56</sup>See Mark Van Doren, Nathaniel Hawthorne (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1949), p. 66.

<sup>57</sup>Quoted in Robert Newsom, Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 48.

<sup>58</sup>Nathaniel Hawthorne, Preface to The House of the Seven Gables (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. xxi.

<sup>59</sup>Walpole, Castle of Otranto, pp. 43-44.

<sup>60</sup>Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 147.

<sup>61</sup>See Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 163; Wilson, Wound and Bow, p. 10.

<sup>62</sup>Dickens, Pickwick, p. 594.

<sup>63</sup>See Alexander Welsh, The City of Dickens (London: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 58.

<sup>64</sup>Charles Dickens, Preface to the First Cheap edition of The Old Curiosity Shop (1848) (London: Oxford University

Press, 1970), p. xii.

<sup>65</sup>Davis, Flint and Flame, p. 91.

<sup>66</sup>Dickens, Dombey, pp. 276-277.

## II

### A NIGHTMARE WORLD

#### 1.

Bleak House begins in fog and, as previously indicated, the fog is not just a dry-ice inclemency. To quote the oft-quoted opening lines of the novel once again may seem superfluous, yet Dickens never wrote anything more remarkable, and the passage exemplifies his elaboration of Gothic atmosphere:

London. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes--gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex Marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and

hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.<sup>1</sup>

Immediately, Dickens plunges us into a nightmare world, where gargoyle shapes loom out of the fog. Yet it is London, seen as a cesspool--as terrible an image, in its way, as Eliot's *Unreal City* or Wordsworth's "monstrous anthill on the plain" (*The Prelude* [1850], VII, 149). And we cannot doubt that this London, wet and grubby and yet dazzling in its diversity, epitomized for Dickens, as for many artists before and since, the whole of a great (and dirty) civilization. If, among the multitudinous topical concerns of *Bleak House*, Dickens omits all mention of the Great Exhibition of 1851, as John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson point out,<sup>2</sup> it may be that he has constructed his own cloudier Crystal Palace, less brilliant because it exhibits English social anachronism. More precisely, he has translated urban squalor--miry streets and collapsed tenements--into a vast Gothic ruin, and peopled it with the vampires and mere bullies who feed on an obsolete system.<sup>3</sup> E.M. Forster thought the novel a mess structurally,<sup>4</sup> but many commentators rank it among Dickens's most rigorously planned, despite (or because of) its complicated double narrative. I would

suggest that what gives Bleak House its exceptional unity and strength is Dickens's modified Gothic sensibility. The vision finally takes hold: what in his earlier work could appear a rather doubtful metaphorical appliance, or just a sensational gimmick indifferently employed, becomes, in Bleak House, a sophisticated ordering principle that weaves the heterogeneous aspects of London high and low life into an intricate configuration of horrific images. Dickens undertakes nothing less than a psychical profile of Victorian England, an "anatomy of society",<sup>5</sup> and his adapted Gothic casts a fearful pall over this demi-paradise.

As if to provide a preliminary sub-text for Bleak House (though he would have resented the subordinate position), Carlyle wrote in Latter-Day Pamphlets (1850): "...our life-atmosphere has (for the time) become one vile London fog, and the eternal loadstars are gone out for us! Gone out;--yet very visible if you can get above the fog".<sup>6</sup> Above the fog was naturally where Carlyle stationed himself as Victorian sage; Professor Teufelsdröckh, his persona in Sartor Resartus (1833-34), peers down god-like from his high window at Weissnichtwo (Know-Not-Where) into the "smoke-counterpane" which conceals the human flood living and dying to such little purpose far below, and thinks, "I am alone with the Stars."<sup>7</sup> The rhetoric is as incontinent as Dickens's, and perhaps even more startling since it adorns a work, not of imaginative fiction, but of single-minded

didacticism. However, in Sartor Resartus, On Heroes and Hero-worship (1841), Past and Present (1843) and Latter-Day Pamphlets, Carlyle was quite consciously endeavouring to furnish a reviving gospel for a moribund age. With mounting vehemence--some might say, frenzy--he lambasted the flabbiness of Victorian ethics: the complacency of Mammonism, the blandness of utilitarianism and the general spiritual aridity of the times. While Carlyle's reactionism, most particularly his opinion of self-congratulatory do-gooding and of the so-called "nigger question", looked to many like frothing at the mouth by the time of Latter-Day Pamphlets, the impact on the tone of Victorian fiction of even the most magisterial of his edicts was incontestable and, indeed, incalculable. As Kathleen Tillotson has demonstrated, "after Carlyle, the poetic, prophetic, and visionary possibilities of the novel [were] fully awakened."<sup>8</sup>

And in Dickens they flourished. Even at the low ebb of Carlyle's popularity, the younger writer managed to keep the faith--though he could not know with what disdain the prophet privately regarded the major part of his labour.<sup>9</sup> Yet, whether unwillingly or not, Carlyle came the closest of any contemporary to being Dickens's intellectual mentor. If, as Shaw says, Dickens developed a sense of social sin in his mature fictions,<sup>10</sup> Carlyle more than anyone else was responsible for his initiation. The author of Nicholas Nickleby (1838-39) has little or no idea of the body poli-

tic or of pervasive social injustice. Dotheboys Hall can be shut up or repaired with an appropriate act of Parliament --the grimy academy is never seen as symptomatic of a larger problem. The cosmopolitanism increasingly in evidence after Dombey we may reasonably attribute in large part to Dickens's reading and appreciation of Carlyle, which began in the 1840's. As early as 1843, in A Christmas Carol, Dickens had recounted the allegory of those two haggard children, Ignorance and Want, indicating wrongs not so easily righted by piecemeal measures. Filth and poverty are certainly distressing enough, yet Dickens came to recognize, with Carlyle, that what was fundamentally awry, and what took its toll on the innocent, was the condition of England itself, the spirit of the age. In Bleak House, the self-interest, the impersonality and the meaningless complexity endemic to Victorian "system" are dreadfully conveyed through an involved metaphor which is also a fact. At the heart of a choking obscurity

sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in sight of heaven and earth.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, the Lord Chancellor is rather a dull fellow, indistinguishable from his predecessors and, presumably, from his successors. And the ruined suitors waiting for the verdict in the immemorial Jarndyce and Jarndyce come

and go in a ghastly anonymous parade, "perennially hopeless",<sup>12</sup> while the legal machine inexorably grinds on. For, in the new Victorian framework, evil has been largely dissociated from the individual; it is now--in Chancery. Though Dickens, ever a melodramatist, persisted in segregating his cast of characters into heroes and villains, with relatively few subtler shadings, though he and the majority of his readers agreed that a criminal is, after all, a criminal, crime in broad terms could, for the first time, be deemed the inevitable consequence of the iniquities of collective living. The Victorians were, of course, socially aware because they had to be. By contrast, the moralists of an earlier, simpler agrarian civilization, while they might lash out at a local abuse, or bemoan the wickedness of the city in imitation of Horace, were apt to treat human folly as a permanent condition--a fact of life--above and beyond the influence of specific circumstance. In the conventional Christian frame of reference, in Chaucer or Jonson or Fielding, the hoary old sinner has only himself to blame, and his own conscience to account to since, as a part of the divine plan, the structure of society cannot be too closely questioned.

The Gothic romancers too, though amoral by Dickens's rule, ultimately set evil squarely within the human heart in the best Calvinist tradition. Still, as we have noted, the subversive tendencies of dark Romanticism muddle the issue a good deal. For whatever his crimes, whether incest or infant-



icide, the Gothic hero-villain seems somehow exalted above the common ranks of humanity, a superman even in his damnation. Considering his own eager interest in the psychology of crime, Dickens must have been intrigued by such ambivalent ethics yet, in his fiction, the bourgeois moralist generally gains ascendancy, and the Byronic model is seldom pursued.<sup>13</sup> Only Steerforth, John Jasper and perhaps Sydney Carton fit the pattern at all comfortably, and two of these die horrible deaths while their more complacent counterparts, David Copperfield and Charles Darnay, settle down to perpetual happiness.

It is, of course, true that the hero-villain of Gothic romance typically ends his days just as miserably as any of Dickens's rogues, and that his death often appears to involve some form of retribution (not necessarily divine). It is equally true that the Gothic heroine, liberated at last, usually retires to a life of quiet contentment with a sterling cipher every bit as dull as Charles Darnay (Theodore in The Castle of Otranto is a prominent example). The decline in the fortunes of the Byronic hero in Victorian fiction is nonetheless quite as appreciable as the concomitant rise to eminence of the genteel hero, who speaks the King's English and dutifully makes his way in the world.<sup>14</sup> Such a displacement Dickens renders almost in allegorical fashion in Bleak House.

What is the novel about? On a literal level, it concerns meek Esther Summerson's discovery of her parentage,

and hence of her identity, amid the stagnations and legal obfuscations of Victorian society. On a figurative plane, the book is, among other things, about the eclipse of the Romantic hero. For Esther's parents make a Gothic pair indeed. If not exactly a chaste maid in the Radcliffian mold, Honoria Dedlock, with her oddly contradictory streaks of pride and self-reproach, passion and repression, remains an impressive tragic figure. Harboured the guilty secret of Esther's birth beneath a guise of icy hauteur, she is hounded to death by her equally chilly black-gaitered Fate --Tulkinghorn, the Dedlock solicitor, whose devious psychological harrassments suggest a rarefication of Gothic torments. Her lover, Captain Hawdon, appears early in the novel, but only as a gaunt and sallow corpse huddled in an opium-smelling room; his ravaged features do not, however, entirely conceal the swarthy lineaments of the Byronic hero. The account given of him by Krook, the rag and bottle man, is doubly revealing in this context: "'They say he has sold himself to the Enemy; but you and I know better--he don't buy. I'll tell you what, though; my lodger is so black-humoured and gloomy, that I believe he'd as soon make that bargain as any other. Don't put him out, sir. That's my advice!'"<sup>15</sup> Though evidently lacking the pride and overweening ambition of an Ambrosio, Hawdon has known the same soul-destroying passion and the same hopelessness. The queer pseudonym which he adopts as a law-writer--"Nemo",

meaning "no one"--clearly indicates his alienation and despair, as well as being an ironic reminder of the Captain's vital importance as a narrative device in spite of his nullity in terms of characterization. In still another sense, the name connotes his obsolescence as a literary archetype.<sup>16</sup> For all their histrionic grandeur, Lady Dedlock and Nemo are something like fictional dinosaurs, and must yield to a more docile, but also more stable, younger generation. So Lady Dedlock dies, her arm stretched around the iron gate behind which her lover rests in a stinking graveyard.

Yet Esther, witness to this scene of painful devastation (and exquisite romanticism), not only survives but prospers. She is another of Dickens's perfect domestic angels, his ideal of femininity, and her marriage to Allan Woodcourt, the earnest young surgeon, implies a kind of Victorian idyll. Smaller-scaled, milder-mannered, perhaps more realistically observed than their Romantic forebears, the junior couple shares a love neither illicit nor (in any overtly sexual sense) passionate, but rather ardent and true. If the pathetic history of Captain Hawdon and Lady Dedlock savours strongly of Sturm und Drang, it is only fitting that Esther Summerson's more sedate personal adventures should be cast in the shape of a Bildungsroman.

Esther's apotheosis as Dame Durden--the "little woman", the ultimate housekeeper--argues the adoption of a pragmatic, rather cozy variety of Romanticism which is peculiarly Victorian. Yet, as must now be obvious, Dickens's en-

thusiasm for even the queasiest specimen of Gothicism colours his work as conspicuously as his more sentimental longings. Both penchants, we have seen, emanate from an exaggerated emotionalism. But it is the Gothic that gives Bleak House its full obsessive power. Although, in the broader Victorian perspective, the Byronic hero looked impossibly outmoded as a useful, or even attractive, fictional prototype (except perhaps as debased in the penny dreadfuls), Dickens imbues the crowded social canvas of Bleak House with an analogous--and wholly apposite--fiendish energy. Now it is civilization that staggers under the curse, apparently soulless and severed from its own humanity, though (and the distinction is an important one) not as yet irretrievably damned.

Earlier, in Dombey and Son, Dickens had portrayed the mushrooming of London's population in the 1840's as a lurid spectacle, more exactly a shocking ritual of human sacrifice to the great metropolis itself:

Day after day, such travellers crept past, but always...in one direction--always towards the town. Swallowed up in one phase or other of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death--they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost.<sup>17</sup>

Bleak House, one might say, is a novel-length amplification of this intense, horrific image. In both novels, sporadically and indefinitely in the former, more sharply and comprehensively in the latter, Dickens shows the city as an omniv-

orous organism, an entity ironically discrete from the aggregate of its citizenry--literally, a body politic. The social leviathan is an idea at least as old as Hobbes, but Dickens's rendering of the monster offers no reassuring integration of man and commonwealth. Indeed, as the post-Dombey fictions demonstrate again and again, a radical divorcement of the two is strictly necessary to a convoluted bureaucratic system the preservation of which, in large measure, depends on the rooting out of the unpredictable--and hence disruptive--human factor. While a seventeenth or eighteenth-century pauper might console himself with the knowledge (if he knew his Leibniz) that he too counted as a vital link in the great chain of being or, at the very least, a cog in the great political machine, a nineteenth-century Jo or Charley Neckett, adrift in the confounding vastness of Dickens's London, merely melts "into the city's strife and sound, like a dewdrop in an ocean"<sup>18</sup>--swallowed alive. Whether owing to incompetence or overcompetence (and Dickens makes no real distinction), in this modern age, the system--no longer, one presumes, divinely ordained--has become a self-regulating body whose whole idiotic point seems to be self-perpetuation. Chancery, above all, exemplifies the Kafkaesque absurdity of an officialism which, through invincible redundancy and circumlocution, keeps itself sleek, if not healthy:

"All through the deplorable cause, everything that everybody in it, except one man, knows already, is

referred to that only one-man who don't know it, to find out--all through the deplorable cause, everybody must have copies, over and over again, of everything that has accumulated about it in the way of cartloads of paper (or must pay for them without having them, which is the usual course, for nobody wants them); and must go down the middle and up again, through such an infernal country-dance of costs and fees and nonsense and corruption, as was never dreamed of in the wildest visions of a Witch's Sabbath. Equity sends questions to Law, Law sends questions back to Equity; 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."<sup>19</sup>

To be "in Chancery" is to be absorbed beyond recall in an inclusive organization the operation of which is incomprehensible to rational understanding, yet which runs smoothly enough on its own account and by its own relentless logic. Dickens presents Chancery as a classic case of "no exit"<sup>20</sup>--veritably, a hell on earth.

To speak of Dickens's existentialism as epitomized in such merciless litigation would be specious and inaccurate; already the vocabulary is too pretentious and too academic for an artist as resolutely popular as Dickens. It would hardly be creditable to claim that in Bleak House, arguably the most technically audacious of Victorian novels, Dickens was writing for an ideal readership. Like Shakespeare, he aimed to reach both pit and gallery, the widest possible

audience, and perhaps unlike most authors, he knew his public intimately. By the 1850's, both in his fiction and in his editorial pieces for Household Words and later All the Year Round, Dickens had begun writing at his audience in a fairly intense manner, assailing his readers with Carlylean grandiloquence and sarcasm in an effort to raise consciousness about social corruption. Bleak House, Hard Times and Little Dorrit are au fond--though not exclusively--novels of ideology; their primary frame of reference is therefore not cosmic but microcosmic.

Dickens was not, however, a Marxist or a Chartist, much less the precognizant Freudian that some critics have averred, though Bleak House remains sufficiently allusive to support, at least partially, hard-line readings of this sort. In fact, his political and philosophical allegiances (assuming he necessarily inclined one way or another) are difficult to determine with much confidence. It seems unquestionable that in the last two decades of his life, Dickens followed Carlyle to the right--certainly, his latter-day pronouncements on such issues as colonialism and capital punishment cannot but fall heavily on liberal ears--so that, on balance, we must count him more reactionary than radical. How may we define the politics of Bleak House? If, as most commentators agree, the friction between Sir Leicester Dedlock and Rouncewell the ironmaster inescapably suggests the power struggle between the nobility and the rising commercial classes, Dickens's treatment



of both characters is so ambivalent as to nullify a strictly partisan approach. At best, his social attitudes are eclectic. At worst, if one takes too narrow a perspective, they are likely to appear inconsistent, impractical and even somewhat sentimental. George Orwell perhaps most succinctly states the case against Dickens:

It seems that in every attack Dickens makes upon society he is always pointing to a change of spirit rather than a change of structure. It is hopeless to try and pin him down to any definite remedy, still more to any political doctrine...useless to change institutions without "a change of heart"-<sup>21</sup>and that, essentially, is what he is always saying.

But if his political faith finally eludes us, it may be that by mid-career he was growing beyond the overt politicizing and pamphleteering of his early fiction. We discern in Bleak House a more reflecting and surely a more private persuasion of what ails society, one that realistically admits some degree of ambiguity.

Whatever the merits of Dickens's sometimes nebulous personal ideology--and Carlyle, for one, found it mawkish and incredible--it can hardly be doubted that the desire for a simple "change of heart" underlies the elaborate symbolic superstructure of Bleak House. Rather obviously, this kind of romantic hypothesizing is the inevitable outgrowth of a fundamental optimism about the perfectability of human nature. Yet Dickens could be fairly cynical about the theoretical and mechanical means to such an end. Though the Court of Chancery, while it stands, remains an insuper-



able barrier to genuine human progress, those utopian schemes intended, in one way or another, to heal the most serious breaches in society and to regulate the system generally--Benthamism, for instance, or Tractarianism or institutional philanthropy of any sort--Dickens portrays with equal asperity. That so often he repudiates the cure along with the disease (sometimes, one feels, a little too cavalierly) is perhaps to be expected: Dickens never could work up much enthusiasm for the partial solution which all too frequently seemed a mere remodelling of the problem.<sup>22</sup> Even utopianism smacks of "system", and it becomes clear from Dombey onwards that this is what Dickens fumed most furiously against.

Launching Household Words in 1850, Dickens expounded its principal aim in terms which we have encountered already:

To show that in all familiar things, even in those which are repellant on the surface, there is Romance enough, if we will but find it out--to teach the hardest workers at this whirling wheel of toil that their lot is not necessarily a moody, brutal fact excluded from the sympathies and graces of imagination; to bring the greater and lesser, in a degree, together upon that wide field and mutually dispose them to a better acquaintance and a kindlier understanding--is one main object of our Household Words.<sup>23</sup>

It was a gospel that Dickens never swerved from either in his journalism or in his fiction--an aesthetic creed and likewise an ideological manifesto. Carlyle too raged frequently and vociferously against "steam-engine" values, those spectres of thought which, under the sway of the "monster Utilitaria", threatened to starve the human spirit.

But Dickens could not agree with him that the one thing needful to counter the world of boring fact, and indeed all other manifestations of spiritual malaise, was a new and inspiriting Faith. Less morally rigorous than his teacher --"softer" by Carlyle's own reckoning--Dickens found sufficient inspiration in a contemplation of the multiformity of English life wherein lay, for good or ill, whatever meaning existence offered. He was profoundly a humanist, although not perhaps in the strictest sense of the word. For he valued not only the native dignity of man, the highest and the best of human endeavour, but also the seamier side, less dignified yet with a vitality of its own. Life, creative, spontaneous, constantly surprising, was Romance itself for Dickens.

This may be a sentimental view, but it is not piddling sentiment. As Arthur Clayborough has noted, Dickens attached considerable moral weight to what might be regarded, from a literalist standpoint, as the mere trivia of daily living.<sup>24</sup> Esther, bustling about Bleak House with her keys jangling, Trooper George, sharing a rasher of bacon with poor Phil Squod, were for Dickens spiritual ideals, triumphant embodiments of the miraculous within the everyday. Really, Dickens's joyous celebration of life around him is not so very different from Carlyle's neo-Puritan denomination of the world as "the living visible Garment of God",<sup>25</sup> though Carlyle would hardly believe it. Dickens,

of course, remains far more indulgent, far more indiscriminate and--a salient point--far more secular in his enthusiasms than the rather chilly sage of Chelsea. Still, both authors questioned the prevalent materialist philosophy in which clothes are just clothes and bacon only bacon. Both in general perceived life as an allegory of the Spirit. Dickens, however, put his trust in the human spirit, which he found most perfectly expressed in the faculty of imagination or, as he called it, fancy--that innate capacity for metaphorical projection which man uniquely possesses and which obviously is necessary to every creative undertaking, however humble. Fancy, to Dickens's mind, was the only effective bulwark against "brutal fact" and fact the perennial threat to innocent fancy. This bitter ideological contest Dickens renders most unequivocally in the novels of the middle period. Hard Times, of course, addresses the issue quite explicitly, dramatizing the dissension in deliberately schematic terms, as a virtual morality play with sullen Louisa Gradgrind caught uncomfortably between the two factions. But it is in Bleak House a year earlier that the fray acquires the strongest mythic resonance, becomes for Dickens, literally no less than figuratively, a matter of life and death.

As is true of most of Dickens's full-length fictions, the social concerns of Bleak House are almost staggeringly wide-ranging. The uninhibited plot flies up and down the

social scale missing few gradations along the way, taking account variously of the ancienne noblesse and their obsequious poor relations, the nouveau riche and the shabby gentility, the base born and the dispossessed, and even touching, to good sardonic effect, on another group with a less imperative claim to class distinction--the English dead. Probably such a teeming canvas represents Dickens's naïve but perfectly sincere attempt to gather the greater and the lesser together and, as he says, mutually dispose them to a kindlier understanding. And undoubtedly his cast of hundreds is meant to exemplify a pet egalitarian theory, that every member of society shares a hidden alliance which, through any number of convolutions, either partly or wholly determines his fate. (Dickens ruminates: "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!")<sup>26</sup> But in the broadest sense, I think that Dickens's microcosmic method--his working of the Jellybys, Turveydrops, Bagnets, Boythorns and Buckets into a moral pattern of almost Byzantine subtlety--issues from a desire to reproduce, with complete poetic fidelity, the infinitely varied, sometimes ragged but often astonishing texture of English life. In a certain sense, Dickens rarely penetrates very far beneath the surface of things, yet it is a highly interesting surface that he presents, one that the author believed on the whole well worth preserving.

What, of course, jeopardizes this brilliant surface is that which seeks to deny it, that which reduces the amazing and the amusing to something cold and monotonous--a fact. The rationalist excesses of Bentham and the utilitarians, the calculated debasement of human feelings and the ludicrous categorization of even minor human pleasures, clearly horrified Dickens and Bleak House is almost certainly his most emphatic Romantic counterstatement. Pleading for the ascendancy of the irrational, the inexplicable and the intuitive, Dickens placed himself--perhaps unwittingly--in a position directly comparable to that of an earlier rebellious generation. His hatred of the Victorian system, and of all systems generally which repress the human spirit (however kindly intended), is far more sharply focussed than the indistinct fulminations of the Gothic romancers, yet the distrust of pure reason--which to Dickens seemed so often pure unreason--is essentially the same.

I have suggested that the nihilism of Gothic fiction, reflected in landscapes of bleakness and terror, proceeds from a violent although largely unformulated agnosticism, a want of confidence in conventional moral norms, and a desperation at having cut loose from all traditional philosophical moorings. It is true that Beckford, Lewis and Mary Shelley often played a rather complex game, exulting in madness and anarchy, luxuriating in angst, blaspheming freely, and yet finally turning around and endors-

ing stability and Reason. -But despite such crafty double-dealing, there remained the general opinion that a world without God, or without some commensurate spiritual essence, is a world lacking depth and contours, a nightmare of chaos and dissolution. Less daring but also less duplicitous than his terrorist forebears, Dickens restyles these broad sentiments along Victorian lines in Bleak House. The Chancery world which systematically excludes fancy, which indeed squeezes out the incalculable human element for the greater glory of the system, becomes an inferno, inert and empty, an insupportable death-in-life:

On such an afternoon, some score of members of the High Court of Chancery bar ought to be--as here they are--mistily engaged in one of the ten thousand stages of an endless cause, tripping one another up on slippery precedents, groping knee-deep in technicalities, running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might. On such an afternoon, the various solicitors in the cause, some two or three of whom have inherited it from their fathers, who made a fortune by it, ought to be--as are they not?--ranged in a line, in a long matted well (but you might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it), between the registrar's red table and the silk gowns, with bills, cross-bills, answers, rejoinders, injunctions, affidavits, issues, references to masters, master's reports, mountains of costly nonsense, piled before them....This is the Court of Chancery; which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard; which has its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance; which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right; which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope; so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart; that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give--who does not often give--the warning,

"Suffer any wrong that can be done you, rather than come here!"<sup>27</sup>

The echo of Dante in this last line is surely deliberate. Even in the lower circles of hell a certain structure is discernible, though it be but organized confusion. The bales of official documents epitomizing the Chancery muddle, dust-heaps that choke the soul, in themselves seem cause enough to abandon hope.

This essentially is the ideological foundation on which Bleak House is built: a carefully balanced and recognizably Manichean antithesis of light (life, imagination, spirit, altruism) and darkness (system, materialism, self-interest, death). Poetically, the conflict translates into images of filth, decay and bestiality and converse images of sunshine, abundance and domestic cheer in scenes alternately horrific and sentimental. In my terms, it is the opposition of the Gothic and what I would call the anti-Gothic. Norman Friedman has drawn attention to this fairly elaborate pattern of contrasts--albeit in a less specific, unhistorical context--in an intelligent and revealingly titled commentary, "The Shadow and the Sun: Notes Toward a Reading of Bleak House",<sup>28</sup> to which I am considerably indebted as the genesis of my own argument. Still, Friedman errs exactly where so many ingenious Dickensian scholars have erred, in attempting a tight, logical, intricately structured exegesis of a novel which intellectually is not consistently tight or logical or really, in the final analy-



sis, highly sophisticated. I have no doubt that Bleak House is a richly resonant novel, with perhaps the most compelling symbolism in Victorian literature. But deep in the heart of this visionary masterpiece is an ambivalence which cannot be accounted for by standard critical formulae. Such ambivalence represents, I think, the paradox of Dickens's Gothic art.

Peter Steele has quite rightly pointed out that Dickens often writes as if, in some curious fashion, he assented to Dylan Thomas's remark, "Isn't life a terrible thing, thank God?"<sup>29</sup> Life can, indeed, be terrible in a society cursed by corruption and alienation, as Dickens never tires of explaining, but life can also be a source of perverse amusement. To be sure, Dickens would not, and temperamentally could not, ever allow himself the dubious luxury of Harold Skimpole's languid aestheticism, an attitude which insists on the picturesque beauty of slavery and dire poverty. Nonetheless, reading almost any one of Dickens's major fictions, we cannot help but feel that here is life spread out for our delectation, a spectacle, sometimes marvellous, sometimes odious, often ridiculous. In itself, Dickens's panoramic method is nothing extraordinary. Fielding, a far more traditional artist, sports with human folly in much the same terms, and doubtless would have acknowledged the abrasive Mrs. Pardiggle as a meet companion for his own bullying Mrs. Tow-ouse. Dickens, like Fielding,



could be stiffly peremptory in his judgement of vice and virtue and yet, however ardently he championed the latter, the former held such a peculiar fascination for him (exclusive of moral considerations) that some of his most extravagant grotesques are thrown deviously, but perceptibly, off balance.

To put it another way, Dickens might fervently wish always to bask in the sun but the shadow too had its --slightly wicked--attractions. At least emotionally, there remains a grey area which confounds, to some extent, the easy Manichean moral order. Bleak House, it can be said, concerns death as much as life, whether it be the violent death of Krook, the rag and bottle man, by spontaneous combustion or the inevitable, creeping ruin of the aristocracy through stagnation or, in a somewhat different sense, the distressing spiritual deadness of the lawyers and clients in Chancery. Yet, however horrible these phenomena might seem, there was still that fatal fascination, and perhaps, for the purposes of Bleak House, Dylan Thomas's ironic observation should be amended to, "Isn't death a shocking thing, thank God?" Actually, the paraphrase could serve The Monk or Vathek or any of the Schauer-Romantik fictions equally well. The Gothic romancers, after all, made a cult of mayhem and moral confusion. Dickens was too much of a moderate ever consciously to submit to such calamitous ethics and yet, on some basic and

probably subliminal level, he responded to their great-- though often crude--imaginative power. It is not, therefore, mere sophistry to suggest that Dickens's childish delight in every nauseous detail of Krook's death, endearing though it may be, subtly undercuts the deadly serious moral symbolism or that the whimsicality and individuality which he lends poor, unkempt Mrs. Jellyby in part militates against what presumably is her symbolic function as one of those spiritually damned. Quite simply, Dickens's love of the loathsome, the side of him that still cherished memories of The Terrific Register and of cheap romance, collides with his hatred of social corruption whenever (and it is frequently) he chooses to employ the former as a metaphor for the latter. George Gissing made much the same point long ago when he complained that Dickens's famous description of the Chancery fog, while rhetorically effective, "makes one rather cheerful than otherwise, for we are spectators in the company of a man who allows nothing to balk his enjoyment of life".<sup>30</sup> Everywhere in Bleak House, one feels this slight discomfort, this tension between art and ideology.

No defence is possible, and really none is called for. It is perfectly understandable that Dickens, writing in a literary age far less self-conscious than our own, should feel no particular need to integrate form and substance absolutely, to describe civilization in a heap of broken images like Eliot, or to express modern alienation

by paring away all non-essential language, as Beckett does. Clearly, Dickens was not--entirely--a "modern" novelist; the paradox of spiritually depleted characters who yet vigorously proclaim their right to exist (if only in the imagination of the reader) was a paradox he could live with. And we can do no less, for the often puzzling versatility of Dickens's art demands a fairly open approach, a freedom from the limitations of critical rigidity and attitudinizing. I do not advocate willful naïveté or an uncritical view but quite the opposite: a preliminary recognition of Dickens's complexity, a desire to sort out the ambiguities, a refusal to gloss over or ignore the inconsistencies. It is, I believe, in this liberal temper that the subject of Bleak House and the Gothic imagination should be considered.

## 2.

Atmosphere is everything in a Gothic novel; without sufficient creepiness, attention wavers and interest gradually dissipates. Mrs. Radcliffe certainly knew this: her romances are nothing if not atmospheric, her rather trivial and disappointingly tame plots customarily being swamped by garrulous descriptions of sublime alpine scenery and thundering cataracts. James too knew about atmosphere, albeit in a more insinuating way: his occasional Gothic tales shadow forth equivocal phantoms in an ambience thick with dread and evil. In a similar manner, but for different motives, both authors sacrifice the definable fact for

the more horrible implication. And what of Dickens? The Old Curiosity Shop, with its strange and still largely uncredited mixture of the fabulous and the awful, probably contains more suggestive horror than any other Dickens novel, but Bleak House, in general, dwells on brutality and immorality without reserve. Dickens, of course, needed to be graphic since, in this novel, the repulsive image and the explicit violent act symbolize identifiable--and hence arrestable--social evil. His ruthlessness is, in some respects, analogous to Lewis's. Neither writer, however, neglects atmosphere in the pursuit of melodrama. In The Monk, the murky cloisters and foul catacombs hide an ugly sexual hysteria which braces one for any amount of carnage. And in Bleak House, the infamy operating at every level of society seems the bitter, ashen fruit of the universal rust and must and dust.

The fog, the mud and gas of Dickens's London, the infested churchyard in Tom-all-Alone's, the close, dank mausoleum at Chesney Wold, comprise a familiar Gothic landscape--perhaps too familiar. It may appear an obvious point to make, but it is nonetheless true that the nightmare world of Bleak House had a mainly empirical basis. Certainly, it did not take a profound imagination, only a reasonable acuity, to associate the climate and geography of Victorian England with Gothic horror. Horror of the home-grown sort could be met with everyday in any of the poorer metro-

politan districts, and filth and ordure were equally a fact of life on every city street. The street mud which, as Dickens reports with amusing tact, "is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how",<sup>31</sup> was, according to Mayhew, chiefly composed of animal dung --an estimated 40,000 tons per annum.<sup>32</sup> The November fog --a "London particular"--may have struck more than one Londoner as "a dilution of yellow peas-pudding",<sup>33</sup> but scientifically it was an olid combination of coal smoke and chemical vapours. Out of such miasmal demographical data emerges Dickens's macabre-prophetic vision of an haunted England.

"In all my writings, I hope I have taken every available opportunity of showing the want of sanitary improvements in the neglected dwellings of the poor", wrote Dickens in the preface to Martin Chuzzlewit,<sup>34</sup> and his solicitude was indeed well-founded. For by the 1850's, it was generally agreed that the national disgrace--scandalously high mortality rates from smallpox and cholera--might successfully be resisted through judicious programs of slum clearance: cheap, clean, uncrowded housing for the poor. Bleak House can be read on this literal level, as a social problems novel with political overtones like Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) or Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906). It is probably significant that during the writing of the novel Dickens was actively engaged in planning affordable housing

complexes at Bethnal Green with his long-time charitable collaborator, the Baroness Burdett-Coutts.<sup>35</sup> He wrote to her in 1854:

[The poor] will never save their children from the dreadful and unnatural mortality now prevalent among them (almost too murderous to be thought of), or save themselves from untimely sickness and death, until they have cheap pure water in unlimited quantity, wholesome air, constraint upon little landlords like our Westminster friends to keep their property decent under the heaviest penalties, efficient drainage and such alterations in building acts as shall preserve open spaces in the closest regions, and make them where they are not now.<sup>36</sup>

If blind allegiance to system, whether on the left or the right, eventually became for Dickens the cardinal ideological crime, pollution was a sour indication of the failure of that system to provide equity for every citizen. It was, in effect, the physical evidence of moral corruption.

Everyone who read The Times in 1845 knew--literally --where the bodies were buried. The well-publicized inquiry into burial practices in the London Metropolitan area revealed what, of course, dozens of slum dwellers were already cognizant of, namely that limited space, insufferably poor ventilation and parsimonious or merely unscrupulous local officials made certain inner city cemeteries little more than pestholes for every manner of infectious disease.<sup>37</sup> The deposition of a grave-digger at the Spa-fields burial ground in Clerkenwell divulged almost unimaginable atrocities and indignities in the much-vaunted decade of Victorian progress:

Reuben Room examined--I was in the employ of Mr. F. Green, as grave-digger, in 1837, and continued in his employ for about six years. Our mode of working the ground was not commencing at one end and working to the other, but digging wherever it was ordered, totally regardless whether the ground was full or not; for instance, to dig a grave seven feet deep at a particular spot, I have often disturbed and mutilated seven or eight bodies; that is, I have severed heads, arms, legs, or whatever came in my way, with a crowbar, pickaxe, chopper, and saw. Of the bodies, some were quite fresh and some decomposed. I have had as much as  $1\frac{1}{2}$  cwt. of human flesh on what we term the "beef-board" at the foot of the grave at one time. I have often put a rope round the neck of the corpse to drag it out of the coffin, fastening one end of the rope to a tombstone, so as to keep the corpse upright to get at the coffin from underneath, to make room for the flesh of other bodies. The coffins were taken away and burnt with pieces of decomposing flesh adhering thereto. I have taken up half a ton of wood out of one grave, because I had to take out two tiers of coffins, some of which were quite fresh, and we used to cut them up for struts, used for shoring up the graves. We had as many as 50 or 60 sides of coffins always in use to keep the ground from falling in when digging. We have buried as many as 45 bodies in one day, besides still-borns. I and Tom Smith kept an account one year; we buried 2,017 bodies besides still-borns, which are generally enclosed in deal coffins. We have taken them up when they have been in the ground only two days, and used them to light fires with. I have been up to my knees in human flesh by jumping on the bodies so as to cram them in the least possible space at the bottom of the graves in which fresh bodies were afterwards placed. We covered over the flesh at the bottom by a small layer of mould. I have ruptured myself in dragging a heavy corpse out of the coffin. It was a very heavy one. It slipped from my hold lifting it by the shoulders. The corpse was quite fresh. These occurrences took place everyday.<sup>38</sup>

Tenants in the vicinity complained of watery blisters, "a nasty coppery taste in [the] mouth", and of sights insupportable to human sensibilities.<sup>39</sup> Dickens spares us these intolerable details which, in a work of fiction, might repel more than instruct, instead imbuing the grave-



yard scenes in Tom-all-Alone's with an obsessive apocalyptic wrath that has a commensurate emotional power. But his account is horrible enough. In rehearsing the paltry rites of Nemo's anonymous funeral, Dickens reiterates a then-current notion, that the effluvia of these charnel houses, leaked into the water and the air, breed a pestilence reaching far up in the social strata:

...the body of our dear brother here departed [is borne off], to a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed; while our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official back-stairs--would to Heaven they had departed!--are very complacent and agreeable. Into a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination, and a Caffre would shudder at, they bring our dear brother here departed, to receive Christian burial.

With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate--with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life--here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside: a shameful testimony to future ages, how civilization and barbarism walked this boastful island together.

The point is made again, even more explicitly, in the celebrated characterization of Tom-all-Alone's as a cancerous social organism which, in retaliation for criminal mismanagement, plots continuously and surreptitiously against its betters:

Even the winds are [Tom's] messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It shall pollute, this very night, the choice stream (in which chemists on analysis would find the genuine nobility) of a Norman house, and his Grace shall not be able to say Nay to



the infamous alliance. There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, not an ignorance, not a wickedness, not a brutality of his committing, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. Verily, what with tainting, plundering, and spoiling, Tom has his revenge.<sup>41</sup>

Such were the material terrors of life in Victorian London.

Yet it should be perfectly apparent that Tom's revenge is a moral disease as well, an infection closely akin to Carlyle's "universal Social Gangrene".<sup>42</sup> Dickens dramatizes the epidemic--which structurally is central to Bleak House. We watch with mounting apprehension as plague spills out of its narrow hotbed in the slums, spreading rapidly from Nemo's untended grave to Jo, the street-waif, to Charley, the lady's maid, and finally to Esther, whom it leaves permanently scarred. The strain seems some kind of smallpox, but the precise pathology need not be determined. As in Shakespeare, disease serves a valuable allegorical function as a sign of moral infirmity and, as in Shakespeare, images of healing form a hopeful complement. If Tom-all-Alone's, its foul tenements swarming with human misery in "maggot numbers",<sup>43</sup> represents in two senses a sickness, an "eyesore" and also a "heartsore", as Mr. Jarn-dyce says,<sup>44</sup> the positive values embodied in Allan Woodcourt and Esther--he with his medical bag and she with her broom--possibly point the way towards a cure.

Cholera had carried off nearly 15,000 Londoners in

1848,<sup>45</sup> and the following year it felled 180 children in an overcrowded orphanage at Tooting, so Dickens had every reason to call for a thorough house-cleaning. Yet neither cholera nor smallpox is the principal malady confounding Bleak House. The jaundice in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, that "monument of Chancery practice",<sup>46</sup> casts a sickly hue over the whole of society, yellowing legal documents and colouring men's perceptions, inducing lassitude and prejudice in every quarter. Dickens manages to implicate virtually every character in the maddening suit, since virtually everyone is somehow entangled in "the system", whether a Dedlock or a know-nothing Jo. We observe the operation of the Chancery disease in the lamentable case history of Richard Carstone, whose youth and spirit are broken by slow degrees, whose trusting nature turns to rancour and suspicion because, as Jarndyce explains, "His blood is infected, and objects lose their natural aspects in his sight."<sup>47</sup> We behold the sorrowful effects of the disease on Gridley, the man from Shropshire, who eventually succumbs to apoplexy, and on Miss Flite who, like Richard, daily sits in expectation of a favourable judgement but who has gone pathetically, irrevocably insane. And most remarkable of all, we learn, again from Mr. Jarndyce (ch. 8), that Tom-all-Alone's is a property "in Chancery", that countless years of litigation have caused its ruin, though no one exactly knows whose monstrous inheritance it is. Now we begin to

understand the motive for Tom's revenge. The physical and moral pox working its way up into the fashionable world is not qualitatively different from the jaundice working its way down. Weakened by the latter condition, the body politic cannot long survive the onslaught of the former.

Madness, maggots, disease, dust, filth and ruination are the major components of Dickens's nightmare world, the central motifs through which he generates a Gothic atmosphere. All these contribute in a greater or lesser measure to the grand metaphors of the novel, Dickens's vision of English civilization as a wrecked fortress or, alternatively, as an inferno. Yet even in his most implausible romantic vagaries, Dickens rarely departs from a certain base of reality. In general, he stays on the romantic side of observable phenomena, snatching inspiration from the headlines, but by and large avoiding narrow, prosaic topicality. Indeed, it may be his greatest asset as a writer that he successfully juggles immediacy and universality, the obvious result being that his fiction can be read simultaneously on several levels, and so enjoy a wide and lasting popularity. A small but telling example of this versatility occurs relatively early in Bleak House in the chapter entitled "Tom-all-Alone's" (ch. 16). The scene is stark and terrifying. Lady Dedlock, veiled in the common dress of her French maid, Hortense, makes her way to the burial site of her long lost love, led by an exceedingly incongruous

companion. Jo, who is a native of the place, identifies the grave, and other matters of pictorial interest, in a dry, fairly matter-of-fact manner, very much as a tour guide in hell:

"There!" says Jo, pointing. "Over yinder. Among them piles of bones, and close to that there kitchin winder! They put him wery nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp upon it to git it in. I could unkiver it for you with my broom, if the gate was open. That's why they locks it, I s'pose," giving it a shake. "It's always locked. Look at the rat!" cries Jo, excited. "Hi! Look! There he goes! Ho! Into the ground!"<sup>48</sup>

Lady Dedlock's understandably shocked response to all of this--"O, what a scene of horror!"<sup>49</sup>--may appear in one framework merely the stock reaction of the paralyzed Gothic maiden, and indeed the episode works well as gruesome, voyeuristic melodrama. But melodrama is sometimes insidious; it can be used quite artfully as a vehicle for political muckraking. Dickens's perennial preachment on the need for sanitary reform gains considerable drive and urgency from being so sensationalized. At the same time, Jo's eyewitness account has an unadorned, eloquent veracity that Dickens's rather bombastic rhetoric elsewhere occasionally lacks. And, of course, the plot contrivance that throws this mismatched pair together, though not in ordinary terms "realistic", effectively establishes a symbolic alliance between them. If Lady Dedlock's astonished incomprehension, relative to Jo's comparative indifference, betrays class isolation and the evasion of moral respons-

ibility, their improbable meeting is surely intended to suggest that they are nevertheless brother and sister under the skin.

But then the scene begins to acquire a certain disturbing resonance. The subsequent brief exchange between Jo and Lady Dedlock is fraught with bitter irony:

"Is this place of abomination, consecrated ground?"

"I don't know nothink of consequential ground," says Jo, still staring.

"Is it blessed?"

"WHICH?" says Jo, in the last degree amazed.

"Is it blessed?"

"I'm blest if I know," says Jo, staring more than ever; "but I shouldn't think it warn't. Blest?" repeats Jo, something troubled in his mind. "It an't done it much good if it is. Blest? I should think it was t'othered myself. But I don't know nothink!"<sup>50</sup>

This moderately stylized dialogue makes plain the discrepancy between what should be and what is, between the sanctity of what the churchyard once represented and what it has come to mean through abuse and neglect. Again we note the interplay of light and dark imagery, here projected somewhat obliquely as a Calvinistic juxtaposition of grace and damnation--an idea elaborated further in several key episodes of the novel. The soil itself, one feels, is cursed, both physically and spiritually, and the same is potentially true of the whole of haunted England.

This insignificant burial ground, patterned by Dickens's own admission after a "closely hemmed-in graveyard"<sup>51</sup> near Drury Lane, becomes the recurrent symbol of a society edging towards death. Typically, at this stage in

his career, Dickens builds upon an issue of contemporary interest, embellishing it through visionary power and force of rhetoric, transforming a local cultural detail into what can only be called an epic metaphor, without however in any way seeming to descend into burlesque. Or, to state it more baldly, Dickens perceives a humble truth--a fact--and draws out of it a greater truth, one that has broad, indeed global, implications. It is a radical technique, this poeticizing of demography, since it taxes to the utmost Dickens's cunning as a symbolist. But it is an approach dictated as much by common sense as by ambition. For in courting both contemporaneity and perpetuity, Dickens melds the most attractive features of the social problems novel (for instance, Mrs. Gaskell's Mary Barton [1848]) and the Romantic novel, achieving the effect of concreteness without being dully factual or slavishly statistical, giving free play to his macabre imagination without ever appearing flighty or unduly frivolous. The consummate balance struck between the corporeal and the ineffable in Bleak House is often startling in its vigorous suggestiveness, yet the design is not wholly original to Dickens. Carlyle too seizes upon particulars, extrapolating vital philosophical principles from the ephemerae of "The Present Time".

Bleak House is certainly Dickens's most Carlylean work. Other novels--notably Hard Times and A Tale of Two Cities--address Carlylean themes more specifically, or at

greater length, but no other shows so sustained an influence on every important plane, stylistic and intellectual. Truly, in its careful, comprehensive articulation of the contrasting elements composing the social fabric, in its caustic portrayal of the proliferation of misery, Bleak House may be considered Dickens's "Condition-of-England" novel. From that ominous first paragraph, in which the end of Michaelmas term strangely coincides with "the death of the sun", we have a sense of the Carlylean "now", an impression that strife and suffering everywhere threaten, at this very moment in history, to push civilization to the brink of a terrible new epoch. The novel radiates apocalyptic fury, its elemental imagery, overwrought symbolism and quasi-Biblical language conspiring vividly to convey the prophecy of doom. Such cosmic tension is immeasurably heightened by a simple but really rather brilliant rhetorical trick. For almost exactly half of the narrative (thirty-four out of sixty-seven chapters), for the major allegorical sequences and most of the descriptive set pieces, Dickens employs the present tense. The unspoken message throughout is, "These things are happening all around us every day."

The omniscient narrator of the "present-day" sections of Bleak House adopts a Carlylean mien for the most part, regarding the misguided mechanisms of English society with both scorn and deep compassion from what must appear under the circumstances the last outpost of sanity and

truth. Perhaps the mantle of the prophet rests less easily on Dickens than on dour Carlyle, but there is little question whence much of the rhetorical fire of Bleak House originates. It is a slippery business, indeed, doing justice to the vigorous prose of this most experimental of Victorian novels. Dickens's thoroughly immoderate poetic language eludes ready classification, spanning as it does the majestic, the ironic and the lugubrious, combining dithyrambs of incredible beauty and power with mutilated, misproportioned sentences in a mixture so wild, and yet so rich, as positively to resist conventional scholarly scrutiny. Clearly, the style of Bleak House is too much. The insistent rhythms, the relentless repetition, the eclectic sometimes conflicting imagery and the general air of breathless excitement bespeak an idiom that is determinedly ostentatious. Dickens quite obviously means to overwhelm the reader, piling effect upon effect for the greatest possible emotional impact, exerting brute force if necessary to cow his audience into moral submission. Yet such intensity is not unrelieved. It may be one function of the unspectacular, comparatively contemplative first-person history of Esther (who is far less clever than the omniscient narrator) to offer periodic respite from the din.

Several of Dickens's loudest tirades concern Jo, who, as the lowest of the low, surviving solely on animal cunning, commands fear as well as pity. The last of these



harangues, shortly before Jo's death (ch. 47), shows Dickens's agitation virtually at fever pitch:

He is not one of Mrs. Pardiggle's Tockahoopo Indians; he is not one of Mrs. Jellyby's lambs, being wholly unconnected with Borrioboola-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<sup>52</sup> thy head, there is nothing interesting about thee.

The passage highlights Dickens's peculiar brand of verbal acrobatics to good advantage. Words fly by, bristling with brutal sarcasm, swooping and pulsating, quickening on the beat of the reiterated adjective, climaxing in a mock-heroic "kicker". Such a whirlwind exercise, more affective than rational in intent, likely constitutes a conscious effort to shake the reader out of his complacency, yet neither message nor method is entirely intrinsic to Dickens. In tone, in cadence, in manner of symbolism, Bleak House consistently bears the imprint of Carlyle.

It may be recalled that Wordsworth condemned Carlyle as a "pest to the English tongue".<sup>53</sup> It may also be recalled that Mrs. Gaskell includes in Cranford (1853) a lively discussion between a Miss Jenkyns and a Captain Brown on the relative merits of Rasselas and Pickwick, a debate that ends abruptly with the lady's imperious pro-

nouncement, "I prefer Dr. Johnson to Mr. Boz."<sup>54</sup> These and other tokens of critical reactionism should be taken, not as evidence of poor judgement necessarily, but as a sort of inverted tribute to the unnerving energy of a fundamentally new style of writing. Johnson's diction is always pleasing, exhibiting grace, wit, balance, composure and all the other virtues that accrue from following neo-classical principles. The Romantic prose of Dickens and Carlyle is, by contrast, rough and discordant, irregular and sometimes annoyingly affected. It can well be imagined how utterly such violence in language might offend the finely tuned ear of the linguistic purist, yet the offense was probably calculated. The other side of the perfect harmony and elegance aimed for in eighteenth-century idiom (and intermittently achieved by such expert practitioners as Dryden, Addison, Johnson, Fielding and Goldsmith) is a style essentially passive and inert, words that record cleverly and decorously, but do not in themselves engage the imagination--do not "sing". Carlyle's prosodic intemperance, born of a desire to revive the "dead letter" of language, represents nothing less than a conscious stylistic revolution.<sup>55</sup> It seems appropriate therefore that V.S. Pritchett should term such rhetoric a "Gothic and Gaelic confection".<sup>56</sup>

Dickens had his own reason for adapting Carlyle's extraordinary baroque to fiction. As skillful as the best eighteenth-century novelists were in exposing vice through

neatly constructed, more or less credible plots, their prose in general (with certain distinguished exceptions) misses that edge of dramatic excitement that draws the reader emotionally into the fictional world. Bound by fairly rigid standards of decorum, the texture of a novel like Joseph Andrews may appear somewhat thin, the medium only superficially approximating the fantastic rhythms of life that Dickens perceived. But in restoring dramatic language to somewhere near a Shakespearean level of fertility and inventiveness, Dickens realizes an ethical as well as an aesthetic goal. Consider his beguiling delineation of the regal Mrs. Rouncewell:

It has rained so hard and rained so long, down in Lincolnshire, that Mrs. Rouncewell, the old house-keeper at Chesney Wold, has several times taken off her spectacles and cleaned them, to make certain that the drops were not upon the glasses. Mrs. Rouncewell might have been sufficiently assured by hearing the rain, but that she is rather deaf, which nothing will induce her to believe. She is a fine old lady, handsome, stately, wonderfully neat, and has such a back and such a stomacher, that if her stays should turn out when she dies to have been a broad old-fashioned family fire-grate, nobody who knows her would have cause to be surprised. Weather affects Mrs. Rouncewell little. The house is there in all weathers, and the house, as she expresses it, "is what she looks at." She sits in her room (in a side passage on the ground floor, with an arched window commanding a smooth quadrangle, adorned at regular intervals with smooth round trees and smooth round blocks of stone, as if the trees were going to play at bowls with the stones), and the whole house reposes on her mind. She can open it on occasion, and be busy and fluttered; but it is shut-up now, and lies on the breadth of Mrs. Rouncewell's iron-bound bosom, in a majestic sleep.<sup>57</sup>

The poetic idea herein expressed is, I believe, quite

clear. Mrs. Rouncewell is like a well-appointed house. She is a stabilizing force, an ordering principle, in a world where so many houses are in anarchic disarray. Yet however warm our appreciation of this singular woman in her role as mythic matron of Chesney Wold, our primary empathy in this passage must be with Dickens, whose relish in so drolly describing her is entirely unconcealed. The sublime effrontery of Dickens's prose, the always surprising metaphors that hover pleasurably between serenity and affectionate derision, display in abundance that vital quality without which the human condition is rendered dryasdust--fancy. The style of Bleak House is then instructive in more than one sense, and it may be Dickens's will to demonstrate, indeed to exemplify, the healing power of imagination--even where the point seems most inapt--that accounts for (though it scarcely resolves) the aforementioned ambivalence of the novel.

Possibly because he was less versatile than Dickens, and infinitely less playful, Carlyle's "tracts for our times" present few of the same moral and intellectual problems that make Bleak House aesthetically so treacherous and yet so fascinating. Rarely given to stylistic self-indulgence for its own sake, due no doubt to his austere Puritan background, Carlyle wrote of apocalypse in prose which is always purposeful even when most windy and exaggerated. Chiefly, he wished to claim the throne that he

himself holds out in Sartor Resartus, "A Hierarch, therefore, and Pontiff of the World will we call him, the Poet and inspired Maker; who, Prometheus-like, can shape new Symbols, and bring new Fire from Heaven to fix it there."<sup>58</sup> Carlyle, the Victorian Prometheus, injects such Fire into his language as if to prove the old Calvinist axiom that God's burning Spirit resides in all things, however mean, and that poetic allegory is one way of uncovering the divine spark.

Judging from his comfortless sketch of Esther's godmother, the redoubtable Miss Barbary, in the third chapter of Bleak House, Dickens thought no more highly of Puritanism than he did of utilitarianism, or any other humourless, ascetic ideology. Nonetheless, a profusion of second-hand Puritan symbolism manages to creep into the novel, underscoring Dickens's horrific vision to a quite unexpected degree. At first, we may notice only random theological metaphor: Miss Flite's jumbling of the Great Seal of England with the sixth seal of the Revelations, and her addled anticipation of final settlement on "the Day of Judgment" (ch. 3); Mr. Snagsby's memorable visit to Tom-all-Alone's, seen as a descent into the pit, with "a concourse of imprisoned demons" howling at the verge (ch. 22). But it should be remembered that the awful consequence of the opening of the sixth seal is elemental chaos. Mountains crumble, the sun blackens, and the moon becomes as blood. Dickens

provides a close equivalent to this cosmic devastation and disorientation in the first unsettling pages of Bleak House and in the central allegorical episode of Krook's inflammatory death. Soon it becomes apparent that London, beset by fire, water and plague, is a godless City of Destruction.<sup>59</sup>

The disquieting portentousness of Bleak House, the sense of universal (albeit, in this case, societal) guilt is surely Calvinistic, but Dickens could hardly reconcile his own generous humanism with the stern moral reckoning of the zealot. Although Dickens's imagery gains tremendous impetus from Carlylean-derived Puritanism, it seems plain that the sectarian influence is mainly a connotative one, hellfire serving as a caution not a consummation. What drew Dickens to the morose symbolism of a doctrine that emotionally and intellectually so thoroughly repelled him? Certainly, his admiration for Carlyle had something to do with it. And most probably, another factor can be contemplated: the considerable metaphorical overlap between Puritan allegory and Gothic romance. It is a theme seldom treated in any great depth (though at least one critic has endeavoured a comprehensive exposition)<sup>60</sup> but it is a subject peculiarly relevant to a novel inhabited by so many devils and angels. I have already touched on several notable points of coincidence--a common fascination with iniquity, virtually an obsession with human mortality, and a mutually felt terror of eternal perdition. It is understandable,

though not a little paradoxical, that the Gothic romancer, requiring an iconography through which he might express--indeed exploit--his own historical doubt and despair, should turn to prescribed Christian archetypes of alienation. But quite apart from ideology, the appalling spectacle of an Ambrosio or a Caliph Vathek suffering the torments of hell has a primitive emotional horror that the more prevalent varieties of sadism can in no way equal. It is very likely that simple ignoble pragmatism operated on one level to encourage the terror novelists in their frankly commercial dalliance with Calvinist gloom.

Dickens too must have appreciated the garish, lurid scariness of retributive Puritan imagery, even as he disdained the accompanying cold-hearted dogma. As well, he must have taken comfort in the fact of Carlyle's own undeniable penchant for the macabre and the grotesque. It is safe to assume that Carlyle did not waste his time reading Gothic romance, yet legions of ideological phantoms populate his works. In Sartor Resartus, in a chapter titled "Natural Supernaturalism", he adopts a fairly traditional, broadly-based, but always serious attitude towards spiritual phenomena, beginning characteristically with a gibe at the eighteenth-century temper for not seeing deeply enough into the essence of things:

...could anything be more miraculous than an actual authentic Ghost? The English Johnson longed, all his life, to see one; but could not, though he went to Cock Lane, and thence to the church-vaults, and



tapped on coffins. Foolish Doctor! Did he never, with the mind's eye as well as with the body's, look round him into that full tide of human Life he so loved; did he never so much as look into Himself? The good Doctor was a Ghost, as actual and authentic as heart could wish; well-nigh a million of Ghosts were travelling the streets by his side. Once more I say, sweep away the illusion of Time; compress the threescore years into three minutes: what else was he, what else are we? Are we not Spirits, that are shaped into a body, into an Appearance; and that fade-away again into air and Invisibility? This is no metaphor, it is a simple scientific fact: we start out of Nothingness, take figure, and are Apparitions; round us, as round the veriest spectre, is Eternity; and to Eternity minutes are as years and aeons....do not we squeak and jibber (in our discordant, screech-owlsh debatings and recriminations); and glide bodeful, and feeble, and fearful; or uproar (poltern), and revel in our mad Dance of the Dead,--till the scent of the morning air summons us to our still Home; and dreamy Night becomes awake and Day?...Ghosts! There are nigh a thousand-million walking the Earth openly at noontide; some half-hundred have vanished from it, some half-hundred have arisen in it, ere thy watch ticks once.

There is nothing very revolutionary about these sentiments which, at bottom, represent little more than a restatement of the conventional Christian memento mori. Neither is there anything particularly surprising about the choice of imagery except perhaps (to paraphrase Sir Leicester Dedlock) for the fact of the choice being made. Yet Carlyle's ghosts are not the Bleeding Nuns and shrieking castle-spectres of Gothic fiction, but rather metaphysical abstracts, closer in their meaning to Ibsen than Mrs. Radcliffe. A typical passage on the decadence of the nobility (from Past and Present) demonstrates this rarely remarked-on component of the Carlylean style, "Phantasms, ghosts, in this midnight hour, hold jubilee, and screech and jabber;



and the question rather were, "What high reality anywhere is yet awake? Aristocracy has become Phantasm-Aristocracy, no longer able to do its work, not in the least conscious that it has any work longer to do."<sup>62</sup> Gothic imagery here reinforces what is, of course, a manifestly Puritan ethic. In their idleness, the languid lords and ladies cheat themselves of the reality--the divinity--of honest labour; clinging to dead ideas of privilege, they pervert their true nature, which is to work, and so become unreal, inhuman shadows in human form. To be sure, Carlyle draws on the occult in the interest of rhetorical effectiveness, but always deliberately, and only with the utmost moral strictness. The gravity of Carlyle's quasi-Puritan Gothic doubtless delighted Dickens for it conferred a measure of respectability upon his own ghoulish predilections, and the discipline which the elder sage lent the unruly author in matters of style and symbol cannot be underestimated.

Why then is Carlyle so eminently unreadable? I hope it is not merely perverse to suggest that Carlyle's radical and, in its time, very influential style seems rather monstrous today, whereas Dickens's equally innovative prose yields fresh nuances on every reading. But probably for most modern readers a little of Carlyle's crabbed, Germanic language goes a long way. It may be that, on the most fundamental level, he lacked a firm dramatic sense; always at white heat, his fantastically

involved syntax has little cumulative emotional impact, sounding instead like one great deafening roar without variation or relief, or alternatively resembling a tangled thicket which we penetrate at our peril. Dickens's prose, even when most Carlylean, is looser, tonally more varied and, of course, perfectly readable. So where does the essential difference lie? I suppose it will be generally conceded that, despite its (calculated) excesses, Carlyle's style is both sober and high-minded--that is, hortatory and inflexibly moralistic. Dickens's, though partaking of this severity often enough, is often a little gaudy too, and I would argue (without wishing to appear needlessly difficult) that this gaudiness remains Dickens's saving grace. For the combination of sensation and sentiment so strangely attractive to Dickens from his earliest writing has a surprising vulgar vitality giving a sinew to his prose that Carlyle cannot remotely match.

In part, we may look to terror romance as the source of Dickens's melodramatic facility. The contribution of the Gothic to English literary style has never been adequately gauged, and I can no more than outline it here. Still, it can be said without exaggeration that the great endowment of the Gothic mode in fiction is a reckless emotionalism that did much to free the novel from the sometimes deadening formalism of the eighteenth-century. An early work like Otranto is new primarily in subject matter, its

diction remaining rather suffocatingly tasteful. But the more frenetic fantasies of dark Romanticism, written at the crest of the terrific movement, have a dynamism and immediacy truly unprecedented in the short history of fiction. Quite possibly because they relied so heavily upon sensational incident and shameless shock effects (rather than Christian homily and classical pacing) to pique the reader's interest, Lewis, Maturin, Mary Shelley and even staid Ann Radcliffe collectively conceived a suitably compelling and suspenseful--if occasionally choppy--prose style that carries one easily through the hoariest intrigue.

The opening lines of The Monk:

Scarcely had the Abbey-Bell tolled for five minutes, and already wag<sub>3</sub> the Church of the Capuchins thronged with Auditors.

or of Frankenstein:

You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprize which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.<sup>64</sup>

show, in this one respect, a marked advance over the dry and somewhat distancing account of birth and breeding that begins almost any eighteenth-century novel. Whatever they may be guilty of--crudity, impiety, even puerility--the most accomplished Gothic romancers can hardly be accused of stodginess. Neither can Dickens. If Carlyle taught him a rhetorical and symbolic self-consciousness, and more importantly a sense of moral vocation, the Gothic is, I think, largely responsible for the unsubtle power of his novels

purely on a storytelling plane. Stylistically, the Gothic influence is mainly indirect, while Carlyle's own variety of moral terrorism has an authority more precisely determinable. Yet Bleak House everywhere indicates a fusion of the two. It is an uneasy coupling but ultimately a fruitful one.

## 3.

The most scintillating and easily the most entertaining of the classic terror fictions is William Beckford's Vathek (1786), a tour de force or rococo cynicism. As a rule, the tone remains playfully poisonous, the most atrocious savagery being passed over lightly and with wry humour, as though the book were written from the perspective of a fiend. But near the end, the mood turns abruptly serious, as the wicked Caliph Vathek and his concubine Nouronihar enter the hall of Eblis, where they freeze at the prospect of the doom they must themselves soon suffer:

In the midst of this immense hall, a vast multitude was incessantly passing, who severally kept their right hands on their hearts, without once regarding any thing around them: they had all the livid paleness of death. Their eyes, deep sunk in their sockets, resembled those phosphoric meteors that glimmer by night in places of interment. Some stalked slowly on, absorbed in profound reverie; some, shrieking with agony, ran furiously about like tigers wounded with poisoned arrows; whilst others, grinding their teeth in rage, foamed along more frantic than the wildest maniac. They all avoided each other; and, though surrounded by a multitude that no one could number, each wandered at random unheeding of the rest, as if alone on a desert where no foot had trodden.<sup>65</sup>

Punishment comes swiftly and irrevocably: the hearts of the

damned are set afire, and they flee from one another in mutual horror and distaste. Like Ambrosio's hideous death alone on the river bank, Vathek's descent into the infernal regions suggests an exceptionally drastic form of alienation. But, in one sense, Beckford's is the more perceptive image. For if the extermination of a single reprobate seems dreadful, the vituperative despair of this unholy throng carries still more lethal associations. These are the walking dead, oblivious to everything but their own pain, yet comprising a community of lost souls. It is a conventional theological representation of hell but also, in some elementary way, a tragic vision of social alienation.

Vathek is too glittering and artificial a novel either to take itself too seriously or to lend itself comfortably to an overly artful construction. Still, in portraying an alienated mass as well as an alienated hero, Beckford momentarily flirts with a pregnant idea, one which recurs in Bleak House within more rigorous structural contours. From one vantage point, the numberless poor souls who wander through the maze of Dickens's London, absorbed by their individual obsessions, are just as lost as any race of cursed sinners. As Beckford's multitude has forfeited the hope that unites it, body and soul, in a common humanity, so the self-occupied inmates of Bleak House have, by and large, severed the organic filaments that bind them to a wholesome commonweal through meaningful social relat-

ions. Ghosts or zombies, they drift aimlessly and incommunicatively through a dying world, one steadily disintegrating for the want of Spirit, fancy, love and a sense of duty. The vitalizing connective values that Dickens and Carlyle advocate are, by necessity, social and altruistic. Without them, the tissue of collective life gradually corrupts into dust. Without "Church-Clothes", Carlyle argues,

the SKIN would become a shrivelled pelt, or fast-rotting raw-hide; and Society itself a dead carcass,--deserving to be buried. Men were no longer Social, but Gregarious; which latter state also could not continue, but must gradually issue in universal selfish discord, hatred, savage isolation, and dispersion;--whereby, as we might continue to say, the very dust and dead body of Society would have evaporated and become abolished.<sup>66</sup>

If, as Robert A. Donovan proposes, the cryptic "connexions" between the characters in Bleak House connote an active human brotherhood, modern malaise does everything imaginable to disrupt such harmony and coherence.<sup>67</sup>

Miss Flite is perhaps a typical denizen of the nightmare world for, courtly and considerate though she is, her few fast friendships do not extend beyond the hypnotic circle of the Chancery court. (Significantly, the only person she feels a natural association with is Gridley, who shares her legal monomania, and whose pathetic death she attends in chapter 24.) The very names of the birds in her famed menagerie--to be set free on the "Day of Judgment"--allegorize her sad decline and further imply the erosion of social integrity:

"Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon, and Spinach. That's the whole collection," said the old man [Krook], "all<sup>68</sup> gooped up together, by my noble and learned brother."

The other "Lord Chancellor", the one in Lincoln's Inn Hall, epitomizes the dispiriting officialdom that instigates this monumental decay. And youth, hope, and beauty crushed into dust and ashes through sheepskin, plunder and jargon is a formula invariably true in the Chancery world. (Later, when Miss Flite adds two more birds to her collection which she calls "the Wards in Jarndyce"<sup>69</sup>--after Richard and Ada Clare --it may seem the final damning touch.) The list of names surely indicates the disparate useless elements into which the social fabric is decomposing, and J. Hillis Miller has shrewdly perceived that the action of the novel marks a figurative return to "primal slime".<sup>70</sup> We witness the wreckage of a civilization in Nemo's sordid chamber, "nearly black with soot, and grease, and dirt"<sup>71</sup>; in the Jellyby household, as jumbled and shabby as its thoughtless mistress; finally, in Krook's rag and bottle shop, where the dustheap of "gammon" and "spinach" accumulates ominously. It is a nightmare world indeed--a world of sickening putrefaction.

Among the ghosts that haunt the ruined house of England, none are more melancholy than those that walk the uppermost levels. Dickens's attitude toward the "Phantasm-Aristocracy" remains, for the most part, staunchly Carlylean, yet an unexpected sympathy to some extent palliates his caus-



tic critique of "Donothingness" and "Dandyism"--unexpected because Dickens customarily identified himself--emotionally, at any rate--with the poor and the mistreated. And his ambivalent Gothic imagery for once seems entirely appropriate to a class productive of such mixed feelings. The initial description of Chesney Wold, the Dedlock family manor, implies an eminence on its last legs, one crumbling into nothing even as Dickens writes:

The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's "place" has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet through, and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman's axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires, where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves.<sup>72</sup>

As Phiz's inky frontispiece to Bleak House (see Appendix) makes obvious, Chesney Wold is a tainted Gothic ruin at the centre of which sits languor and inevitable dissolution. Here is aristocratic pride and arrogance visibly melting away. It is a brilliantly incisive portrait of a "deadened



world" whose growth, as Dickens says, "is sometimes unhealthy for want of air".<sup>73</sup> Still, Dickens cannot help investing the scene with a certain solemn grandeur which may be a sign of his unresolved emotions. For, as a class, the nobility exhibits several admirable traits, though it has an alarming hollowness at its core.

We have seen what, in Carlyle's eyes, was the cardinal sin of the fashionable world: its refusal to work. Work, for Carlyle, had almost a magical significance, representing to his neo-Puritan mind a transcendent moral value as much as an experience. Work is blessed; more, it is divine, for in work only can man express his utmost being before God and impose some semblance of order upon the world. So up and work, Carlyle admonishes: "Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called Today; for the Night cometh, wherein no man can work."<sup>74</sup> Even a ditchdigger has his appointed task to perform alongside a lofty Captain of Industry, and it is no accident that Bleak House describes a wide range of professions, from Jo's crossing-sweeping to Trooper George's soldiering to Rouncewell's iron manufacture. The idle rich, however, in Carlyle's opinion, contribute exactly nothing to the commonweal, muffled as they are from the nobler verities of life. And Dickens could not but agree that such decadence, so grievously out of step with the bustle of London labour, rendered the upper classes a rather ghostly social anachron-

ism.

Chesney Wold, with its cushions, screens and chinoiserie, its simpering hangers-on and squealing, skeleton-throated "charmners", is another of the novel's rotting junkheaps, only "the general flavour of the Dedlock dust is quenched in delicate perfumes."<sup>75</sup> Dickens makes the most of this anomaly, hinting repeatedly that a death's head peers out from behind the jewels and powder, that the forced gaiety of Volumnia Dedlock and other members of the beau monde amounts to a danse macabre for a style becoming obsolete. The vacuousness of this woolly-headed world is perhaps most acerbically exemplified in Sir Leicester's debilitated cousin, for whom intelligible speech has grown too arduous to bother with, whose one notable comment on affairs of state is "Country's going--DAYVLE--steeple-chase pace."<sup>76</sup> Failure to communicate may be the principal Dedlock debility, even more bodeful than the baronet's ancestral gout. Harsh truths need not be mentioned in these venerable halls, unless they be defused and prettified beyond recognition. Sounding suspiciously like Carlyle growling at the "Dandiacal Body", Dickens travesties those ladies and gentlemen of fashion who have agreed to put a smooth glaze on the world, and to keep down all its realities. For whom everything must be languid and pretty. Who have found out the perpetual stoppage. Who are to rejoice at nothing, and be sorry for nothing. Who are not to be disturbed by ideas.<sup>77</sup>

The Dedlock tragedy must seem all the more devastating to its participants because it is a death blow dealt without

warning to a peculiarly insulated society. Yet even outside the charmed circle there are those, aristocratic in temperament if not in name, who feel quite self-satisfied to abjure their social responsibility. Harold Skimpole, who has given up his medical practice in order to embrace a life of unconfined egoism and parasitism, demonstrates plainly enough the dangers of dilettantism. And Turveydrop, reveling in the splendour of his precious Deportment, never so much as uncrossing his legs to help his harried family, is puffed up Dandyism incarnate. While Dickens may cynically enjoy the comic spectacle of these two (and pass his delight on to the reader), he has no illusions about them. In their lethargy, in their remoteness from the larger realities around them, they too can be reckoned among the ghosts of Bleak House.

There is a more traditional wraith affrighting the place in Lincolnshire with its nocturnal perambulations. The legend of the Ghost's Walk is perhaps not one of Dickens's happier inspirations, yet it has a notable thematic function, serving deftly to consolidate the numberless macabre motifs in the novel. As Mrs. Rouncewell tells it, with mingled pride and reverence, it is a tale of political intrigue and Romantic extravagance. In the days of the English Civil War, Sir Morbury Dedlock found himself ideologically at odds with his Lady who, it was whispered, had relations on the rebel side. When her brother was killed in

battle by her husband's near kinsman, she began passionately to hate the whole Dedlock clan, and took to laming the horses used in the King's service. On one such occasion, she was accidentally lamed herself and, as the old housekeeper says, "from that hour began to pine away".<sup>78</sup> Finally, expiring on the terrace where she had paced obsessively in her last months, this earlier Lady Dedlock hurled a ghastly imprecation at the Dedlock posterity:

"I will die here where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here, until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity, or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!'"...There and then she died. And from those days," says Mrs. Rouncewell, "the name has come down--The Ghost's Walk. If the tread is an echo, it is an echo that is only heard after dark, and is often unheard for a long while together. But it comes back, from time to time; and so sure as there is sickness or death in the family, it will be heard then."<sup>79</sup>

And indeed the step is heard at various strategic junctures in the novel, inexorably tapping out Honoria Dedlock's shame and ruin. Typically, Dickens will not guarantee the authenticity of his castle-spectre, preferring to maintain at least a perfunctory ambiguity; yet purely on a metaphorical level, the legitimacy of the family curse cannot be impugned.

Effectively portentous though it is, the Ghost's Walk myth manifests what is probably Dickens's worst fault as a symbolist--his tendency to overstate. If, as seems likely, he intended the echo as an oblique foreshadowing not only of personal calamity but also of societal doom, in some respects the execution falls short of the conception.

Overdramatized and overelaborated, the Ghost's Walk is a rather tired conceit, a banal variation on the spirit-who-will-not-rest familiar from The Monk and Otranto, that Dickens forces every which way to draw certain too specific parallels. (The over obviousness of his design is finally crowned by Mrs. Rouncewell's embarrassingly bald declaration that Lady Dedlock looks "as if the step on the Ghost's Walk had almost walked her down".)<sup>80</sup> The whole dubious adventure may appear--to a cynic anyhow--little more than a supernatural sop in an antique melodrama of fallen womanhood and forbidden love. Yet it shows pretty clearly the odd conjunction of formula sensationalism and high moral seriousness that sets the uncertain tone of Bleak House, and it may further indicate how inextricably Dickens's strengths and weaknesses are bound up together. For if, from one perspective, the Ghost's Walk suggests a warmed-over pastiche of various traditional Gothic contrivances (from Walpole's doom-saying Knight of the Gigantic Sabre to Lewis's Bleeding Nun), it is also the Victorian equivalent of Maule's curse --a proof that "the wrongdoing of one generation lives into the successive ones, and, divesting itself of every temporary advantage, becomes a pure and uncontrollable mischief."<sup>81</sup>

Lady Dedlock's expiation of her original sin through years of guilt and silent suffering betrays Dickens the bourgeois moralist at his least attractive. Still, the archaic plot has a quaint inevitability, and it is right that

Esther, at one point (ch. 36), should fancy herself to be the fulfillment of the ghostly prophecy. The original sin of the gentry as a class is not, however, strictly speaking, unchastity, but rather immobility ("dead-lock"). Allegorically speaking, it is this paralysis that the Ghost's Walk so painfully tramples down. And, of course, in still another sense, the Dedlock curse corresponds to that other family curse that abides and ravages from generation to generation--Chancery.

Turveydrop shows the ludicrous side of the aristocracy. He may have been consciously designed as a parodic image of the presumptuous, supercilious and often quite impossible Sir Leicester Dedlock. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, Sir Leicester also embodies the true nobility of the upper classes, the integrity which itself is passing away along with the pride and power. He is, as Dickens says, "an honourable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man".<sup>82</sup> His imperiousness coincides with, possibly complements, his unimpeachable honour, and Dickens, though he directs many satiric barbs at the baronet, refuses to laugh him to scorn. He married for love, and Dickens gives him his due for the one sterling act of his life--his immediate and unconditional forgiveness of his fugitive wife for her past indiscretion (ch. 56). In no way does Dickens ridicule Mrs. Rouncewell's unquestioning loyalty to Sir Leicester or Trooper George's decision to

attend him in his declining years (ch. 63). For, whatever his shortcomings, he is ever earnest and manly.

Nonetheless, the Ghost's Walk rides roughshod over Sir Leicester's authority, in part in payment for his hubris, in part as the figurative exponent of ineluctable historical forces. Quite evidently--and somewhat sadly from Dickens's point of view--the aristocracy is doomed by history, doomed to cede the reins of governance to a more forthright and industrious community. The baronet can no more arrest social progress than he can call a halt to the breathless sequence of circumstances which precipitate the Dedlock tragedy. His worst fears, that "'the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have--a--obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together!'"<sup>83</sup>--that his own prestige and influence have diminished--seem confirmed by events in the novel. He cannot prevent Rosa, his Lady's personal maid, from leaving service to marry the ironmaster's son (ch. 48); and all his money cannot buy seats in parliament for his men against the people's candidates (backed by Rouncewell) (ch. 40). Turveydrop is astute when he remarks ruefully that "a race of weavers" will succeed Deportment.<sup>84</sup> For in Dickens's view of class conflict, the ascendant middle-class inevitably wins every ideological skirmish; the nobility is too old and impotent to offer much resistance.

The unearthly shadow that falls across the ancest-



ral portraits and bric-a-brac at sunset in the drawing-room at Chesney Wold (ch. 40) suggests the twilight of feudal privilege. The night comes a little later as Sir Leicester, alone in the great halls of the cold house, slips into dotage and finally into oblivion:

The greater part of the house is shut up, and it is a showhouse no longer; yet Sir Leicester holds his shrunken state in the long drawing-room for all that, and reposes in his old place before my Lady's picture. Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumined only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. A little more, in truth, and it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester; and the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and relieved him.

Thus Chesney Wold. With so much of itself abandoned to darkness and vacancy; with so little change under the summer shining or the wintry lowering; so sombre and motionless always--no flag flying now by day, no rows of lights sparkling by night; with no family to come and go, no visitors to be the souls of pale cold shapes of rooms, no stir of life about it; --passion and pride, even to the stranger's eye, have died away from the place in Lincolnshire, and yielded it to dull repose.

It is the end of the aristocracy, a desolation that Dickens beholds respectfully, even tenderly, but with few regrets.

The Lady Dedlock plot, heavy-laden with Gothic imagery, dramatizes--in a circumscribed socio-historical context--that favourite axiom of Romantic fiction, sic transit gloria mundi. Yet Dickens will not dwell on the ruined castle like some wistful antiquarian. Forward-looking as befits a Victorian crusader, he gambles with indefinite hope for a better world on the active principles



of the enterprising middle-class. Although Skimpole and Turveydrop live quite complacently in almost total unemployment, it is clear that they are hybrids, petits bourgeois with aristocratic pretensions--anachronistic aberrations. To Dickens's mind, the real middle-class is defined mainly by its assiduity, an attribute of which, in theory at least, he thoroughly approved. Even so, like Carlyle, he held some forms of industry in greater esteem than others. In general, Dickens lauds most unreservedly those occupations which he judges most socially constructive, not those which tend to reinforce the system, but those which help to foster healthy social ties, which cohere but do not constrict. Sometimes, his idealization of middle-class diligence and initiative slides into gross sentimentality (see section 4); on the other hand, his scathing exposure of the frequent wrong-headedness of bourgeois zeal, as exemplified in time-serving philanthropy and pecuniary self-interest, could hardly be improved upon. Mr. Chadband, the evangelical minister whom Dickens constantly compares to an oil-press because of his gluttonous appetite and unctuous manner, shows the hopeless inadequacy and indeed the unwillingness of most organized religion, in Dickens's opinion, to advance anything more than cosmetic measures in the relief of human suffering; his exhortation of Jo with a neat little ditty--"O running stream of sparkling joy/To be a soaring human boy!"<sup>86</sup>--is a comic high point of Bleak House. Mrs.

Pardiggle too is devoted to her platitudes in the name of which she bullies the poor. She is, as Esther says, "an inexorable moral Policeman",<sup>87</sup> yet her ideas of morality are so smug and limited, her compassion so scarce that, labour as she might, her tirelessness only adds to the misery of the world. It is, for Dickens, a deplorable misdirection of energy.

It may seem curious that Dickens upbraids the middle-class--which at least busies itself at something--far more savagely than ever he thinks to rail at the sluggish nobility. But Dickens accords Sir Leicester the sort of sympathy one customarily extends to the terminally ill; his kind is passing from the earth while the Chadbands, Pardiggles and their subtly pernicious values increase with the rise of their class. The aristocracy no longer poses a significant threat to human brotherhood but the newly animated middle-class must be watched with trepidation, if also with cautious optimism.

The great promise that the middle-class holds out for the future lies in its eagerness to work doggedly to attain its goals. Its tragedy, in Dickens's view, is the inability of its members to work together. If we may deduce from Bleak House what for Dickens is the primary bourgeois sickness, it must surely be alienation, a condition appallingly rife in Dickens's London yet given some peculiarity among the middle-class by its fragmentation of the work

ethic. Mrs. Jellyby most elaborately demonstrates the cost in terms of human spirit of giving oneself entirely over to a cause or a philosophical creed. Her eyes, Esther observes, "had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off",<sup>88</sup> and indeed they can focus on nothing but her African project--the colonial settlements, native missions and coffee plantations which involve her in endless negotiations for the general welfare of the fairyland of Borrioboola-Gha. Mrs. Jellyby is so fixated on her "telescopic philanthropy" that she too has lost touch with what are, to Dickens's mind, the far more basic realities of life. Still, she remains as insensible of Jo's wretchedness as of the preparations for her daughter's wedding (ch. 30), and the risible contrast between her complicated schemes for foreign "improvement" and the shocking tumult of her own household points up the obvious moral of the parable, that one must attend to one's own garden first.

It may be that in so brilliantly burlesquing one kind of insularity, Dickens inadvertently espouses another which is not much better, which indeed has unpleasant xenophobic connotations. Neither should we ignore the far more blatant sexism dismayingly apparent in the Jellyby episodes, the tacit assumption, deeply ingrained in the Victorian consciousness, that a woman who shirks domestic duties--housework, child-rearing and so forth--automatically turns herself into a grotesque, a butt of ridicule. Mrs. Jellyby

is such a deep-dyed grotesque that she almost--though not quite--distracts our attention from these specifically modern qualms (which, however, found at least one Victorian spokesman in John Stuart Mill).<sup>89</sup> Yet we can hardly forget Dickens's prejudice when he assigns her a pinched confederate, a Miss Wisk, who regularly and rather stupidly rants about "the emancipation of Woman from the thralldom of her Tyrant, Man";<sup>90</sup> or when the very nature of the novel's symbolism, much of which hinges on references to house-cleaning or, conversely, house-dirtying, conspires to strip the slatternly Mrs. Jellyby of any shred of dignity her indefatigable if misguided public spirit might lend her.

As a housekeeper, Mrs. Jellyby suffers gravely in comparison with stately Mrs. Rouncewell or neat-as-a-pin Esther, yet her "unwomanliness", however fraudulently conceived, represents just one element in a complex creation. It is unfortunate, though perhaps inevitable, that Dickens should choose to counter her stridency with conventional icons of soft femininity--efficient matrons and pliant madonnas--as if womanly docility were a touchstone of moral righteousness. But it would be unfair to hang an anti-feminist label on the material and neglect its larger reverberations. From the tarnished brass plate on the door to the ashes in the grate to the waste paper on the Borrioboolan question strewn everywhere, Mrs. Jellyby's household bears witness in every detail to the ineptitude of the system.

She too is a ghost walking among ruins but, unlike the Dedlock phantom, she is a sharply contemporary figure whose creepily unvarying mannerisms, as Robert Garis notes,<sup>91</sup> suggest the inhuman, mechanical routine of English society. She is, as Garis says, a completely flat character, every nuance of her speech, dress and mien being entirely consistent, predictable and reducible to as rigid a formula as Mrs. Micawber's, "I never will desert Mr. Micawber."<sup>92</sup> Mrs. Jellyby's singular obsession, however, consumes her personality in a manner more frightening than comic, her philanthropic monomania indicating something like a Jonsonian imbalance of humours--though, of course, like the other ruling passions in Bleak House, hers is essentially a social humour with a far more devious basis than a mere superfluity of bile.

The abstracted air that Dickens stresses as Mrs. Jellyby's chief characteristic is exactly apt, for she has abstracted herself from the real world of consequential activity and communal obligations. She exists a woman apart in her own tightly ringed world, and perhaps she never thinks to collaborate with her public-minded fellows, Mrs. Pardiggle, Miss Wisk and the rest, because they too occupy their own self-absorbed spheres, which cannot touch, even to collide. Mrs. Jellyby has no dimensions beyond her Borrioboolan one; she and her colleagues show none of the creativity and spontaneity which Dickens felt necessary to sustain the richness of human life. Accordingly, they are rendered

ideological ghosts, who have sold their souls to the system, who thus labour under the double affliction of barrenness and isolation. The incredible inventory of domestic flotsam that spills out of Mrs. Jellyby's closets when they are opened--

bits of mouldy pie, sour bottles, Mrs. Jellyby's caps, letters, tea, forks, odd boots and shoes of children, firewood, wafers, saucepan-lids, damp sugar in odds and ends of paper bags, footstools, blacklead brushes, bread, Mrs. Jellyby's bonnets, books with butter sticking to the binding, guttered candle-ends put out by being turned upside down in broken candlesticks, nutshells, heads and tails of shrimps, dinner-mats, gloves, coffee-grounds, umbrellas<sup>93</sup>

--once again attests to the muddled degradation to be expected under the rule of egoism and without connective social tissue.<sup>94</sup> This pointedly middle-class trash seems the perfect objective correlative of bourgeois despair.

Mrs. Jellyby will appear, to most readers, too lively ever to look spectral; if she is flat, she presents a marvelous illusion of roundness nonetheless. It may be that Dickens was inclined to be indulgent with Mrs. Jellyby because, in spite of herself, she adds somewhat to the colour of English life; or it may be just that his creative exuberance, as before noted, led him to ambiguities which could not have been fully intended. In any case, it should be reasonably clear that Mrs. Jellyby, who at least pays lip service to altruism, is not the prime bourgeois villain in Bleak House. Of all the numberless grotesques that inhabit this crowded novel, none are more inhuman or more repugnant

to contemplate than the Smallweeds, that dreadful family of moneylenders whose fanatical dedication to the principles of Mammonism has shrivelled them into peevish monkeys. If some genial humour manages to creep into Dickens's delineation of Mrs. Jellyby, no such leavening softens the Smallweeds. For Dickens's abhorrence of this class of character is inveterate and unqualified.

Not only monkeys, but likewise bears, pigs, parrots, magpies, grubs and goblins lend their frightful features to the collective deportment of the Smallweeds. In employing bestial imagery to connote moral degeneration, Dickens reverts to an ancient literary stratagem, one which, however, gathers a special satirical force within the Victorian social framework. Perhaps the most horrid example of such dispiriting regression concerns great-grandfather Smallweed who, before his untimely sacrifice at the altar of "Compound Interest", was a "horny-skinned, two-legged, money-getting species of spider, who spun webs to catch unwary flies, and retired into holes until they were entrapped".<sup>95</sup> Yet succeeding generations carry on the verminous tradition. Cackling Grandfather Smallweed and his two dwarfish grandchildren, Bart and Judy, freely commit their lives (such as they are) to the ensnarement and engorgement of such negligent debtors as George Rouncewell; or else they exert themselves in groping among the papers of a deceased relative (appropriately, Mr. Krook) for some choice legal morsel convertible

into cash. While Mrs. Jellyby's blithe indifference to her husband, sons and daughters epitomizes the familial disjunction which, in Dickens's view, results in general chaos, the Smallweeds, united in a common spirit of cupidity, seem a ghoulish travesty of familial solidarity. Yet, although they converge upon their victims as a single battery, it is perfectly plain that they loathe one another beyond words.

If the Smallweeds are not outright utilitarians, they nevertheless at all times align themselves to the world of fact--an orientation imperative in the uncompromising pursuit of Mammon. Again, the humour that governs them poisons every aspect of their existence. They live in a grim, bricked-in house, bare of ornament and severe of furnishings. Being of an imperturbably "practical character", as Dickens remarks wryly, they have "discarded all amusements, discountenanced all story-books, fairy tales, fictions, and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever".<sup>96</sup> The result is that Bart and Judy bear the mark of preternatural age; neither having the least experience in childish games or flights of fancy, they conduct themselves as wizened men and women or, more precisely, as abominable crossbreeds of youth and age--"fossil imps". Their denial of innocence is perhaps the central horror of Bleak House, because it is a denial of imagination and, ultimately, a denial of humanity. Like the Gradgrinds later, the Smallweeds utterly capitulate to the ruthless mechanisms of "system", yet the pecuniary



brood is far worse off since its motives are so thoroughly selfish. In its consecration to the sacred principles of gain, the house of Smallweed locks out the greater world of benevolence and beauty, locks itself into narrow, perfidious patterns of behaviour which assure its eventual decay.

Grandmother Smallweed has already lapsed into comatose senility (though she sparks to life briefly whenever money is mentioned). And Grandfather Smallweed, when he is riled, requires the utmost vigilance on the part of the attentive Judy to keep from subsiding into a sordid pile of rags--a marvel that Dickens records again and again to intensifying comic effect:

As the excellent old gentleman's nails are long and leaden, and his hands lean and veinous, and his eyes green and watery; and, over and above this, as he continues, while he claws, to slide down in his chair and to collapse into a shapeless bundle; he becomes such a ghastly spectacle, even in the accustomed eyes of Judy, that that young virgin pounces at him with something more than the ardour of affection, and so shakes him up, and pats and pokes him in divers parts of his body, but particularly in that part which the science of self-defence would call his wind, that in his grievous distress he utters enforced sounds like a paviour's rammer.<sup>97</sup>

It is as if such brutality were the final expedient to awaken the soul in flesh which otherwise is so much dust.

Shored up by such insistently macabre imagery, variously exercised, Dickens's moral and psychological analysis of the class structure of Victorian England is profoundly perceptive, even if one feels--as one must--that it is based more on intuition than empirical evidence. Certainly,

Dickens could see through the Jellyby mission quite as clearly as he saw through Chesney Wold. He understood how apathy, self-interest or sheer ignorance could lead to the abuse and exploitation of the lower classes--crimes without malice perhaps, but crimes nonetheless. Yet, however much Dickens scorned the oppressor and wept for the oppressed, it is evident that he felt far easier among the former group than the latter. The poor in Bleak House are an inarticulate, fearfully inscrutable mass; they recede, for the most part, before the more sharply differentiated middle-class, yet they remain a seething, troubling presence in the background. It is probably fair to say that, though Dickens knew why Tom-all-Alone's was, he did not really know what it was. He recognized, of course, that the reeking houses that come crashing down around Nemo and Jo were significant not only of the crying need for prudent slum renovation but also, figuratively, of the menacing rootlessness of the mob. Yet, infallible as his perceptions about the plight of the London poor may appear, it is hard to escape the impression that Dickens stood on the outside looking in. Mayhew, in the course of his research for London Labour and the London Poor (1851), found it necessary to live with the lower classes in order to document their attitudes and behaviour. Dickens, however, would only visit the slums under police protection.<sup>98</sup> While one can hardly blame him for his apprehension, it may suggest a certain detachment and suspicion

which, indeed, infuse the symbolism around Tom-all-Alone's to an alarming degree. In this context, Dickens's choice of Gothic imagery seems condescending, even insulting. We have already noted his characterization of the wretched as an indistinguishable multitude of "imprisoned demons". Even more insensitive, in a way, is the rather revolting analogy made with lice: "As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in."<sup>99</sup> Dickens, it seems, could work up much more sympathy for the poor in the abstract than in the flesh.

His ambivalence--which may be expressed as the war between bourgeois gentility and a legendary goodwill towards mankind--asserts itself most conspicuously in another somewhat presumptuous analogy: "The blinded oxen, over-goaded, over-driven, never guided, run into wrong places and are beaten out; and plunge, red-eyed and foaming, at stone walls; and often sorely hurt the innocent, and often sorely hurt themselves. Very like Jo and his order; very, very like!"<sup>100</sup> Here, compassion for the downtrodden competes with fear of the mob instinct (compounded by the primal middle-class fear of revolution), yet neither side is brought into very clear focus in Bleak House. In general, Dickens inclines either to ennoble the poor artificially, or else

to treat them as ruffians, physically abhorrent, morally reprobate and dangerously unbridled. The brickmakers at St. Albans, though perfunctorily developed as characters, palpably demonstrate his uncertainty in dealing with this class: the men, without exception, are taciturn, ill-natured brutes, the women long-suffering, maternal and of extraordinarily delicate sensibilities. Needless to say, neither stereotype is especially credible, and their conjunction seems inappropriately melodramatic. The Neckett family too is cursorily drawn, appearing just a sentimental blur most of the time. Even Jo, far and away the most complex and convincing exponent of the proletariat in the novel--emotionally and spiritually stunted, trusting to animal cunning and yet, in his honesty and dedication to his menial work, capable of better things--comes across occasionally as glossily romanticized. It is very much as Esther says: there is an "iron barrier"<sup>101</sup> between these people and the sort of middle-class humanism that Dickens professed. For, as Anne Humpherys points out, the generalizations on which he founds his view of the poor tend, in some respects, inadvertently to dehumanize them.<sup>102</sup>

There is another class of characters in Bleak House, one bound less by status or a prevalent set of values than by what may be termed its curious and horrific non-existence. Seated at table with Sir Leicester Dedlock, carping at the disgraceful state of parliament in the current sess-

ion, is my Lord Boodle, a force to be reckoned with in government,

of considerable reputation with his party, who has known what office is, and who tells Sir Leicester Dedlock with much gravity, after dinner, that he really does not see to what the present age is tending. A debate is not what a debate used to be; the House is not what the House used to be; even a Cabinet is not what it formerly was. He perceives with astonishment, that supposing the present Government to be overthrown, the limited choice of the Crown, in the formation of a new Ministry, would lie between Lord Coodle and Sir Thomas Doodle--supposing it to be impossible for the Duke of Foodle to act with Goodle, which may be assumed to be the case in consequence of the breach arising out of that affair with Hoodle. Then, giving the Home Department and the Leadership of the House of Commons to Joodle, the Exchequer to Koodle, the Colonies to Loodle, and the Foreign Office to Moodle, what are you to do with Noodle? You can't offer him the Presidency of the Council; that is reserved for Poodle. You can't put him in the Woods and Forests; that is hardly good enough for Quoodle. What follows? That the country is shipwrecked, lost, and gone to pieces (as is made manifest to the patriotism of Sir Leicester Dedlock), because you can't provide for Noodle!<sup>103</sup>

This dance down the alphabet, signifying the political infighting routinely conducted almost as an abstract exercise in the Houses of Parliament, suggests with wonderful satirical acumen the wholly incredible insulation of the English power clique from pressing problems in the real world. In this, it is very much like Chancery, which also inhabits a thick little world unto itself, which operates ritualistically within serpentine, abstruse principles. But parliament represented for Dickens a specific and peculiarly inviting target: that these quarrelsome nothings ostensibly speak for the people, and worse, enact legis-

lation by which society is supposed to be intelligently structured, seemed a bad jest. Government, intended to hold things together, succeeds, through indifference, impotence and over-systemization, only in breaking them apart. The consequence is that the country is indeed shipwrecked, lost, and gone to pieces, but not for the reasons indicated.

It is, of course, half the satirical point that Lord Boodle and his retinue (and likewise the opposing faction of Buffy, Cuffy, Duffy, clear through to Puffy) can hardly be believed in as characters. We never for a minute presume that their deeds, minimal as they are, have any bearing on the plot, or that these shadowy MPs are sufficiently corporeal to interact on any level with the Dedlocks or anyone else. Flatter even than the Smallweeds, they exist purely on paper, without a discrete or vital life in our imagination. Like Blaze and Sparkle the jewellers, Sheen and Gloss the mercers and Mr. Sladdery the librarian --dandiacal toadies all--their single attribute is their name and whatever it connotes. In limning figures so pointedly negligible, Dickens pursues a "rhetorical" rather than a "dramatic" mode of characterization. Partly, this is a matter of convenience. He can, in a few economical paragraphs, dispose of some wayward sectors of society which otherwise cannot be worked into the plot. Yet the paltriness of Dickens's treatment makes its own comment on its prestigious and powerful subjects. The interminable tally

of political eminence that Dickens arranges with such amusing irony evidences, like Miss Flite's birds and Mrs. Jellyby's closets, the meaningless refuse of English civilization, only here it is human refuse that has piled up--living dust. The Boodles and Buffys, commanding the reins of authority, are commensurately the biggest nonentities in the novel, ghosts without, however, even the appearance of substance.

Dickens's parliamentary caricature (which again strikes chords of Carlylean ire) divulges a vacuum, a chilling inanity at the top. Government, however, remains essentially passive in its casual corruption, its sins being those of omission more than commission. But somewhere near the centre of the system, embodying its worst features with dangerously deceptive propriety, are agents of chaos who actively engage to dismember the social organism, to loosen and finally cut the bonds of sympathy and understanding that keep the communal spirit alive. The lawyers carry a heavy symbolic load in Bleak House, epitomizing not only the lamentable (and ironic) paucity of justice to be had from Victorian judicial institutions but also the cruel discord built into the entire system--and vital for its sustenance. "The one great principle of the English law," Dickens comments dryly,

is, to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light it becomes a coherent scheme, and not



the monstrous maze the laity are apt to think it. Let them but once clearly perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself at their expense, and surely they will cease to grumble.<sup>104</sup>

Q.D. Leavis observes that the bar makes a tidy business for itself by exploiting man's "litigating" instinct--by setting everyone at odds with everyone else.<sup>105</sup> The tenacity with which attorneys such as Tulkinghorn, Conversation Kenge, and the cadaverous Vholes foment this universal enmity (which Ada describes as our all "ruining one another, without knowing how or why"),<sup>106</sup> since it is basically so self-interested, stands as a vicious parody of the hard work and discipline that both Dickens and Carlyle rated so highly. Vholes's solemn talk of professional "duty", "even if it sows dissension in families",<sup>107</sup> indeed would appear to indicate that the parody is fully conscious.

Because it turns the work ethic so thoroughly on its ear, law represents for Dickens a vocation entirely without honour. Its premeditated antagonisms fix it even lower than usury in Dickens's opinion (though an impeccable mask of respectability partially disguises the fact), and of course Richard Carstone's careless rejection of medicine and the military as careers, and his increasing fascination with the madness of Chancery, show a steep moral decline that may be charted almost point by point. Vholes, his solicitor, abets him as far as possible in the pursuit of his inheritance, tactfully, almost imperceptibly undermining his friendship with his cousin--and rival litigant--John Jarndyce in



the process, yet the professional relationship of attorney and client scarcely operates to the advantage of the petitioning party. For as Esther remarks, in an urban, middle-class way, Vholes has "something of the Vampire in him".<sup>108</sup> Steadily, stealthily, he drains his prey first of loyalty, next of spirit and enthusiasm, last of life itself. Dickens characteristically plays to the hilt Vholes's legal variety of bloodsucking, and all the macabre associations that crowd around him as one of the undead. Esther at another time recalls the awful image of Vholes, "black-gloved and buttoned up", driving off into the night with Richard in a gig drawn by a "gaunt pale horse"<sup>109</sup>--virtually an icon of the triumph of death. And Vholes's office, begrimed by must and dust, grease, soot and tatters of inky parchment, is the suitable natural habitat for such a ghoul. (His desk, Dickens notes, echoes "as hollow as a coffin" when rapped, or else sounds "as if ashes were falling on ashes, and dust on dust".)<sup>110</sup> Finally, and most tellingly, those authorities who would defend the lawyer and his unnatural race, who would concoct a rationale to secure a savage system, couch their argument in concretely horrid terms: "As though, Mr. Vholes and his relations being minor cannibal chiefs, and it being proposed to abolish cannibalism, indignant champions were to put the case thus: Make man-eating unlawful, and you starve the Vholeses!"<sup>111</sup> Not surprisingly, when Jarndyce and Jarndyce has at last wound down, when the

estate has evaporated, totally consumed in costs--when Richard's absolute ruin is assured--Vholes gives "one gasp as if he had swallowed the last morsel of his client",<sup>112</sup> and glides away.

Man-eating was, perhaps, the most drastic moral perversion that Dickens could think of to convey the corrupt heart of the system, perpetually anti-human and anti-life. If the ideal society--as opposed to the perfectly regulated system--is for Dickens premised upon the brotherhood of man, then the lawyers, adhering to quite another conception of association, may be reckoned a purely anti-social force. Because the rancour they incite is so willfully orchestrated and because (unlike the fairly niggling Smallweeds) the power they wield--and crave--is so tremendous, they pose the most ominous threat to a humane society, eating away at it from the inside, as Dickens says, "like maggots in nuts".<sup>113</sup> Probably Dickens had no private vendetta against lawyers;<sup>114</sup> rather, he perceived the litigious temper as a generalized (and perilous) social phenomenon, of which the advocate is the apt symbol. Tulkinghorn, the Dedlock solicitor, is the perfection of the type, manipulating his victims and grinding them down with truly aristocratic elegance. Critics have sometimes quibbled that his persecution of Lady Dedlock and dogged tracking down of her secret past are dimly motivated, but this clearly misses the point. Tulkinghorn behaves as he does because he must. As a servant of the

system, he is duty bound to uproot and destroy, to find out secrets and use them to consolidate his dominion. Black-clothed, black-stockinged, he mutely gathers confidences, giving nothing, taking all, like a consuming black void.

Tulkinghorn's quite terrifying reticence is exactly the opposite of the neighbourly communication Dickens deemed needful to promote a fertile, inspirited social environment. Accordingly, like nearly every other alienated soul in Bleak House, he lives and breathes in an atmosphere choking with dust, "the universal article into which his papers and himself, and all his clients, and all things of earth, animate and inanimate, are resolving".<sup>115</sup> Such an explicit articulation of what I would call the "Gothic decay" theme lends credence to J. Hillis Miller's idea that the novel traces a gradual, inescapable reflux to "homogeneity".<sup>116</sup> That Dickens wittingly devised a formal iconography of this sort, in the Tulkinghorn episodes but also more generally, is most certain from the variously sportive and sardonic accounts of the mincing figure that sprawls across the painted ceiling of the lawyer's chambers, a Roman demigod portentously named "Allegory". Though by and large the idly pointing apparition seems a comic deity, a whimsical counterbalance to Tulkinghorn's sobriety, when the solicitor is murdered (in a rather obscure revenge plot perpetrated by the amusingly tigerish Hortense), the Roman points with grave import at the tell-tale pool of blood, as if to say, "Look here at

what remains of pride and power!" Later, Tulkinghorn's mortal dust is consigned to its final resting place in a freezing spectacle that ranks with the most impressive scenes in Dickens:

A great crowd assembles in Lincoln's Inn Fields on the day of the funeral. Sir Leicester Dedlock attends the ceremony in person; strictly speaking, there are only three other human followers, that is to say, Lord Doodle, William Buffy, and the debilitated cousin (thrown in as a make-weight), but the amount of inconsolable carriages is immense. The Peerage contributes more four-wheeled affliction than has ever been seen in that neighbourhood. Such is the assemblage of armorial bearings on coach panels, that the Heralds' College might be supposed to have lost its father and mother at a blow. The Duke of Foodle sends a splendid pile of dust and ashes, with silver wheel-boxes, patent axles, all the last improvements, and three bereaved worms, ~~six~~<sup>117</sup> feet high, holding on behind, in a bunch of woe.

In this novel of unexpected analogues, Tulkinghorn's funeral, for all its pomp, is fully as anonymous as Nemo's at the other end of the social scale. The worms involved in each case may be of somewhat different species, but morally they crawl out of the same rotten woodwork. And, in the widest allegorical context, the dust and ashes buried with such empty pageantry near Lincoln's Inn Fields surely signify the last meaningless rites of the whole depleted system.

Nonetheless, Conversation Kenge continues eloquently to uphold the great principles of Chancery at every opportunity, all the while "gently moving his right hand as if it were a silver trowel, with which to spread the cement of his words on the structure of the system, and consolidate it for a thousand ages".<sup>118</sup> Clearly, desperate measures

are indicated if society is to be renewed, even if, as Jarndyce's hyperbolic friend Boythorn says, it takes "ten thousand hundred-weight of gunpowder"<sup>119</sup> to finish the job. And, indeed, a detonation on this order is very nearly what happens.

Krook's spontaneous combustion, exactly halfway through the novel (in the thirty-second chapter or the tenth number of the original twenty part serialization), is the central symbolic event to which all the multifarious Gothic imagery tends and from which it recedes. In figurative terms, the colossal dustheap that begins to amass from page one, in the streets, in the slums, in the lawyers' offices, in parliament, in the homes of do-gooders and moneylenders --wherever selfishness and indolence connive to subvert basic human integrity--finally explodes into a furious apocalyptic blaze which utterly destroys but also, in some sense, cleanses. Dickens insists that the conflagration is self-generated--spontaneous--because for him it was a truism that corruption compels its own downfall sooner or later. Still, we may wonder why he chose to employ a dubious bit of pseudo-science (which even at the time had been mostly discredited) as the cornerstone of an elaborate symbolic superstructure. George Lewes among others objected, not unreasonably, to the incorporation of such fantastic material into a work of otherwise uncompromising fidelity to truth. And, indeed, unlike the mainly metaphorical Ghost's Walk,

Krook's death cannot properly be accounted for, even under the generous provisions of that versatile Dickensian formula, "the romantic side of familiar things". It is the one wholly implausible, totally impossible incident in Bleak House, the one florid extravagance--and Dickens believed in it implicitly.

Why he was so convinced of the scientific basis for spontaneous combustion it is difficult to say. Perhaps, given the deliciously horrible nature of the supposed phenomenon, he was more than willing to be persuaded. In any case, he answered would-be sceptics with unusual vehemence. There is, in truth, an element of embarrassment in the confidence with which Dickens cites precedents (such as "the Italian case of the Countess Cornelia Baudi as set forth in detail by one Bianchini, prebendary of Verona, who wrote a scholarly work or so, and was occasionally heard of in his time as having gleams of reason in him")<sup>120</sup> or rebukes intransigent men of learning (who, denying the evidence of their senses, "hold with indignation that the deceased had no business to die in the alleged manner").<sup>121</sup> Both in the text (ch. 33) and in a prefatory note directed quite pointedly at "Mr. Lewes", Dickens claims an extensive background in the medical literature on the subject, which apparently settles the issue "beyond all rational doubt".<sup>122</sup> It does not really signify that, as Trevor Blount points out, Dickens can quote no authority more modern than the early eighteenth-

century.<sup>123</sup> Today, only the very literal-minded would argue that the want of a firm empirical foundation spoils the brilliant effect of the episode to any significant degree. But clearly strict veracity mattered very much to Dickens. He, at least, accepted the superannuated testimony of "distinguished medical professors" as gospel, even if others less credulous could not, and he needed this solid nugget of "fact" around which to wrap his layers of symbolism. In a similar manner, in the same preface, Dickens felt constrained to vindicate his Chancery satire--which we have far less reason to question--from charges of exaggeration and distortion. He was afraid, of course, that without these twin underpinnings of truth, his moral allegory would topple into the glittery rubble of idle romance.

Perhaps ironically, such romance was most likely where Dickens first learned of this wonder. The pulpy legacy of The Terrific Register we have already noted. And, doubtless because it offered at once the pleasures of both gore and spectacle, spontaneous combustion found some favour with Gothic novelists as well. Charles Brockden Brown's American Gothic Wieland (1798) is only the best-known of numerous terror romances featuring this particular sensation along with the more familiar claptrap of ghosts and ancient curses. Jacob Faithful (1834), a sea-faring tale by Dickens's erstwhile literary acquaintance Captain Frederick Marryat, also contains a vivid account of the

popular medical myth.<sup>124</sup> Other somewhat more prestigious antecedents, which Dickens may or may not have been aware of, include Thomas De Quincey's Confessions of an English Opium Eater (1821), Melville's Redburn (1849) and, surprisingly, Gogol's Dead Souls (1842). Few of these authors cared much about scrupulous documentation and, truthfully, neither did Dickens when, in a playful mood, he described Scrooge, engulfed in the "blaze of ruddy light" that presages the coming of the second spirit, as being exceedingly fearful that "he might be at that very moment an interesting case of spontaneous combustion, without having the consolation of knowing it."<sup>125</sup> That, however, was a good joke. Krook's spontaneous combustion, though not without a certain gallows humour, is a deadly serious symbolic event. Like any competent sensation novelist, Dickens uses his freakish catastrophe as a hook to lure the thrill-hungry reader. Excitement is the premier attraction for the audience and, one imagines, also for the author. But once the reader has risen to the bait, once his attention has been wholly concentrated by the crescendo of paralyzing suspense, Dickens springs a stern moral prophecy which rather gains impact than not from culminating such a concerted assault on one's emotions. The lurid and the didactic undoubtedly make strange bedfellows, yet Krook's incineration reconciles them as closely as seems possible.

Plainly, at least for his own peace of mind, Dickens



needed some semblance of authenticity to warrant his exploitation of such licentious melodrama, even for so noble a purpose. Fortunately for him, a far more eminent, not to say respectable, prototype of incendiary violence presented itself than that supplied by Gothic romance. Carlyle too was drawn to the iconography of combustion, probably, as before suggested, under the secondary influence of Calvinism. It was, of course, Carlyle who lit the apocalyptic flame in Dickens. As Michael Goldberg remarks, the fire that rages across Europe in Carlyle's revelational version of the French Revolution (1837) and that consumes the "worn-out rags" of the world in Latter-Day Pamphlets bears more than a passing likeness to the funeral pyre in Krook's rag and bottle shop, where the dissolute ancien régime of Chancery meets so unholy an end.<sup>126</sup> Professor Teufelsdröckh's impetuous prediction of fiery cataclysm in Sartor Resartus perhaps most obviously prefigures the smouldering symbolic ruin of Bleak House:

"The world," says he, "as it needs must, is under a process of devastation and waste, which, whether by silent assiduous corrosion, or open quicker combustion, as the case chances, will effectually enough annihilate the past Forms of Society; replace them with what it may. For the present, it is contemplated that when man's whole Spiritual Interests are once divested, these innumerable stript-off Garments shall mostly be burnt; but the sounder Rags among them be quilted together into one huge Irish watch-coat for the defence of the Body only!"<sup>127</sup>

Invariably in Carlyle a Phoenix rises from the world's ashes; a new society, invigorated by faith and activity,

slowly, painfully composes itself in some indeterminate future. In a homelier, less definitive way, Krook's spontaneous combustion emblemizes essentially the same moral. Yet Dickens's account, its smoking Carlylean rhetoric and blood-and-thunder sensationalism joining forces to such bold effect, is by long odds the more hair-raising of the two.

Hair-raising and, more importantly, consciousness-raising may be judged the contiguous aims of this tumultuous episode; on either count, it is masterfully constructed. Already something indefinably evil infects the close atmosphere of Krook's warehouse in our first visit to that establishment (ch. 5). The astounding assemblage of useless commodities displayed in the shop window, and itemized by Esther with some puzzlement, is far from reassuring:

In one part of the window was a picture of a red paper mill, at which a cart was unloading a quantity of sacks of old rags. In another, was the inscription, BONES BOUGHT. In another, KITCHEN-STUFF BOUGHT. In another, OLD IRON BOUGHT. In another, WASTE PAPER BOUGHT. In another, LADIES' AND GENTLEMEN'S WARD-ROBES BOUGHT. Everything seemed to be bought, and nothing to be sold there. In all parts of the window were quantities of dirty bottles: blacking bottles, medicine bottles, ginger-beer and soda-water bottles, pickle bottles, wine bottles, ink bottles: I am reminded by mentioning the latter, that the shop had, in several little particulars, the air of being in a legal neighbourhood, and of being, as it were, a dirty hanger-on and disowned relation of the law. There were a great many ink bottles. There was a little tottering bench of shabby old volumes, outside the door, labelled "Law Books, all at 9d".... There were several second-hand bags, blue and red, hanging up. A little way within the shop-door, lay heaps of old crackled parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog's-eared law-papers. I could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds huddled together as old iron, had

once belonged to doors of rooms or strong chests in lawyers' offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counsellors' bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada and me while we all stood looking in, that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked away very clean, were<sup>128</sup> the bones of clients, to make the picture complete.

Here, in one densely cluttered yet compactly allegorical room, is the collected dust of English civilization circa 1852. Here are Mrs. Jellyby's dissipated kitchen-stuffs, Vholes's dirty parchments, Chancery's blue bags and Nemo's bones tossed together in an indiscriminate heap. Here also is Carlyle's "huge Rag-fair" of the world, crawling with "beetles and spiders",<sup>129</sup> and signally fit for burning.

The predominantly legal character of Krook's eccentric warehouse (which, incidentally, also maintains a stockpile of ladies' hair in great bags--a particularly chilling touch) is openly, indeed nakedly, symbolic. In nearly every detail, from the scores of ink bottles to the set of unequal scales, it is apparent that Krook's shop "stands in" for Chancery as Chancery can be said to "stand in" for the system as a whole. Krook himself, though illiterate, has no trouble unravelling the allegory. As he explains it--perhaps too readily--to Richard, his shop has earned the ignoble name of Chancery, and he that of the shadow Lord Chancellor, chiefly because both agencies are wont to gather dust voraciously:

"You see I have so many things here," he resumed,

holding up the lantern, "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 bear to part with anything I once lay hold of (or so my neighbours think, but what do they know?) 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. I don't mind. I go to see my noble and learned brother pretty well every day, when he sits in the Inn. He don't notice me, but I notice him. There's no great odds betwixt us. We both grub on in a muddle."<sup>130</sup>

It is pithy passages like this that have prompted critics to write learned articles on Dickens and the doppelgänger. Krook's household, however, doubles not only for Chancery, but likewise for the myriad other muddled households in the novel, of which it is the paradigm. There is also, perhaps, something vaguely Platonic about this elaborate hierarchy of societal forms, though one supposes that nothing could have been further from Dickens's mind.

The havoc that he would wreak on the system therefore remains vicarious. Chancery is blown up, as it were, by deputy. In part, this seems an aesthetic decision of a fairly mundane sort: Dickens, who clung to shreds of factual truth almost as a form of emotional security, could not, in all good conscience, picture the flaming finish of Lincoln's Inn Hall without compromising his own--admittedly qualified--notions of realism. Yet, that he settled on Krook as the sole sacrificial scapegoat for the injustice he perceived

all around him further demonstrates a moral and political uncertainty, even to some degree a timidity, that should not be ignored. He could, with few qualms, indeed with evident satisfaction, imagine the fire that demolished parliament in 1834, how the stove, "overgorged" with the "worm-eaten" notched sticks that formerly were used as accounting tallies, "set fire to the panelling; the panelling set fire to the House of Lords; the House of Lords set fire to the House of Commons; the two houses were reduced to ashes." He could even extrapolate a moral from the disaster: "I think we may reasonably observe...that all obstinate adherence to rubbish which time has long outlived, is certain to have in the soul of it more or less that is pernicious and destructive; more or less that will some day set fire to something or other; more or less, which, freely given to the winds would have been harmless, which persistently retained, is ruinous."<sup>131</sup> But it is one thing to expound--and to a select audience<sup>132</sup>--on an historical event which can be taken as an act of God. It is quite another to set off dynamite yourself, even under the guise of fiction. Dickens was no anarchist; as angrily as he stormed against iniquity, he had no wish to engage in tangibly subversive activity which might alienate his vast readership. Assuredly, he desired to stir his audience, to work it up to a froth of indignation if need be, but never to affront it by challenging its most basic and heartfelt assumptions about the per-

petuity of Victorian institutions. He himself had rather grave reservations about the wisdom of violence as an expedient for social change, as we will shortly see, yet he could justifiably represent such violence on a figurative level, under the umbrella of poetic license. So Krook's death, a kind of ersatz apocalypse, a warning more than a fulfillment, must have seemed to him a very artful subterfuge.

I am not underrating the remarkable aptness of Dickens's symbolism, or the irresistible force with which his rhetoric comes crashing down on our heads. I merely call attention to an ethical dilemma that Dickens faced, that, given the general temper of his time, it was inevitable he should face, and that he resolved perhaps not to everyone's complete satisfaction. But such opacities apart, the episode shows a command of melodramatic technique almost without parallel, even in the frenetic annals of sensation literature. Long before the explosion, indeed by the second number, Dickens has begun to apprise us of its eventuality. In retrospect, his initial, superlatively grotesque characterization of Krook becomes obviously prognosticative: "He was short, cadaverous, and withered; with his head sunk sideways between his shoulders, and the breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth, as if he were on fire within."<sup>133</sup> Numerous uneasy inklings of this sort accrue, almost imperceptibly building up suspense. At another time, Krook is

likened to "a bundle of old clothes, with a spirituous heat smouldering in it".<sup>134</sup> And Dickens never permits us to forget that the rag and bottle man (who, it appears, is literally a rag and bottle man) stays "continually in liquor"--the prerequisite for the biochemical reaction that precipitates so horrendous a convulsion of bodily humours.

For sheer emotional power and voluptuousness of atmosphere, "The Appointed Time", in which these presentiments are finally realized, seems to me the most impressive chapter in the novel. The "appointed time" is, of course, midnight, ostensibly the hour stipulated by Krook for the handing over of Captain Hawdon's letters to Tony Jobling and the lawyer's clerk, William Guppy. But twelve o'clock is also the witching hour, the hour of doom and revelation --when time has run out. Dickens treats the three hours the chapter covers virtually as a countdown to apocalypse, the bell of Saint Paul's tolling at intervals as the tense minutes slip away until, in a rush of horror, the discovery is made. Right away Dickens generates a mood of ineffable dread. Writing with a hard-boiled precision that sounds a little like Raymond Chandler, he paints a milieu where death seems palpably in the air: "It is a fine steaming night to turn the slaughter-houses, the unwholesome trades, the sewerage, bad water, and burial-grounds to account, and give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business."<sup>135</sup> Bad air, indeed, becomes the major motif of the chapter, giving



everyone around Lincoln's Inn "the horrors", and occasioning the novel's best sick joke (which, on a second reading anyhow, is also a plum dramatic irony): Mr. Snagsby, supposing the greasy stench in the neighbourhood to be "chops" at the Sol's Arms, remarks casually to Jobling, "I don't think --not to put too fine a point upon it--that they were quite fresh, when they were shown the gridiron."<sup>136</sup>

One can envision Dickens licking his own chops as he sets down these unsavoury particulars. Again, the Gothic paradox, which we last observed operating vigorously in Mrs. Jellyby's household, seems in full force. However reluctantly, we must conclude that for Dickens even the putrescent mess of spontaneous combustion was a part of the "enjoyment of life". In truth, judging by his descriptions, in loving detail, of the falling soot that "smears, like black fat"<sup>137</sup> and the "thick, yellow liquor" that oozes and congeals in a "nauseous pool"<sup>138</sup> in Krook's upper rooms, it appears to have been a goodly part. Certainly, one does not want to sound sanctimonious like some literary Puritan, and deny Dickens his fun; still, it is useful to take note of such ambiguities when they arise. It can be stated with general accuracy that, by the time of Bleak House, Dickens had found an acceptable way to sublimate, or otherwise to transform, his morbid impulses into something more ennobling. In Dickens only among English novelists is the Gothic so overtly the servant of social conscience, yet at times, as



in this episode, it is difficult to say just which is leading which.

Nonetheless, the impression throughout is one of genuine horror. The climax, the unbearable realization of what has happened, seems in itself almost a complete vindication of Dickens's Gothic method (if, in fact, an apology is needed). Here indeed, for the space of a few paragraphs, the Gothic flame and fire of apocalypse become truly, mystically one, the highest pitch of melodrama invisibly giving way to the highest rhetoric. In grim succession, Dickens divulges the awful secrets of Krook's chamber as Guppy and Jobling uncover them, slowly at first, then in a panic of terror--the greasy walls, the suffocating vapour, the empty bottle, the empty chair, the maddened cat, and then the shock:

Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper, but not so light as usual, seeming to be steeped in something; and here is--is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or is it coal? O Horror, he is here! and this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another into the street, is all that represents him.

Help, help, help! come into this house for Heaven's sake!

Plenty will come in, but none can help. The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done. Call the death by any name Your Highness will, attribute it to whom you will, or say it might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally--inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only--Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died.<sup>139</sup>

Coming originally at the end of the middle number (the same number, incidentally, in which Esther goes blind), this passage must have created a considerable stir. Here is onomatopoeia of a daring and ingenious sort: the combustion, which we do not witness, nevertheless demonstrates its magnitude in a rhetorical explosion, the immediate aim (and effect) of which is to send one's senses reeling. The nimble progression of point of view from the objective "they" of most of the chapter to the "we" that implicates us in the calamity to the final accusatory "you" shows just how fervently Dickens desired to involve his audience in his nightmare world, both emotionally and morally. His indefinite but desperate--and reiterated--plea for "help" appears therefore to extend well beyond the frame of the text.

These impassioned lines can be said to constitute the allegorical crux of Bleak House, the epicentre that holds the novel's basic meaning, and releases it in veritable shock waves. This is emotional writing of a very high order; as a reasoned argument against "injustice" and "false pretences", it is, perhaps predictably, somewhat less satisfying. Dickens, of course, as a matter of policy, assailed the heart before deliberating with the mind. Consequently, the political message embedded in Krook's spontaneous combustion remains, for the most part, rather irksomely ill-defined. Precisely what, in concrete terms, does the flaming symbolism connote? What powers exactly will be

brought to bear on the unjust system to lay it waste from within? Dickens seems determinedly vague on this point, as if quite possibly afraid of the answer. Yet tacit surely in the allegory of Krook's death is the threat of revolution, the foreboding that someday soon Jo and the brick-makers of St. Albans will boil up to overturn the existing order--a prospect that Dickens dreaded less for any structural realignment than for the bloodshed inevitable under mob rule. Carlyle the mystic, peering down from his high window, could speak confidently, even reassuringly, of perpetual cycles of death and resurrection, and of the "Baphometric Fire-baptism"<sup>140</sup> that is to begin the world anew. Dickens the novelist, stationed in a more vulnerable position among the daily concerns of the human community, had far more immediate cause to fear the stormy transition period before the rebirth of the Phoenix. Perhaps then the explosion in Krook's chamber is, after all, best deemed an "imaginative ritual act", as Michael Goldberg maintains,<sup>141</sup> a poetically conceived retribution for social sin, as in some ferocious Victorian morality play. Perhaps, at the same time, Dickens's terror of the radical solution betrays itself in his very hesitancy to spell it out. Yet, even in the nebulous ideological context Dickens assigns to it, violence becomes discernibly linked with social change in this episode. The Gothic alternative, the self-immolation of the body politic, stands always as a dismaying possibility

in the abiding question of England's future. And the dread that suffuses Krook's shop, the brutality, the nausea and loathing, show just how little Dickens the middle-class humanist cared to think the unthinkable.

. 4.

Luckily, a more pacific alternative offered itself. It may be said truthfully that though Dickens accepted the Gothic metaphorically, as a prophetic vision of English civilization, he dismissed it intellectually. He simply could not countenance the overwhelming hopelessness and alienation of the Gothic milieu--the sense that nothing has meaning or value--and, at least at this stage of his career, he would not believe that human nature is invincibly corrupt. The predominant tone of Bleak House is not cynicism, much less despair, but instead a profound and passionate anxiety about the tenor of the present time. And such anxiety, growing out of an earnest commitment to the social good, carries with it an implicit optimism, at least an intimation that England's fate is not irrevocably sealed.

Dickens's transplantation of Gothic imagery from lonely Romantic landscapes to a contemporary social setting, and his employment of the Gothic as a tool of social analysis, may be judged symptomatic of the Victorianism for which society is an indefeasible constant. Yet also typically Victorian is his express need to predicate constructive

and moderate policies with which to combat the social-Gothic menace. Thus, as I have noted, allegorically Bleak House is split down the middle, Dickens's terrifying Gothic vision competing with an anti-Gothic vision which, in its own sentimental and placatory way, is quite as deeply-felt. Aesthetically, the former remains much the stronger, the more burning in the reader's memory. Still, the sunlight and fresh air, the cleanliness and good cheer that sweep away the mud and general unpleasantness cannot be overlooked, not if we are to see the picture whole. Walter E. Houghton suggests in The Victorian Frame of Mind (1957) that optimism and anxiety were the two defining emotional attitudes of the period generally, and that such ambivalence was the natural baffled response to a highly variable social, political and intellectual climate.<sup>142</sup> If this is so, then Bleak House is perhaps the inevitable novel to be written in England at mid-century. Indeed, Bleak House is England at mid-century, haunted by fear and irresolution, torn by self-doubt, yet never abandoning the hope of genuine human progress.

Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens had little wish to appear to mire himself in fruitless pessimism; to do so, Houghton says, would be to risk being reputed "weak" or "unmanly".<sup>143</sup> "It is not the province of a Poet to harp upon his own discontents," Dickens wrote to an aspiring author in 1840, "or to teach other people that they ought

to be discontented. Leave Byron to his gloomy greatness,  
and do you

Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything."<sup>144</sup>

Dickens preaches here not as a Victorian Pangloss, serenely confident that all is for the best, but simply as a humanist seeking, through conservative means, a somewhat better way. Angst he knew, both privately and as a social commentator, yet he would have been a far different novelist to linger on it, ruefully anticipating a long slow slide into anarchy. In fact, his casting off of the Byronic model--eminent to be sure, but unforgivably nihilistic--comprises an important part of the subject matter of Bleak House.

Dickens, in so explicitly repudiating the seductive malaise of Sturm und Drang Romanticism, may have had in mind Carlyle's celebrated injunction in Sartor Resartus, "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe."<sup>145</sup> Carlyle too advanced an active and positive species of Romanticism to supersede the outworn anti-establishment grumbling of an earlier generation of poets--though his rigorous and rather humourless program for change is surely no easier to take. Only with intolerable fear and anguish inexpressible can the fledgling Teufelsdröckh move from the Everlasting No through the Centre of Indifference to the blessed fortitude of the Everlasting Yea. These, it may be argued, are the solemn rites of passage from negative Romanticism to Victorianism. And, as Mario Praz points out, a comparable

formal philosophical transition occurs in Dickens's fictional world. The tempest that rages through the climactic chapter of David Copperfield (1849-50) may be a Gothic paroxysm, but it is the Byronic villain that drowns, his corpse washing up at the bourgeois hero's feet. David, who patently displays all the persevering virtues of which Carlyle approved, triumphs resoundingly over Steerforth, the "fascinating, untrammelled aristocrat",<sup>146</sup> just as Esther, the female David Copperfield, achieves the model domesticity which her mother cannot. Esther's marriage emblemizes Victorian principles of moral growth in a homelier, less bellicose manner than in Carlyle; so does the major affirmative phenomenon in the novel--the magic renovation of Bleak House.

Taking due note of the complications earlier indicated, it may nonetheless be remarked that by and large Dickens associates Gothic imagery with "system" and anti-Gothic imagery with "society", the two being understood as separate concepts. In the current state of affairs, of course, they are not invariably distinct, but in a healthy society, built on a solid foundation of humanity and justice, the soul-wasting mechanisms of the system have perforce ceased to function. At least the potential for such happiness and well-being is implied in odd pockets of Bleak House, among those scattered sets of characters whose everyday performance of their duty ensures their individual sal-

vation. "It is not Grace, prayer, or ritual, then, which redeems us," writes Norman Friedman, "but rather the personal benevolence of a good man, a man who unselfishly recognizes and acts upon his role as a responsible human being in a society where one's mortal fate hinges so closely upon the actions of another."<sup>147</sup> If all men are brothers under the skin, if consequently spiritual redemption can only be sought within a social framework, then those values are paramount which draw people together, which strengthen rather than loosen the organic filaments. For Dickens, these include kindness, conviviality and Christian charity (though, of course, not the self-aggrandizing sort that Mrs. Pardiggle practises)--anything, indeed, that encourages a spirit of co-operation. Carlyle, who preferred to goad people into obedience, scorned such lenient "Christmas turkey" philosophizing, yet Dickens fully respected the sterner Carlylean virtues as well. The thrice-wed Mrs. Bayham Badger rehearses the admirable work ethic of her first husband in wholly unequivocal terms: "It was a maxim of Captain Swosser's,...speaking in his figurative manner, that when you make pitch hot, you cannot make it too hot; and that if you only have to swab a plank, you should swab it as if Davy Jones were after you."<sup>148</sup> It is only through such shoulder to shoulder effort, and a gentle fellowship of souls, that society may be peacefully transformed, and the imminent explosion narrowly sidestepped.



Disinterested industry--so-called "stick-to-it-iveness"--is often esteemed as a specifically middle-class virtue, and was moreso in Dickens's time when the meteoric rise of the commercial classes could still be considered a veritable historical phenomenon. For better or worse, it was middle-class ethics that set the tone of Victorian culture, and thus, though he naturally hoped to reach everyone, it is the middle-class that Dickens primarily addresses in Bleak House. As I have mentioned, he had great faith in the capacity of the middle-class to effect social change; as a result, virtually all the moral paradigms in the novel are, like Dickens himself, socially dedicated bourgeois, shown cheerfully employed in honourable occupations while all manner of snug, euphoric symbolism gathers about them. Harmony is the prevailing motif in Caddy and Prince Turveydrop's dancing academy; likewise in the Bagnets' musician's shop. Matthew Bagnet ("Lignum Vitae"), bassoon-player and ex-artilleryman, defers to his wife on every important matter. She, of equal military bearing, may for her part be seen perpetually washing "greens" whenever she is not training her two daughters in the finer points of domestic economy. Hence Dickens, with hardly a word being spoken, equates life and growth and music and family with the regimental discipline he so respected. "Discipline must be maintained," says Mr. Bagnet on numerous occasions, but he is not the only one to live out this ideal. Trooper George

and the battle-scarred Phil Squod keep religiously to their routine at the shooting gallery, their heartiness, resilience and mutual loyalty forbidding anything like monotony from creeping in. And Lawrence Boythorn, another old soldier, is, as his name implies, so wonderful a fusion of bluster and tenderness, vigour and courtliness, that we cannot doubt he represented for Dickens a special moral archetype--a real man's man. His garden, a traditional iconographic rendering of God's plenty, evidences a sharp reversal of the process of decay general elsewhere in the novel:

...everything about the place wore an aspect of maturity and abundance. The old lime-tree walk was like green cloisters, the very shadows of the cherry-trees and apple-trees were heavy with fruit, the gooseberry-bushes were so laden that their branches arched and rested on the earth, the strawberries and raspberries grew in like profusion, and the peaches basked by the hundred on the wall. Tumbled about among the apread nets and the glass frames sparkling and winking in the sun, there were such heaps of drooping pods, and marrows, and cucumbers, that every foot of ground appeared a vegetable treasury, while the smell of sweet herbs and all kinds of wholesome growth (to say nothing of the neighbouring meadows where the hay was carrying) made the whole air a great nosegay.<sup>149</sup>

Boythorn and the others, while not graced with much sophistication or depth, radiate, in their joyousness and harmless eccentricity, a potent life force that Dickens wished in some curious way to harness. An interaction of personality and a subsequent multiplication of bourgeois virtue were to him the most desirable means of rehabilitating the nightmare world.

It may strike us that, by and large, the toiling middle-class in Bleak House performs a peripheral, vaguely whimsical sort of work which, however useful allegorically, is not very convincing in practical terms. It may well be, as Alexander Welsh maintains,<sup>150</sup> that Dickens, like Carlyle, promoted work more as a moral principle than as a ponderable experience. Perhaps for this reason the grubbier jobs in the novel, the ones whose symbolic associations are not so immediately prepossessing, fit only equivocally into Dickens's allegorical scheme. Inspector Bucket, the police detective who "cracks" the Tulkinghorn case, grills witnesses and chases after clues with almost superhuman efficiency. He certainly does his duty, and we know from several admiring pieces in Household Words that Dickens's regard for the newly formed Metropolitan Police was unconfined.<sup>151</sup> Yet Bucket skulks about in such a ghostly, inscrutable manner, and treats those he apprehends (notably Jo and Gridley) so callously that we may not know quite what to make of him.

Rouncewell, the ironmaster, poses still more interesting problems. We have seen how pivotal a role this Captain of Industry has in Bleak House, particularly when set against his chief antagonist, Sir Leicester Dedlock. Rouncewell is the hustling middle-class entrepreneur, gruff, forthright, not nearly as likable as his brother George, yet keen in his solicitude for his family and fair and

honest in his dealings with his workmen. Factory owner, inventor, banker, he is the model citizen of the burgeoning 40's and 50's. Try as he might, however, Dickens cannot make the north country look wholesome. There is some attempt, through the plentiful iron imagery, to evoke Rouncewell's manliness and strength, and to suggest, in the sparking and steaming of the machinery, a harmonious hubbub of activity. Trooper George's visit to the ironworks near the end of the novel (ch. 63) discovers a bizarrely bustling world, grotesquely but poetically infused with artificial life:

He comes to a gateway in the brick wall, looks in, and sees a great perplexity of iron lying about, in every stage, and in a vast variety of shapes; in bars, in wedges, in sheets; in tanks, in boilers, in axles, in wheels, in cogs, in cranks, in rails; twisted and wrenched into eccentric and perverse forms, as separate parts of machinery; mountains of it broken up, and rusty in its age; distant furnaces of it glowing and bubbling in its youth; bright fire-works of it showering about, under the blows of the steam hammer; red-hot iron, white-hot iron, cold-black iron; an iron taste, an iron smell, and a Babel of iron sounds.<sup>152</sup>

Iron-making here becomes virtually a moral attribute, a sign of robust, creative industry--the technological equivalent of Boythorn's agriculture. And the ubiquitous iron dust seems less the proof of universal degradation than of the ceaseless grimy labour of busy men. Fairly evidently, the spontaneity and variegation of Dickens's imagery bespeak an overall optimism more than any appreciable terror of mechanization. Yet, with just a slight shift in emphasis, and a widening of perspective, this baroque spectacle would

be indistinguishable from the fiery pandemonium of Coketown in Dickens's next novel. However much he might want to put Rouncewell on the side of the angels, the facts of life in industrial England were such that our perception of the iron country is more likely to be devilish. The features of the blackened landscape that Dickens singles out--the "blighted verdure", the "scorching fires", and so forth<sup>153</sup>--are therefore fully as enigmatic as that earlier anxious image of the "triumphant monster, Death".

No such aesthetic ambiguity, however, confounds the "Bleak House" set of characters--Esther, Allan, Ada and John Jarndyce. (Richard begins in this reputable company but gradually drifts over to the Gothic camp.) Once again, we find ourselves in the realm of idealized behaviour, where the upright bourgeois labours ardently but indeminately in the service of mankind. Ada Clare, with her obviously denotative name, is a mere cipher, an emblem of youth and beauty betrayed by the system. Her one true love lost, her life is irreparably ruined, as conventional Victorian sentimentalism (and Dickens's own private mythology) demands: even seven years after Richard's death, she continues to wear mourning dress, and has not married again. Still, Skimpole speaks better than he knows when he says of Ada, "With that golden hair, those blue eyes, and that fresh bloom on her cheek, she is like the summer morning."<sup>154</sup> Tragedy, even socially precipitated, cannot really affect

her transparent goodness and luminosity. Though finally too passive and insipid in her role as wronged beauty, there can be little question that she projected for Dickens a radiant--if narrow--moral quintessence.

Jarndyce, the gentle master of Bleak House, is not very interesting either, but he at least pursues an active form of benevolism. He arranges, indeed orchestrates, the coming together of Esther and the two orphans in his home. He rescues Charley Neckett from the drudgery of the Smallweeds, and even provides a temporary harbour for Jo when he is ill from smallpox. We may, however, begin to wonder after a while just how Jarndyce finances his various humanitarian endeavours. Dickens neglects to tell us, and I suspect that he simply did not wish to complicate his case with material considerations, the merest whisper of which would presumably sully Jarndyce's spiritual purity. Yet without a sound temporal basis, without some sense of daily tribulation, of overcoming obstacles and laying plans, he appears the blandest abstraction of philanthropism. His acknowledgement of injustice, of social evil, and of the time generally being out of joint, seems almost wholly restricted to misty declarations that "the wind is in the east" and periodic sojourns in "the Growlery", his den of discontent--neither act evincing much of a combative spirit --but his essential naïveté in such matters manifests itself in his lodging of Skimpole, the "child", the viper in his

garden. Dickens evidently saw Jarndyce as a nineteenth-century Parson Adams or Vicar of Wakefield--the very glass and form of the naturally good man. But his goodness is cast in too vague a form, and his mild quirkiness is just too innocuous, ever to constitute a valid opposition to "system". This amiable, unmemorable, ineffectual old gentleman seems hardly strong enough to bear the moral and symbolic weight that Dickens lades on him at last. "Soothingly, like the gentle rustling of the leaves; and genially, like the ripening weather; and radiantly and beneficently, like the sunshine",<sup>155</sup> he affirms his paternal love for Esther, and bestows on her and Allan the priceless marriage gift of their own Bleak House. We never have a distinct impression of Jarndyce's character, beyond a general rectitude and sweet temper, yet Dickens describes him almost as the great god Pan--a deity of life and light. Esther reports his singular effect on her: "I was cold, and I trembled violently; but not a word he uttered was lost. As I sat looking fixedly at him, and the sun's rays descended, softly shining through the leaves, upon his bare head, I felt as if the brightness on him must be like the brightness of the Angels."<sup>156</sup> Plainly, the epiphanic anti-Gothic symbolism here is too rich to fill such a shallow vessel.

It may be apparent by now, and it is not really surprising, that Dickens's Gothic analysis of society is a good deal more persuasive than his anti-Gothic solution.



The one, after all, is based on sharp observation, the other on indefinite and rather idealistic speculation. The fascinating personal history of Esther Summerson, weaving like a golden thread through the horrific images of social devastation, brings into focus the peculiar problems of Dickens's ultimately life-affirming ideology. Critics in the past, a little disturbed by the author's presumption in putting himself inside a woman's head, have generally found her insufferable. And, in truth, her dutiful exhortations to herself, her endless bustling about and, most notoriously, her irksome habit of recapitulating compliments paid her (the only verbal means, of course, by which Dickens might indicate her virtue) are crotchets more irritating than endearing. The tendency now though, in complete reaction, is to discern in her a rather trumped-up psychological complexity--hence the inevitable articles on phallic imagery in Bleak House and Esther's repressed sexuality. The truth, as it so often does, lies somewhere in the middle. Esther is neither so tangled a bundle of complexes nor quite so coy a monster as the polarities of Summersonian scholarship might suggest. She is instead a slightly too self-conscious neophyte whose laborious progress through the world, though psychologically consistent, is primarily a moral and mythological development. Through much pain and sorrow, Esther becomes, for better or worse, the exalted embodiment of all Dickens's most cherished humanistic ideals--allegorically,



the warder-off of demons, the white witch of Bleak House.

Her personal history is more accurately a case history, since it schematizes, somewhat didactically, the arduous process through which individual redemption may be achieved, even within the baleful context of the system. She is, as Bucket says, "a pattern";<sup>157</sup> her moral goodness, though it cannot singlehandedly rid the world of suffering, effectively transforms her own little corner of it, and that, in Dickens's view, is as much as any private citizen can do. Appropriately, therefore, Esther's experiences take the form of a first-person narrative, told in the past tense, with a clear beginning and an end. Rather obviously, her righteous career is not the general rule, but of course Dickens thought it had universal application.

Esther's life begins under an oppressive shadow, the shadow of hell-fired Calvinism and of inexplicable hereditary guilt. On her twelfth birthday, she is apprised, albeit obscurely, of the shame which is her only inheritance in cruelly cutting language: "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers. The time will come--and soon enough--when you will understand this better, and will feel it too, as no one save a woman can."<sup>158</sup> Her aunt's words strike home, and Esther resolves henceforth, in expiation for she knows not what, to be "industrious, contented, and kind-hearted, and to do some good to some one, and win some love to myself if I could".<sup>159</sup> Dickens thus lays the plaus-

ible psychological groundwork for Esther's virtue, and shows her to be caught up--if not in Chancery, then in a labyrinth of imputed sin and confused rights and wrongs which is quite as inescapable. That she finally does escape from the cold grip of dead Religion, realizing that she is as innocent of her birth "as a queen of hers"<sup>160</sup>--overcoming the stigma of illegitimacy which, of course, fell particularly onerously on chaste Victorian womanhood--is an obvious tribute to the commonsensical, strictly secular principles of behaviour which she shares with Dickens, the bourgeois humanist.

Like Professor Teufelsdröckh, though in a more amicable manner, Esther traces a tortuous path from darkness to light, from self-abnegation to self-acceptance--from the Everlasting No to the Everlasting Yea. If anything, in a general way, may be deemed her Centre of Indifference, her time of absolute self-detachment, it is surely the period of her disfiguring--and blinding--illness (in chs. 31 and 35, again almost exactly halfway through the novel). She feels herself, in these delirious weeks, to be utterly dissociated, both in body and in mind, as if, in falling ill, she has "crossed a dark lake", leaving "all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore".<sup>161</sup> There is the time in her sickness when she seems to be labouring up "colossal staircases" without end, constantly obstructed. And there is that far more terrible 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."<sup>162</sup> These images of entrapment and of killing monotony express, in the broadest sense, the basic situation of most of the characters in Bleak House, engaged beyond recall in a system that draws peace, sense and life out of them. But for Esther personally, they symbolize what Friedman calls "her unwitting involvement in the vicious circle of sin",<sup>163</sup> that is, her bewildering complicity in a crime she did not commit, and her mounting anguish and frustration at never being able to atone for it. Her illness, it can be said, provides a neutral ground, a circle of self-forgetting, from which vantage point she may figuratively confront her deepest anxieties. For when the fever breaks, when significantly she has regained her sight, Esther returns to the social world with the mental equipment to put things in their proper perspective. So that when she learns exactly who she is, in a tearful scene with Lady Dedlock (ch. 36), she can, after a struggle, accept her new station, and more confidently resume her duties as mistress of Bleak House. And of course, in a world where so many have neglected or otherwise perverted their social ties, the establishment of Esther's identity becomes doubly connotative.

Despite her generally forward movement from innocence to experience (most poignantly symbolized, perhaps, in the loss of her "poor old face"), it is plain that Dickens thought of Esther much as he thought of Jarndyce--as a moral icon. To be sure, she is a much more fully-rounded figure, yet Esther typifies essentially the same values, on the distaff side, as her benevolent Guardian. If he, like Boythorn and Allan Woodcourt, is an archetype of square-dealing masculinity, she is Dickens's paragon, indeed his dream, of immaculate womanhood. She is, as the original dramatis personae tells us, "a prudent and wise woman, and a self-denying friend";<sup>164</sup> every day and in every way, she lives her life according to a code of integrity and moral responsibility, yet she enacts her duty in an ambit which, in Dickens's terms, is the peculiar province of a woman. It would be doing Esther no disservice to describe her as a glorified housekeeper for she performs the metaphorical as well as the literal chores of her housewifery with a zeal and a cheerfulness that Dickens finds wholly wonderful (even if we do not). She sets both Bleak Houses in order, tidying and organizing without complaint, shaking her basket of keys so that they sound like a chorus of "little bells", generally restoring harmony wherever there is chaos. Yet her domestic service also extends to the great world. In almost a formal allegorical sense, she "saves" Caddy Jellyby, liberating her from inky servitude as her mother's

amanuensis, teaching her by example to make herself personable and useful, and most incredible of all, imposing at least some temporary measure of order on the Jellyby household, so that Caddy's wedding may be a reasonably dignified affair. She likewise redeems young Peepy Jellyby, scrubbing the dirt off his face and instructing him in the rudiments of suitable childish behaviour, and is also instrumental in the deliverance of the orphaned Neckett family from Bell Yard. At other times, she may be glimpsed tending the sick (Jo and then Charley), relieving the poor (the brickmakers of St. Albans), befriending the friendless (Miss Flite), and the record of her womanly compassion stretches on and on.

Esther's appointed task in the domestic sphere is quite simply to make contact with those around her. She "connects"; as committedly as any Carlylean archetype, she gathers together the sundry divergent strands of Dickens's nightmare world. Her forging of social bonds through regular acts of kindness is, of course, in direct contrast to the alienation that the lawyers and the other powers of social corruption both encourage and incarnate. And, pragmatically speaking, the development of a warm rapport between the virtuous middle-class and the poor and the abused through such intense association appeared to Dickens the most feasible means of averting a Victorian Peasants' Revolt. It is not extraordinary that he should cast a woman in the role of the great peacemaker. Houghton notes that so-called

"woman worship" was a prevailing attitude among many Victorian artists and intellectuals (most prominently, Ruskin, Tennyson, Kingsley, and--perhaps surprisingly--George Eliot) who, with the Romantic conservatism characteristic of the age, revered Woman as the guide and moral inspiration of her more worldly companion, Man.<sup>165</sup> Ruskin averred, in terms significant for Bleak House, that woman's intellect "is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision",<sup>166</sup> and Dickens agreed. Esther Summerson, the divine housekeeper, the secular saint, represented for him the highest eminence to which a woman can aspire. If occasionally she leaves the serenity of her hearth to enter into congress with society, she does not, like Mrs. Jellyby, risk making herself ridiculous--and unfeminine--by undertaking a public or professional life. Esther's charity is of a purely private sort; in ministering to the needs of the beleaguered Jos and Charleys, she simply broadens the jurisdiction of her household.

She is the perfect woman, and naturally deserves the perfect man to complete this sentimental beau ideal. Curiously, she plights her troth to each of the two likeliest candidates in the course of the novel. In gratitude for his noble guardianship, Esther accepts Jarndyce's tender and delicately phrased proposal (ch. 44), yet their romance, such as it is, is rather oddly aborted when, realizing where her heart lies, he gives her up to Allan Wood-

court, the dark young surgeon. Esther and Allan certainly make a more logical romantic couple, however unbearably high-mindedly they behave to one another, but as always Dickens intends an allegorical construction to be put on their relationship. In fairly orthodox and straightforward symbolic fashion, their marriage, with its fruitful issue, provides a small corrective to the barrenness all around; it is a private comedy in the midst of social tragedy. Yet more narrowly, it is, as Q.D. Leavis says, the wedding of "love and charity" to "disinterested service and scientific knowledge".<sup>167</sup> The physician, as a rule, holds a super-eminent position in Dickens's moral hierarchy of professions. As a healer, he labours bravely to mend the breaches that erupt in the social fabric, actively doing battle, through the most modern means available, with the death and disease, both factual and metaphorical, which threaten to ravage the body politic. For this reason, the Bayham Badgers, whatever their quaint singularities, warrant our unqualified approbation and Skimpole, who has jettisoned his medical responsibilities, our unmitigated contempt. Allan Woodcourt, young, handsome, sober, studious, unmoneyed, totally selfless, is the culmination of the indefatigable doctor type. He registers vividly in our minds, less as an interesting personality than as a dedicated professional practiced in long hours and punishing work without material reward, and in this he is almost unique among the usually rather intang-

ibly virtuous middle-class characters in Bleak House. Every waking moment, he proves himself, in his patient and caring manner, the worthy soul mate of the equally solicitous Esther: he eases the small distresses of Miss Flite and of Jenny, the brickmaker's wife, he attends the terminal sickbeds of Jo and Richard and, significantly, he turns up in the death scenes of both of Esther's parents, to lend whatever solace he can. His most shining season, however, and his most explicitly allegorical deed, occur midway through the novel, in a shipwreck off the East-Indian coast, as Miss Flite excitedly reports:

"An awful scene. Death in all shapes. Hundreds of dead and dying. Fire, storm, and darkness. Numbers of the drowning thrown upon a rock. There, and through it all, my dear physician was a hero. Calm and brave, through everything. Saved many lives, never complained in hunger and thirst, wrapped naked people in his spare clothes, took the lead, showed them what to do, governed them, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors off at last!"<sup>168</sup>

Here, cast upon the rocks as in traditional Christian iconography, are the myriad lost souls of humanity, and here is their preserver, miraculously pulling some structure out of anarchy, resisting the hostile Gothic forces in a gallant, manly way. Esther, herself a rescuer in a humbler capacity, can perform no more sacred office than to consecrate her life to this man, to serve--and to be loved--as a doctor's wife.

But of course she has her own feminine individuality, which translates into opulent symbolism. She is like the



Biblical queen Esther, who saved the Jews, and who "obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her" (Esther 2: 15), only Dame Durden bathes everyone impartially in her goodness. And Jarndyce and Ada, themselves leagued with freshness and fair weather, readily detect the allegory not so subtly insinuated in her surname: "They said there could be no East wind where Somebody was; they said wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air."<sup>169</sup>

Dickens indeed builds a kind of informal myth around this wonder-working creature, whose benign influence dispels the Chancery fog and sets everything right. She is at once a good fairy and the prophetess of a new order; she is perhaps, in a general way, the destined woman that Hester Prynne foresees at the end of The Scarlet Letter (1850), an "angel and apostle...lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end!"<sup>170</sup> Esther's sacred love effects minor miracles, yet she is not in the least forbidding. Dickens deliberately scales her down to manageable middle-class proportions, picturing her as a genteel sort of household goddess, a Vesta or Hestia (the echo in her name is striking) whose genius inspires an insistently Victorian hearth. Her various affectionate sobriquets--Old Woman, Little Old Woman, Cobweb, Mother Hubbard, Dame Durden and Mrs. Shipton (the latter being the

name of a popular Welsh soothsayer)--however affected they seem now, likewise reinforce our impression of her as a familiar bourgeois mystic, a practitioner of homespun transcendentalism. Esther does not, of course, stand alone in the Dickens canon as caster of spells and lifter of curses. Clearly, she belongs in the charismatic company of her celebrated "white sisters", the other mythic heroines of Dickens's middle fiction--Florence Dombey, Sissy Jupe, Amy Dorrit, not to forget sweet Agnes Wickfield, ever "pointing upward"--each lighting up her book with love and kindness, each weaving her magic with greater or lesser allegorical import. Esther, however, is fortunate to have been conceived in the first flush of Dickens's mature creativity: she is by far the most exuberantly metaphorical of this illustrious quintet.

Dame Durden knows she is not "clever", and while she mentions this undeniable fact several times too often, it has a significance beyond the establishing of her womanly humility. For though she is untutored in the way of the world, though her intellectual life is relatively uncluttered, she is wise and prudent in her "heart"--the region favoured by Victorian Romantics as the seat of moral influence, especially in a woman. "Heart" and "hearth" become identical in Esther, as they often were in Victorian pictorial art, but Dickens leaves it to Jarndyce to make the point overt. By way of reassuring her that she is "quite clever enough" to be mistress of Bleak House, he recites a nursery

rhyme which, under the circumstances, seems symbolically momentous:

"Little old woman, and whither so high?"--  
 "To sweep the cobwebs out of the sky."

As if Dickens's meaning were not already abundantly clear, Jarndyce goes on to gloss the rhyme in unmistakable terms: "You will sweep them so neatly out of our sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days, we shall have to abandon the Growlery, and nail up the door."<sup>171</sup> It is Dickens's most graphic statement of belief in the power of cozy, comfortable middle-class virtue to overthrow --at least locally--the ruination of the nightmare world. It is also a sign of faith in a distinctly feminine life principle, a kind of anima which intrinsically has more to do with feeling and intuition than with cold intellect. Mrs. Wilcox (of Howards End) and Mrs. Ramsay (of To the Lighthouse), both of them presiding over elaborately mythic households, body forth a creative and reconciliatory spiritual splendour for the troubled twentieth-century. In a less emphatically metaphysical, more socially fastidious way, Miss Summerson (latterly Mrs. Woodcourt) discharges an analogous commission for the somewhat differently perplexed nineteenth.

It is possible, however, that Dickens had a contemporary literary model in mind in his sentimental idealization of Esther. Just a year earlier, Phoebe Pyncheon had danced her trim and sensible way through The House of the Seven

Gables, dissolving the Gothic gloom, tending the ruined garden, and finally abolishing the ancient curse that had terrified the Pyncheon family for centuries. She too has sunshine in her name as well as in her being, and her style of metaphorical housekeeping sweeps away the moral cobwebs quite as impeccably as Esther's. Yet Phoebe is an airier sprite than Esther who, despite her at times bathetic diffidence, is observed with a quiet realism and breadth of detail that Hawthorne, however much he may have wanted to, could never quite attain. We may hold certain reservations about Dame Durden's efficacy as a symbolic counterweight to Dickens's Victorian Gothic, but we cannot dispute that she moves about in an effectively concretized social world, or that she carries out her duty as a designated citizen of that world.

Esther's own many-gabled house was at one time called "the Peaks", but Tom Jarndyce, before he blew his brains out in despair, gave it its present dreary appellation and, as John Jarndyce (Tom's grandnephew) explains,

"lived here 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. In the meantime, the place became dilapidated, the wind whistled through the cracked walls, the rain fell through the broken roof, the weeds choked the passage to the rotting door. When I brought what remained of him home here, the brains seemed to me to have been blown out of the house too; it was so shattered and ruined."<sup>172</sup>

Bleak House had, in former days, the aspect of a Gothic ruin, and its owner that of a haunted Gothic hero. This

forlorn wreck John Jarndyce associates with another ruined property in "that city of London", another dwelling place enmeshed in the Chancery muddle, to which Tom has lent his miserable name:

"It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out; without a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare black shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes of rust; the chimneys sinking in; the stone steps to every door (and every door might be Death's Door) turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins are propped, decaying."<sup>173</sup>

It is worth remembering that among Dickens's contemplated titles for the novel were "Tom-all-Alone's/The Ruined House" and "Tom-all-Alone's/The Solitary House/where The Wind howled". The title that he settled on has the considerable advantage of irony, for of course Bleak House is not bleak at all. By the time Esther takes up residence as housekeeper, it has been transformed into a perfect bourgeois paradise though, as Friedman notes, the old name has been retained "as a grim reminder that present happiness can easily revert, if care is not taken scrupulously to avoid legal entanglements, to the old-time misery."<sup>174</sup>

Bleak House, without the utmost moral vigilance, might fall again into dilapidation, like the sorry tenements of Tom-all-Alone's, yet the principle surely also holds true in reverse: Tom, through the intercession of kindness and the exercising of social responsibility, could someday become halfway habitable. Certainly, every allegorical

stone of the refurbished Bleak House shines forth this sort of remedial moral goodness. Esther's first tour of domestic duty, though painted in images a shade too precious, discovers a sunny ambience which, almost point for point, inverts the physical and moral chaos of Tom Jarndyce's careless administration:

Every part of the house was in such order, and every one was so attentive to me, that I had no trouble with my two bunches of keys: though what with trying to remember the contents of each little store-room drawer and cupboard; and what with making notes on a slate about jams, and pickles, and preserves, and bottles, and glass, and china, and a great many other things; and what with being generally a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person; I was so busy that I could not believe it was breakfast-time when I heard the bell ring. Away I ran, however, and made tea, as I had already been installed into the responsibility of the tea-pot; and then, as they were all rather late, and nobody was down yet, I thought I would take a peep at the garden and get some knowledge of that too. I found it quite a delightful place; in front, the pretty avenue and drive by which we had approached...at the back, the flower-garden...Beyond the flower-garden was a kitchen-garden, and then a paddock, and then a snug little rick-yard, and then a dear little farm-yard. As to the House itself, with its three peaks in the roof; its various-shaped windows, some so large, some so small, and all so pretty; its trellis-work, against the south-front for roses and honeysuckle, and its homely, comfortable, welcoming look: it was, as Ada said, when she came out to meet me with her arm through that of its master, worthy of her cousin John--a bold thing to say, though he only pinched her dear cheek for it.<sup>175</sup>

Esther soon finds that everything in the house--the furniture, the wall decoration, even the rambling floor plan (wherein halls digress and rooms branch off in a charmingly fortuitous fashion)--displays this same "pleasant irregularity" or "quaint variety".<sup>176</sup> Bleak House is so delightfully

diverse and yet, at the same time, so meticulously neat that one cannot question it signified for Dickens a specific ideological construct. Expressing values neither anarchic nor inflexibly, cold-heartedly mechanical, the happy household, under the mild protectorship of Jarndyce and Esther, steers a conservative middle course between the antipodes of moral horror, which is, of course, exactly the way of the Victorian Romantic. Creative, spontaneous, yet provident and prudently controlled, Bleak House is Dickens's poetic and somewhat quixotic exemplar of the Victorian home. So when Esther and Allan settle into their own house of light in the Yorkshire countryside, and Esther discerns in all the pretty appointments "my little tastes and fancies, my little methods and inventions which they used to laugh at while they praised them",<sup>177</sup> it is less a matter of Bleak House thinning out, than of its pacific influence broadening: now, as in some occult form of moral mitosis, the goodness diffuses from two hearths.

Allegorically, it all adds up: the contraposition of the Gothic and anti-Gothic fortresses, the white sorceress grappling with the powers of social darkness. Dickens evidently means us to understand that the aggregate of Esther's good works makes a difference in society, and that as she consolidates her moral authority, as her two, three, ten and a hundred converts go about their way disseminating her humanistic gospel, society will be gradually--and blood-



lessly--reborn. How, practically speaking, this magical change can be wrought Dickens gives us hardly a clue. All he says is that Dame Durden "touches and awakens"<sup>178</sup> hearts, meaning, one supposes, that she is a naturally gifted proselytizer. But probably what Dickens will not spell out about Esther is essentially what, two decades later, George Eliot says of Dorothea Brooke, her "modern Saint Theresa", in the final paragraph of Middlemarch (1871-72):

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.<sup>179</sup>

What can we make of these Victorian women who beacon spiritual comfort from their limited spheres, who here and there light sparks of moral earnestness? The sentimental sexism of their delineation is obvious enough, yet so basic to Victorian social attitudes that to attack it at length seems pointless and even redundant. For her part, George Eliot confers far more restricted powers upon Dorothea than does Dickens upon Esther who, as we have seen, mystically "connects" with nearly everyone she meets in her own little (but metaphorically immense) domestic arena. Perhaps, then, Orwell is after all correct: "a change of heart" is, at bottom, the only remedy that Dickens ever proposes for



curing society's ills. And although love, friendship, charity and industry are excellent qualities in themselves, and Dickens doubtless esteemed them sincerely, it is not at all clear that they are useful components of a social program. One cannot, of course, disprove that kindness, universally applied, will transfigure English civilization, but one cannot readily prove it either, and Dicken's attempt to do so through genteel and rather whimsical symbolism seems ill-advised, since it allows so little for the hard facts of political and economic power structures--agencies which, one would think, were hopelessly beyond the reach even of collective pleasantries. Dickens satirizes these very things in the "Gothic" side of the novel, so his retreat into bourgeois idealism on the other side is especially confounding. It may be an issue of naïveté; more likely, it is one of evasion, either deliberate or unconscious. For by falling back into what are fundamentally moral platitudes, he again skirts around committing himself to the admittedly ticklish but necessary business of restructuring society.

There is, then, a sentimentality far more elementary to Bleak House than Esther's quaint assortment of mawkish peccadillos. Carlyle partly put his finger on it when he wrote, rather uncharitably, of Dickens: "He thinks men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accommodating for them, and all sorts of fellows have turkey for their Christmas dinner. Commanding and controlling and

punishing them he would give up without any misgivings, in order to coax and soothe and delude them into doing right."<sup>180</sup> Dickens could be tougher than Carlyle gave him credit for; still, there is some truth in these observations, though it is not a carefully observed truth. Even allegorically, there is something a little flaccid and disconcerting about the manner in which Dickens juxtaposes chintz and china with scenes of epic horror. It cannot honestly be said that his "battered up" anti-Gothic vision, with its prim housewives and tidy little gardens, builds up a symbolic resonance which is equal and opposite to that of the nightmare world.

It should be recognized, though, in all fairness to Dickens, that his sentimental extravagance, however cloying to the modern palate, probably comprises the psychological contrary of the lurid sensationalism which is likewise a Dickensian hallmark. Both sides reflect an overwrought, somewhat "purple" sensibility which half-ashamedly takes pleasure in the emotional extremes of sympathy and terror. Current taste suffers melodrama much more gladly than bathos (the reverse generally being true in Dickens's time), but we should not allow rather arbitrary critical prejudice to influence our judgement overmuch. Still, even the most considered, impartial assessment must rate Dickens's Gothic vision trenchant and finely etched, for all its pestering inconsistencies, and his anti-Gothic vision comparatively weak and pallid. The reasons have already been indicated:

Dickens quite simply could scrutinize the status quo more ably and accurately than he could project an ideal, particularly one which does not directly confront all the social issues involved. Intellectually, Bleak House is slightly askew, but then Dickens never strove for formal perfection in a classical sense. Emotionally, however, the effect of the novel is devastating, and this is due in no small part to Dickens's fecund Gothic imagination. Melodramatically, metaphorically, even stylistically, whether in its Carlylean or more conventionally horrific manifestations, the Gothic invades virtually every aspect of Bleak House, making it at once a work of vulgar excitement and of haunting macabre poetry. In details as playful and inconsequential as Bucket's "ghostly" forefinger, which he consults at odd times like a "familiar demon",<sup>181</sup> and in grim parables as multifarious and problematic as the Ghost's Walk and Krook's spontaneous combustion, Dickens composes a tangled portrait of social angst, of ideological phantoms and litigious monsters in a Victorian nether world. He spies a faint glimmer of sunlight through the Gothic fog, and wishes ardently that the warmth and gladness might spread; but dare we suppose that on some visceral level he felt more guilty love for Krook than Esther?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, "The Topicality of Bleak House", in Dickens at Work (London: Methuen and Co., 1957), pp. 179-182.

<sup>3</sup>See Ronald, "Gothic Castle", pp. 74-75.

<sup>4</sup>See E.M. Forster, Aspects, pp. 119-120.

<sup>5</sup>The term is Edgar Johnson's. See Tragedy and Triumph, p. 762.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas Carlyle, Latter-Day Pamphlets (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>-----, Sartor Resartus (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 154.

<sup>9</sup>Though he may simply have been attempting to live up to his irascible reputation, Carlyle typically referred to Dickens's novels in tones of contempt. Pickwick was the "lowest trash" and Great Expectations that "Pip nonsense". He was, however, more generous to Hard Times, Little Dorrit and A Tale of Two Cities--novels largely based on his own ideas. See Michael Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), pp. 14-15.

<sup>10</sup>George Bernard Shaw, Introduction to Hard Times (1912), reprinted in G.H. Ford and Lauriat Lane, Jr., eds., The Dickens Critics (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961), p. 126.

<sup>11</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>13</sup>The subject is well covered in William R. Harvey's "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XXIV (1969), 305-316.

<sup>14</sup>See Mario Praz, The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian

Fiction, trans. Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 142-143. Praz is careful to distinguish Dickens's placid beau ideal from Carlyle's lofty model of the epic hero of infinite wisdom. Though he concurred with Carlyle on many points, Dickens, essentially an egalitarian (if not quite a democrat), was never really receptive to the system of elitism propounded in On Heroes and Hero Worship.

<sup>15</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup>I am not ignoring the significant contribution of the Brontë sisters in this connection. Both Rochester and Heathcliff strongly suggest an extension and considerable refinement of the Byronic protagonist but, if anything, they are the exceptions that prove the rule. Charlotte and Emily were, after all, pioneers in their treatment of sexual relationships; as such, they were in the psychological vanguard of Victorian fiction.

<sup>17</sup>Dickens, Dombey, p. 462.

<sup>18</sup>-----, Bleak House, p. 217.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., pp. 95-96.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Jean-Paul Sartre, Huis Clos (1945).

<sup>21</sup>George Orwell, "Charles Dickens" in The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), I, 427.

<sup>22</sup>On this issue, as on so many others, Dickens echoed Carlyle, who spoke of the fallacy of seeking a "Morrison's Pill" to cure all the maladies of society. See Past and Present (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1960), p. 23.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Newsom, Romantic Side, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup>Arthur Clayborough, The Grotesque in English Literature (London: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 233-236.

<sup>25</sup>Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 219.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., pp. 2-3.

<sup>28</sup>Norman Friedman, "The Shadow and the Sun: Notes Toward a Reading of Bleak House", Boston University Studies in English, 3 (1957), 147-166.

<sup>29</sup>Peter Steele, "Dickens and the Grotesque", Quadrant, 82 (April 1973), 20.

<sup>30</sup>George Gissing, Charles Dickens: A Critical Study (London: Blackie and Son, 1926), p. 183.

<sup>31</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 135.

<sup>32</sup>Henry Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor, II (1851), 193-196.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas Miller, Illustrated London News, Christmas Supplement (1849), p. 419.

<sup>34</sup>Charles Dickens, Preface to Martin Chuzzlewit (1843-44) (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. xvi.

<sup>35</sup>See Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, pp. 753-754.

<sup>36</sup>Charles Dickens, Letters of Charles Dickens to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts, ed. Charles C. Osborne (London: John Murray, 1931), p. 142.

<sup>37</sup>See Trevor Blount, "The Graveyard Satire of Bleak House in the Context of 1850", Review of English Studies, N.S. 14 (1963), 370-378.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 374-375.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., pp. 375-376.

<sup>40</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 151. The direct inspiration for this passage is probably Carlyle's note on typhus-fever and the Irish widow: "The forlorn Irish Widow applies to her fellow-creatures, as if saying, 'Behold I am sinking, bare of help: ye must help me! I am your sister, bone of your bone; one God made us; ye must help me!' They answer, 'No; impossible: thou art no sister of ours.' But she proves her sisterhood; her typhus-fever kills them: they actually were her brothers, though denying it! Had man ever to go lower for a proof?" See Past and Present, p. 143.

<sup>41</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 627-628.

<sup>42</sup>Carlyle, Past and Present, p. 131.

<sup>43</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 220.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>45</sup>Annual Register, 1849, Chron., pp. 422-430.

- <sup>46</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 20.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 492.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 225.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 225.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 225.
- <sup>51</sup>See Blount, "Graveyard Satire", p. 370.
- <sup>52</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 640-641.
- <sup>53</sup>Quoted in Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens, p. 167.
- <sup>54</sup>Elizabeth Gaskell, Cranford (1853) ed. Peter Keating (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), pp. 47-48.
- <sup>55</sup>See Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens, pp. 164-165.
- <sup>56</sup>V.S. Pritchett, Books in General (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), pp. 65-66.
- <sup>57</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 82-83.
- <sup>58</sup>Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 169.
- <sup>59</sup>See Welsh, City of Dickens, pp. 59-60.
- <sup>60</sup>See Joel Porte, "In the Hands of an Angry God: Religious Terror in Gothic Fiction", in Gothic Imagination, pp. 42-64.
- <sup>61</sup>Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, pp. 198-199.
- <sup>62</sup>-----, Past and Present, p. 134.
- <sup>63</sup>Lewis, The Monk, p. 7.
- <sup>64</sup>Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (1818) in Three Gothic Novels, p. 269.
- <sup>65</sup>Beckford, Vathek, pp. 245-246.
- <sup>66</sup>Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, pp. 162-163.
- <sup>67</sup>Robert A. Donovan, "Structure and Idea in Bleak House", ELH, XXIX, No. 2 (1962), 186-201.
- <sup>68</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 200.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., p. 819.

<sup>70</sup>J. Hillis Miller, Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 195.

<sup>71</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 136.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 8-9.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>74</sup>Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 149.

<sup>75</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 159.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., p. 628.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 788.

<sup>81</sup>Hawthorne, Preface to The House of the Seven Gables, p. xxii.

<sup>82</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., pp. 570-571.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 193.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., pp. 874-876.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., p. 270.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., p. 107.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>89</sup>Mill, of course, believed in the absolute equality of the sexes. He wrote his wife bitterly that the characters of Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle were limned "in the very vulgarest way, just the style in which vulgar men used to ridicule 'learned ladies' as neglecting their children and household". See Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 761.

<sup>90</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 423.



- <sup>91</sup>Garis, Dickens Theatre, p. 112.
- <sup>92</sup>E.M. Forster, Aspects, p. 104.
- <sup>93</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 420.
- <sup>94</sup>J. Hillis Miller, World, p. 194.
- <sup>95</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 287.
- <sup>96</sup>Ibid., p. 288.
- <sup>97</sup>Ibid., p. 371.
- <sup>98</sup>Collins, Dickens and Crime, pp. 205-206.
- <sup>99</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 220.
- <sup>100</sup>Ibid., p. 221.
- <sup>101</sup>Ibid., p. 108.
- <sup>102</sup>Anne Humpherys, "Dickens and Mayhew on the London Poor", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 88.
- <sup>103</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 160-161.
- <sup>104</sup>Ibid., p. 548.
- <sup>105</sup>Q.D. Leavis, "Bleak House: A Chancery World", in F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 133.
- <sup>106</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 58.
- <sup>107</sup>Ibid., p. 553.
- <sup>108</sup>Ibid., p. 820.
- <sup>109</sup>Ibid., p. 535.
- <sup>110</sup>Ibid., pp. 551-552.
- <sup>111</sup>Ibid., p. 549.
- <sup>112</sup>Ibid., p. 867.
- <sup>113</sup>Ibid., p. 130.
- <sup>114</sup>Still, his own brush with Chancery (in 1844) could

not have left him feeling very conciliatory about the law: six separate suits brought against various booksellers for literary piracy embroiled him in legal difficulties so onerous that he had no option but to withdraw all charges with great embarrassment and at considerable cost. See Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, pp. 492-494.

- 115 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 305.
- 116 J. Hillis Miller, World, p. 194.
- 117 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 713.
- 118 Ibid., p. 844.
- 119 Ibid., p. 118.
- 120 Ibid., p. 468.
- 121 Ibid., p. 468.
- 122 Ibid., p. xiv.
- 123 Blount, "Spontaneous Combustion", p. 190.
- 124 See Davis, Flint and Flame, p. 207.
- 125 Charles Dickens, Christmas Books (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 38.
- 126 Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens, p. 72.
- 127 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, pp. 176-177.
- 128 Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 49-50.
- 129 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 177.
- 130 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 52.
- 131 -----, The Speeches of Charles Dickens, ed. K.J. Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), pp. 205-206.
- 132 Dickens made these pointed comments in a speech to the Administrative Reform Association on 27 June 1855.
- 133 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 50.
- 134 Ibid., p. 282.
- 135 Ibid., p. 444.

- 136 Ibid., p. 445.
- 137 Ibid., p. 450.
- 138 Ibid., p. 454.
- 139 Ibid., pp. 455-456.
- 140 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 128.
- 141 Goldberg, Carlyle and Dickens, p. 73.
- 142 Walter E. Houghton, The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 54.
- 143 Ibid., p. 54.
- 144 House and Storey, eds., Letters, II, 155. The quotation is from As You Like It, II.i.16-17.
- 145 Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, p. 145.
- 146 Praz, Hero in Eclipse, p. 127.
- 147 Friedman, "Shadow and Sun", p. 150.
- 148 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 229.
- 149 Ibid., p. 247.
- 150 Welsh, City of Dickens, p. 78.
- 151 See Collins, Dickens and Crime, pp. 196-219.
- 152 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 846.
- 153 Ibid., p. 845.
- 154 Ibid., p. 72.
- 155 Ibid., p. 857.
- 156 Ibid., p. 857.
- 157 Ibid., p. 801.
- 158 Ibid., p. 17.
- 159 Ibid., p. 18.
- 160 Ibid., p. 516.

- 161 Ibid., p. 488.
- 162 Ibid., p. 489.
- 163 Friedman, "Shadow and Sun", p. 164.
- 164 Dickens, Bleak House, p. xxii.
- 165 Houghton, Victorian Frame of Mind, pp. 348-353.
- 166 Ibid., p. 350.
- 167 Q.D. Leavis, "Chancery World", p. 180.
- 168 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 500.
- 169 Ibid., p. 426.
- 170 Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900), p. 381.
- 171 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 97.
- 172 Ibid., p. 96.
- 173 Ibid., pp. 96-97.
- 174 Friedman, "Shadow and Sun", p. 151.
- 175 Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 92-93.
- 176 Ibid., p. 67.
- 177 Ibid., p. 856.
- 178 Ibid., p. 833.
- 179 George Eliot, Middlemarch (1871-72) ed. W.J. Harvey (Middlesex: Penguin, 1976), p. 896.
- 180 Quoted in Davis, Flint and Flame, p. 125.
- 181 Dickens, Bleak House, p. 712.

EPILOGUE: A NOTE ON DICKENS'S LATER  
CAREER AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is a peculiar pitfall of Dickensian scholarship that once one has started to consider this protean novelist one may not know very well when to stop. The temptation to digress, whether into social history or biography or any number of subsidiary issues, is one that students of Dickens will readily attest to, yet a comprehensive commentary is appropriate to an artist whose genius surely lies in his infinite variety. John Russell Brown encourages a "freedom of response" in audiences of Shakespeare;<sup>1</sup> perhaps a comparable fluidity--albeit of a less radical sort than Brown advocates--best accompanies a reading of Dickens. I make these remarks in some measure to justify my own critical methods which I trust do not appear too freewheeling but which, in any case, I believe to be more tenable than a doctrinaire approach. While one can scarcely avoid slanting the evidence one way or another, according to one's biases, it strikes me that the problem with, say, a strictly psychoanalytical interpretation of Bleak House is that it takes so little account of the plenitude of Dickens. Thus, though I largely agree with Lawrence Frank that Bleak House is Dickens's most satisfying revaluation of the Gothic school,<sup>2</sup> I do not wish to be intractable on this point. Critics before Edmund Wilson almost invariably laid emphasis on Dickens's

charming side, the humour and pathos that endeared him to the Victorian public; with few exceptions, critics since have shown more interest in the dark side, obviously because the gloomy Dickens seems a more modern figure. Yet neither view is definitive, and neither can be discussed exclusive of the other. If we must commit ourselves, we had better do as the author and dwell on the romantic side of Bleak House for Dickens's hybrid form of romanticism comprehends both angst and idealism. Though Krook's death is an astonishing tour de force (with all the virtues and limitations that that term implies) and though Esther's civilized love affair with Allan Woodcourt is, in certain respects, cloying, the two in conjunction suggest a positive and negative species of romanticism bound by a single common denominator: Dickens endeavours in either case to elicit an emotional rather than a rational response from the reader. It is through such unscrupulous tactics of persuasion that he hopes, at least to some degree, to effect "a change of heart".

The nightmare world of Bleak House cannot be understood thoroughly without reference to the values with which Dickens seeks to oppose it, values both Carlylean and Dickensian--honour, duty, kindness, imagination--obdurately but sincerely held. This double perspective of Gothic and anti-Gothic, social rot and personal salvation, is a pattern repeated with increasing subtlety but perhaps less vigour in subsequent fictions until in Great Expectations Dickens

finds rather different uses for phantasmagoria. In the early days, in for instance Oliver Twist, he had not thought much beyond giving his--sometimes less than genteel--audience the gooseflesh it apparently craved, often, though not always, in the middle of an object lesson on social welfare. Gleaned from divers sources, some of dubious literary pedigree, the Gothic terrors of his youthful fiction have a certain rude authority and overall intensity that, in general, lift them above their hack antecedents. Yet, surpassingly gruesome though it undoubtedly is, Nancy's murder is almost totally lacking in the larger reverberations of Tulkinghorn's (off-stage) death. If crowded, coincidence-ridden Bleak House appears, at times, extravagantly melodramatic--and few will argue the point--even the most exotic incident fits more or less coherently into Dickens's symbolic vision of haunted England.

The comparatively straightforward narrative structure of his next novel, Hard Times (1854), cannot accommodate nearly the same weight of metaphorical association or volume of grotesquerie as the meshwork of Bleak House, but the shorter fiction has its full share of Gothic monsters nonetheless. Indeed, with much of the clutter removed, the Bounderbys, Gradgrinds and M'Choakumchilds stand out in bolder relief, figures deliberately shallow and one-dimensional--utterly dehumanized--and representing Dickens's gamest attempt at wholly rhetorical characterization. The novel

remains among Dickens's most unified and lucid, far more clear-witted in its exposition of the fact/fancy controversy than Bleak House though thinner-textured and finally less substantial. The polarization of moral forces is, however, deftly managed, the smoke and ashes of Coketown (run everywhere precisely according to Benthamite principles) appearing even more hostile and fruitless alongside the creative exuberance of Sleary's travelling circus. Dickens, of course, could not resist conjuring demons to populate the black country of industrial England, and he was by no means the first writer to exploit the hellish aspect of this blighted landscape; obviously, his use of infernal imagery is more pertinent to Hard Times, where it directly expresses spiritual desolation, than to the somewhat muddled foundry scenes of Bleak House.

Lumbering up and down like "the head of an elephant in a state of melancholy madness",<sup>3</sup> the steam engine--another billowing monster--perfectly embodies the schematized monotony of Coketown, as the "Hands", reduced almost to instinctual behaviour like "the lower creatures of the seashore",<sup>4</sup> disturbingly reflect its soullessness. This last startling image, significant of an appalling degree of alienation, may put us in mind of Eliot's "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/Scuttling across the floors of silent seas" (The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock [1911], 73-74). I do not think the comparison unmerited. Though less puritanical



in his judgements than Eliot, Dickens too perceives the horror that attends an abdication of moral responsibility.

Similar permutations, crustacean and otherwise, occur in Little Dorrit (1855-57), but the novel is most celebrated for its dire images of isolation and imprisonment. The Marshalsea, Bleeding Heart Yard and, on a more personal plane, the house of Clennam, Dickens portrays as places of spiritual bondage as well as physical captivity, while the Circumlocution Office becomes the latest and most terrible instance of the macabre roundabout of Victorian system. The central metaphor of the novel, London as a prison, seems plainly to derive much of its colouring from the claustrophobic ambience of Gothic romance (as too does the image of London as a refuse-heap in Our Mutual Friend), especially those fictions--Udolpho and The Monk being the foremost examples--where people are hopelessly confined against their will through the machinations of wicked authority. The Clennam house in particular Dickens characterizes quite minutely as a crumbling Gothic fortress,<sup>5</sup> and its collapse (prefigured in Oliver Twist, Bleak House and of course Poe) appears fully as portentous an event as Krook's death by spontaneous combustion. But once again, the Carlylean and Dickensian virtues ultimately prevail. In the concluding pages of the novel, Amy Dorrit, another of Dickens's wholesome white sisters, goes down into the tumult of London with her new husband, passing along "in sunshine and shade",<sup>6</sup>

serene and untouched by the commotion.

Dickens, I have said, rejected the Gothic intellectually even while he assented to it metaphorically; as much as the horrid interested him, and as useful as he found it as an instrument of social protest, the Gothic ethos, tending always towards nihilism, hardly accorded with his more sanguine hopes for humanity. Nonetheless, in the final decade of his career, Dickens turned to themes which demonstrate --not exactly romantic agony but at least a dawning recognition of the psychic evil that flows in and out of social evil. The last novels, Great Expectations (1860-61), Our Mutual Friend (1864-65) and The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870), are indisputably the blackest and also, it seems to me, the most conventionally Gothic. In their pitiless, but clearly fascinated, investigation of the labyrinths of the criminal mind, they focus on archetypes of human behaviour which Matthew Lewis and even Mrs. Radcliffe commonly employ, if on a fairly primitive level. The timbre of Dickens's last novels is discernibly different from that of Bleak House: less thundering, less self-consciously figurative, more cynical, possibly more thoughtful. How may we account for the new maturity of Dickens's art, the inward-turning identifiable after Great Expectations? Easy enough to ascribe everything to his well-known marital vicissitudes which, at last, reached a crisis in 1858, and which doubtless left him ruminative and bitter. More judicious perhaps to proffer the simpler

theory that, after bringing the social microcosm pattern to its apogee in Bleak House and Little Dorrit, after weighing the forces of modern European history in A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Dickens naturally sought new inspiration in subject matter of a more personal nature. Yet even in the earlier fiction, he is rarely less than psychologically acute: if not intricately knowing like James, he is at least generally accurate. And even in those later works where the psychology is more elaborately studied, there abides a strong persuasion of specifically social sin. The Dickens of the 1860's, jaundiced and increasingly rigid, sees clearly what the earlier idealist, with his quaintly sentimental notions about the human heart, could only half-suspect: that private vice and public wrong are complementary and, to a great extent, mutually dependent. This is not so much a change of perspective as a deepening of vision.

Dickens's more traditional use of Gothic symbolism in these last years--as an externalization of the soul's corruption--warrants a study of its own, and I can only begin to suggest some of its peculiar qualities. It should be noted, first of all, that Dickens's psychological Gothic, brooding and remarkable though it is, often seems severely limited, not by a failure of imagination but by a tenuous, deviously unbalancing lack of grasp. His talent may with justice be reckoned Promethean. Such an encomium connotes, among other things, an undisciplined, almost lunatic artistry

which expresses itself in wide strokes on an enormous canvas, which catches the contours and the essence of experience but which is simply too impatient to deal adequately with the minutiae and marginalia--an expansionist rather than a minimalist temperament. Hence, though poetically conceived, sharply observed and, in the main, convincing, Dickens's later heroes and villains want the analytical terseness and fineness of detail that an Austen, a George Eliot or a James could supply. He was so long considered such a poor psychologist (by Lewes, James, E.M. Forster et al.) that the current eager reassessment is understandable but also, I feel, at times overzealous and somewhat misleading. For whatever his other graces, Dickens was not a master of nuance: his rather glum moral psychology, with its tortured hearts and forbidden impulses, is a good deal closer to Hawthorne than to Flaubert. But, of course, an exceptional strength resides in the melodramatic, hyperbolic models of mental suffering inherited jointly from the Gothic and Calvinistic literary traditions, and the guilt-ridden milieu of Great Expectations shows the mark of both. Miss Havisham, decked out in her mouldering bridal finery, Magwitch, growling in his heavy chains, belong equally to that nightmare world of inflated passion where the idée fixe, nursed over decades, finally tears one to pieces or explodes one in flames. The two are the ogres of Pip's infancy; they appear to incarnate primal psychic forces, battering his

heart and manipulating his destiny--subtly but thoroughly undermining his "great expectations".

The sustained melancholy of this exceedingly ironic fable is like nothing else in Dickens, yet even here his moral stance remains implicitly--though precariously--life-affirming. Joe Gargery, humble, good-natured, but also innately shrewd, represents a range of positive values which Pip, subverted by his social pretensions, must learn to accept before he may rightly claim the title of gentleman in the true sense of the word. Pip's treatment of Joe is throughout the gauge of his moral worth, and his eventual return to the forge indicates a kind of salvation, an irrevocable, if muted, victory over the proud, deadly phantoms of the past. So, in a different way, does his reunion with a chastened Estella in the revised ending: though psychologically implausible and rather clumsily appended, their chance encounter among the ruins of Satis House suggests a ritual relinquishment of ancient burdens, a new and hard-won maturity. The established sequence of the Bildungsroman is once again immediately apparent, yet Pip's progress is not, in general, distinguished by the naked sort of symbolic patterning that impels Esther's autobiography or even David Copperfield's. Joe serves not as a moral construct like Rouncewell, but simply as a moral norm. And Estella, at least until her phenomenal change of heart, scarcely appears the paradigm of feminine patience and docility to which we are

accustomed in Dickens.<sup>7</sup> She is far more interesting purely as a woman than Esther, but the gain in realism is partly offset by a loss in prophetic power. The very casualness of her conversion argues that Dickens no longer depended quite so heavily on the old iconography and the old ethics, that he no longer saw the need to proselytize quite so fervently. The last novels, jaded, often lacking in humour, reveal what is perhaps the cynicism of the disillusioned romantic. They are for this reason the most nearly Byronic.

Dickens's late preoccupation with human psychology does not, however, entirely overshadow his awareness of social corruption. Great Expectations, with its moneyed fops and parasites, "pierces to the very core of the leisure-class ideal that lurks in the heart of a pecuniary society", as Edgar Johnson says.<sup>8</sup> As in Bleak House, the abundance of Gothic imagery implies that grim death underlies the brilliant surface of the fashionable world. And Our Mutual Friend amounts virtually to a lament for English civilization. Indeed, it is the most distressingly funereal of all Dickens's novels, though a subdued light manages intermittently to break through the mire (issuing principally from Lizzie Hexam, from the Boffins, from saintly Mr. Riah, from tough old Betty Higden and, latterly, from Eugene Wrayburn and a penitent Bella Wilfer). Still, one cannot really feel that the occasional sympathetic figure signifies anything but the common wretch caught in a vise, making his way through the

rubbish as best he can, but pathetically ill-equipped, symbolically or otherwise, to deal the system any mortal blows. No smiling Dame Durden sweeps the cobwebs out of the sky in the novels of the 1860's. Dickens's rather alarming misanthropy at this time (if not quite Swiftean, nonetheless appreciable) effectively robs his characters of the capacity to work such white magic--demythifies them. For Dickens now begins to see that avarice and self-interest are more basic to human nature than any propensity for change. And a society built on such dubious constants cannot genuinely prosper, but must stagnate and finally die. Having, with perhaps considerable storm and stress, arrived at this singularly cheerless conviction, Dickens next undertakes to examine the subtler issue involved--the question of human evil itself--if not to answer, at least to understand. In Edwin Drood, he probes the heart of darkness in a manner patently Gothic, recognizably Christian but also, insofar as it acknowledges the specific burdens of the human psyche, distinctly modern.

Dickens's last unfinished novel is not, as was formerly supposed, merely an evocative potboiler intended to honour or else to compete with Wilkie Collins's Gothic suspense. Although, of course, even such a literal-minded interpretation has a fair claim on our attention (Dickens's sense of his audience being what it was), Drood's famous atmosphere is, I suspect, meant as a tacit social commentary, no less caustic in being implicit. The dust has long set-



tled at Cloisterham, a city perhaps as old as the Druids and, as Dickens demonstrates, quite as dead:

An ancient city, Cloisterham, and no meet dwelling-place for anyone with hankerings after the noisy world. A monotonous, silent city, deriving an earthy flavour throughout from its cathedral crypt, and so abounding in vestiges of monastic graves that the Cloisterham children grow small salad in the dust of abbots and abbesses, and make dirt-pies of nuns and friars; while every ploughman in its outlying fields renders to once puissant Lord Treasurers, Archbishops, Bishops, and such-like the attention which the Ogre in the story-book desired to render to his unbidden visitor, and grinds their bones to make his bread.

The dwellers in this dreary town walk its streets as through the refuse of a lost civilization, and Dickens quietly racks up a telling ideological point: in Cloisterham (transparently Rochester), England's historical past has, in an odd way, become its moral present, the rather surreal juxtaposition of medieval and modern connoting a horrible paralysis, or possibly even a regression, of the human spirit. Gothic imagery, more rife here than anywhere else in Dickens, bespeaks a society beyond help, one that has given up the ghost. Yet Edwin Drood betrays none of the spleen of Our Mutual Friend or even the solicitude that defines Dickens's fiction as a whole. The novel's tone is one of calm resignation, almost of stoicism. I hesitate to use the word "autumnal"--that seems to me a judgement of convenient hindsight--but it does appear that, on the social plane at least, Dickens at last managed to compose himself, if not find peace.

Psychologically, however, the novel is beyond question Dickens's most troubled and intense. For in Edwin Drood



his sometimes ghoulish fascination with aberrant behaviour, indulged in a minor way in his earlier work, is finally given full dominion. Indicative perhaps of Dickens's more conscientious, if also somewhat more sensational, approach to character at this juncture is his virtual abandonment of the rose-coloured visions of hearth and home coveted in the middle novels, those sacrosanct pairings which generally feel rather synthetic, however effective allegorically. For once, the genteel young couple are not in love; indeed, their often strained relationship, the upshot of a preordained engagement, suffices as the fundamental premise for the murder mystery. Neither fits very comfortably into Dickens's customary arrangement for young people: Edwin Drood, the amicable, if slightly thoughtless, engineer whose career hopes are pinned on Egypt, proves himself an incapable hero by (apparently) getting murdered before the book is very far under way; and Rosa Bud is just a girl, as fragile and defenseless as her unfortunate name suggests. She and the other well-intentioned characters, Mr. Grewgious and Minor Canon Crisparkle, can struggle only feebly against the overpowering ennui of Cloisterham. The gracious, but relatively impotent, domestic virtues which they abide by have been subtly disengaged from the moral centre of the novel.

While, of course, little can be stated categorically about this always tantalizing fragment, it does appear that Dickens has substantially dispensed with the formal,

somewhat specialized mode of characterization typical of Bleak House or Hard Times. Neville and Helena Landless, those weird, rather inscrutable twins from the Orient, burst like the blaze of the Turkish Sultan's scimitar upon dull Cloisterham society, and neither Cloisterham nor, one gathers, Dickens knows quite what to make of them. They crack the mold, impressing us less as moral icons than titanic forces of nature, at once noble and barbaric, ferocious in both love and hate. To be sure Dickens was capitalizing on Victorian curiosity about the mysterious East, yet these Landlesses (literally landless--cast adrift from their native land and from social convention) seem creatures of superior power, conceived without the bounds of Victorian bourgeois morality.

And so does John Jasper, the miserable choirmaster, on an even grander scale. Though, as one might expect, established in a more intelligible social context than an Ambrosio or a Montoni, this golden-voiced malefactor is of the same lineage--perhaps the last of the line. In the manner of every Gothic hero-villain, Jasper feels painfully at odds with his environment, a foul humour which he describes in a rather futile exchange with the uncomprehending Edwin Drood:

"The cramped monotony of my existence grinds me away by the grain. How does our service sound to you?"

"Beautiful! Quite celestial!"

"It often sounds to me quite devilish. I am so weary of it. The echoes of my own voice among the arches seem to mock me with my daily drudging round. No wretched monk who droned his life away in that gloomy place before me can have been more tired of

it than I am. He could take for relief (and did take) to carving demons out of the stalls and seats and desks. What shall I do? Must I take to carving them out of my heart?"<sup>10</sup>

A premier citizen of this enervating cathedral town, Jasper writhes in the strait jacket of his own eminence. Like many a Gothic hero before him, he continually puts himself in false positions, appearing docile and respectable in public, harbouring murderous and otherwise unnatural desires in secret. If, as Lawrence Frank contends,<sup>11</sup> Jasper's terrifying passion for Rosa parallels Ambrosio's hunger for the pallid Antonia, surely his shimmering, opium-induced hallucinations of oriental luxury recall Vathek plainly enough. Yet Dickens once again invigorates the moldy genre. Although in some ways his technique seems repellently hard and clinical--the mystery-thriller format obviously dictates that the killer's thoughts be withheld from the reader--Dickens nonetheless presents as absorbing and ambivalent a picture of evil as may be found anywhere in Victorian fiction. Mr. Sapsea, the imbecile Lord Mayor of Cloisterham, and Honeythunder, the swaggering philanthropist, are more familiar conceptions--the flaccid, self-important authority figures whose hypocrisy the younger Dickens took great delight in sending up. If this time they feel a trifle shopworn, it may be that their folly no longer incited Dickens to quite the same intensity of rage. Jasper, the tormented soul lashed about by jealousy and hate, is the pivot on which the novel turns and, though the author extends to him scant

sympathy, the anguish of the sinner's alienation comes through with remarkable poignancy. Jasper is no Raskolnikov and yet, in his own more conservative fashion, Dickens was reaching towards the symbolic pathology of Dostoyevsky--another artist profoundly indebted to the gloomy Gothic tradition.

Where or how far Dickens would have carried the Gothic after Edwin Drood obviously no one can say. It does, however, seem a logical inference that he would have continued moving deeper into disturbed states of consciousness although, indifferent to metaphysics as he was, he likely could never have conceived as searing a vision as that of Dostoyevsky's estranged "underground man". Yet such could never have been his design. Dickens's novels are not, after all, in the final analysis, "high" art--esoteric in their meaning and specialized in their appeal--but rather what we might call "broad" art--panoramic, heterogeneous and unabashedly popular as literature rarely is anymore. Trite as it may sound, it is probably true that everyone can enjoy Dickens on his own level, from the ingenuous child to the academic. For not far beneath the loosely-woven ideology, the Manichean symbolism, the social detail and psychological observation, is a master showman's skill, that perfectly calculated narrative drive that keeps all these particles afloat and stable, that permits them to interact in a meaningful, dramatic way. Certainly, by the time of Bleak House, Dickens

had focussed the connotative possibilities of Gothic romance into an eloquent and reasonably integrated poetic vision; and yet, for all that, we may be equally struck by his peerless facility in handling the mechanics of Gothic melodrama --how, for instance, he delays the revelation of Krook's combustion until precisely the strategic moment, how throughout the novel he paces his effects of terror and suspense with the wit of a virtuoso. The machinery may sometimes creak a little, but we never doubt Dickens's sincerity as we must occasionally doubt Matthew Lewis's or Mrs. Radcliffe's. It is abundantly clear that melodrama, artfully deployed, can function as an unbeatable--if hardly sporting--instrument of propaganda, that it can support a relatively uncomplicated, deeply-felt message simply because it twists and turns its audience so efficiently. Still, on his own terms, Dickens was an honourable sensationalist, scare-mongering not only to make money (though this was scarcely a negligible consideration) but also, and more consequentially, to get through to his readers about matters of grave moral concern--to assault them, if necessary, in order to make his point. And mixed up in Dickens's passionately committed humanism is a more personal interest, a wish to connect with his public on an intimate level as a beloved artist, a real need to be considered, at all times, accessible.

Dickens, Edgar Johnson has written, was "not primarily a systematic thinker, but a man of feeling, intuitive

and emotional".<sup>12</sup> Any final appraisal of Dickens's art must take account of this important fact for, in many ways, it is his depth of feeling that gives his pluralistic, sometimes amorphous social philosophy its vitality and definition. He felt, and wanted his audience to feel, a sorrow and an outrage at injustice on whichever end of the political spectrum it occurred. Often, of course, he expected them to feel terror, initially for its own sake, later in the service of social transformation, and it is his opposition of keen emotion and "system" which, more than anything else, allies him to the anarchic Gothic tradition. Yet it would be a serious mistake to suppose that Dickens ever embraced the bleak tenets of dark Romanticism. The fine flashes of nihilist poetry in Beckford, Maturin, Mary Shelley and even, occasionally, Lewis scarcely palliate the madness and despair at the centre of the Gothic world, and such despondency was fundamentally alien to Dickens's more or less conciliatory temperament.

The difference can be stated another way. The Gothic milieu, with its racking devastation, its godlessness and hellish chaos, is post-apocalyptic. We feel at the end of Vathek or The Monk or Melmoth that all meaning, all spirit has been destroyed, that nothing remains save a dull void. Dickens's perspective of Victorian civilization is, however, pre-apocalyptic. Although perhaps teetering on the edge of full-scale disaster, England yet hangs on by

a hair's breadth, and in Bleak House and the other middle novels one can easily read the "sub-text"--that there is still time. While Dickens employs Gothic motifs (the corpse, the inferno, the ruined castle) fairly constantly in his fiction, the guarded optimism which he managed to maintain through most of his career allows some relief from Romantic anguish. In this framework, the Ghost's Walk and Krook's death seem narrative contrivances more cautionary than directly allegorical and Dickens's Chancery world a sweeping prophetic revelation he hoped would not entirely come true. Even those late works which are less insistently mystical and more conventionally doom-laden retain at least an ordinary Christian faith in the capacity of the virtuous to raise themselves a grade or two above the general muck. Even in Edwin Drood, the most dismayingly elegiac of Dickens's novels, there persists a certain unspecified hopefulness. That "small salad" that grows in the dust of Cloisterham holds the implicit promise of regeneration.

Carlyle dismissed Dickens's fiction as soft-headed and one suspects that Byron would have despised it as bourgeois. Both charges are to some extent justified, since Dickens's sentimental ideology is not intellectually demanding and since his morality rarely trespasses beyond conservative Victorian bounds of "decency". Yet derision is too facile a response to what is callow and commonplace in Dickens. For if he sometimes courted respectability, he was far

from being a gentleman-novelist like Thackeray or Trollope --decorous but a little arid. And if philosophically he seldom demonstrates the reckless courage of the Romantic iconoclast, the moral standards to which he adheres are, for the most part, creditable and constructive, forming the solid, unspectacular basis for his corrosive social commentary. Still, the charge of orthodoxy cannot honestly be ignored: Dickens's idealization of middle-class humanism in Bleak House and other novels jars somewhat clumsily with the almost luxuriously obsessive Gothic imagery, as we have seen, and it can be argued that he dilutes the primitive liberating energy of the Gothic with precisely the mild, innocuous values which the dark romancers rebelled so ruthlessly against. The question therefore still remains: did Dickens conventionalize the Gothic?

It must be owned that, in some respects, he did. Partly, this is the inevitable result of Dickens's eclecticism--his application of the Gothic not as the keystone of a chronicle of abject ruin but almost purely as a metaphorical device, one of several key modes of stylization developed to an extraordinary degree of sophistication in the novels of his maturity. Mainly, though, he just could not believe in it. For all his bitter consciousness of the pusillanimity of Mrs. Grundy, Dickens was essentially a middle-class conservative, and however much the Gothic excited him and appealed to his sense of the macabre, the



grisly excesses of the Schauer-Romantik school scarcely seemed conducive to social harmony. But traces of the bourgeois in Dickens are not necessarily fatal. The glamorous romantic defeatism of the late Gothic is itself sometimes rather offensive, not because it breaks taboos but because it exults in its own amorality, making a kind of sport or idle entertainment out of despair--which is, I think, a form of decadence. Dickens could only be appalled by such listless ethics for, whatever the limitations of his own social theory, it at least has the virtue of integrity.

But Dickens's ideas are, I believe, ultimately less significant than the fervour with which they are expressed. If we love Dickens, it is less for his mind and more for his humanity translated into art, that noble regard for the multiformity of the race which imbues every street scene and every domestic vignette, and which, in the warmth of its devotion to the human cause, virtually disarms all quibbling about his alleged naïveté. The urgency of Dickens's message has in itself a moral beauty which becomes an aesthetic beauty as it passes into the radical prose of Dickens's greatest fiction. It was, of course, this passion that disturbed some contemporary critics (who lamented Dickens's messianic pretentiousness) yet it is this same passion that puts across even the tritest symbolism and the most genteel sentiments in Bleak House. And again it is this passion--so fierce and yet so much more tender than Carlyle's coldly

superior oratory--that elevates Dickens to the front rank of Victorian poets.

I have tried to show in detail to what extent Dickens partakes of the Gothic imagination and, equally important, to what extent he does not. It is necessary to consider both sides, for contrasts are often as revealing as comparisons. Thus, though Dickens's attraction to the ghoulish continues undiminished throughout his literary life, an innate conservatism always checks these morbid tendencies before they arrive at the disastrous extremes of Gothic romance. And though Dickens scorns stuffy rationalism as instinctively as Byron, his dissent in general takes less dissolute forms. I have chosen to emphasize the ethos of Dickens's middle period because it seems to me that the moral ardor graphically conveyed in Bleak House above all is fundamentally more interesting than the comparative moral torpor of Our Mutual Friend and Edwin Drood. The late novels, for all their bite and technical bravura, are, I feel, spoiled to some degree by a kind of submerged rancour which, however closely it approximates Romantic malaise, tends to contract and becloud meaning more than it expands and illuminates--though I grant the point is arguable. It may be less arguable that Bleak House, in which hope eternally succeeds horror, is far more illustrative of the so-called Victorian frame of mind than Edwin Drood. In ways perhaps not fully conscious to the author, Bleak House

allegorizes the transition from Romanticism to Victorianism; this symbolic progression remains one of the novel's permanent fascinations.

Forster should rightly be left the last word, for he knew Dickens best and, almost alone among his contemporaries, recognized what an odd marriage of the sacred and the profane, of high moral attitude and low literary lineage, Dickens's art represents. Carlyle is in Dickens's background, but so are Mrs. Radcliffe and The Terrific Register, and it is the peculiar triumph of Bleak House that this very mixed bag manages somehow to assemble itself into a lucid, extroverted profile of Victorianism. In the Life, Forster describes how Dickens moralizes and aestheticizes the Gothic and other literature of primitive myth for the honest aim of edification, "The social and manly virtues he desired to teach, were to him not less the charm of the ghost, the goblin, and the fairy fancies of his childhood." And he adds perceptively, "What now were to be conquered were the more formidable dragons and giants that had their places at our own hearths."<sup>13</sup> These monsters slain, the ruined house may be set in order, and the human spirit reclaimed.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John Russell Brown, Free Shakespeare (London: Heinemann, 1974), p. 95.

<sup>2</sup>Frank, "Intelligibility of Madness", p. 151.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Dickens, Hard Times (1854) ed. David Craig (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970), p. 65.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>5</sup>See Kirkpatrick, "Gothic Flame of Charles Dickens", p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit (1855-57) ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 802.

<sup>7</sup>Biddy, Joe's second wife, provides the requisite sweetness and light, yet she is hardly given the same prominence as Estella and, like Joe, does not strictly suggest a moral archetype.

<sup>8</sup>Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 989.

<sup>9</sup>Charles Dickens, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870) ed. Margaret Caldwell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>11</sup>Frank, "Intelligibility of Madness", p. 166.

<sup>12</sup>Johnson, Tragedy and Triumph, p. 1128.

<sup>13</sup>John Forster, Life, p. 317.

## APPENDIX

### THE ILLUSTRATIONS OF BLEAK HOUSE

It has become increasingly fashionable in recent years to regard Phiz's illustrations to Dickens's novels as something more than mere window-dressing, a vagary of Victorian publishing practice. The notion is still fairly new, but not at all unwarranted for, as Q.D. Leavis and Michael Steig have demonstrated in their valuable studies of the subject,<sup>1</sup> the etchings that Phiz (Hablot Knight Browne) supplied for ten of the novels, generally at the rate of two a monthly number, convey Dickens's themes remarkably well, and often with great subtlety, without, however, losing their aesthetic autonomy. It is hardly surprising that, as a rule, the drawings appear so unusually appropriate to Dickens's text since they are the product of a thorough collaboration, the author dictating the salient features of each plate quite specifically. Probably the crucial (and more interesting) issue is just the reverse: the suitability of the text for visual representation. One can scarcely conceive of an illustrated Jane Austen or George Eliot, and an illustrated Ulysses is clearly out of the question; why then does an illustrated Dickens seem so desirable, indeed virtually inevitable?

The answer may be obvious. When Romantic painters like Fuseli or Benjamin West depicted Lear on the heath or

Macbeth with the Weird Sisters in an appalling nightmare world, they were responding not only to the dramatic power of Shakespeare's conceptions but also to the visual extravagance of his invention. Dickens's talents are not far different, surely just as undisciplined. "Bathed in the violent chiaroscuro of his fancy", Lord David Cecil writes, "London and its butchers and bakers show transformed and distorted, so that eyes gleam from black caverns, noses depend enormous and legs stretch to grotesque spindles".<sup>2</sup> A flamboyant, indeed, obsessive, visual imagination such as this could hardly fail to excite contemporary illustrators. It is, of course, one of the qualities that renders Dickens--and also Shakespeare--so perennially attractive to film-makers.

Bleak House, arguably the most impressively visionary of Dickens's novels, certainly the most self-consciously pictorial, offered unprecedented scope for Phiz's abilities, yet the illustrations are uneven. If the best of them show a consummate artist at the pinnacle of his career, the less successful plates portend the relatively swift decline that ensued. Still, many of Phiz's designs for the novel are uniquely and gravely beautiful, and even those indifferently executed evince an unwonted formality of composition. What strikes us first about these illustrations is the horrific gloom of the most memorable: the dark plate technique that Phiz uses for ten of the forty etchings gives an impression of shadowy depth that seems consonant with Dickens's intens-

ified social perspective. What may, on due reflection, strike us next about them is their desolation. The Hogarthian style typical of Phiz in, say Nicholas Nickleby or Martin Chuzzlewit--satirical, crowded, hectic and filled with significant detail--has been largely supplanted by a sinister Romantic chiaroscuro, with the human figure either omitted entirely or represented as very tiny in the frame. Although the earlier favoured mode survives in plates as delicately witty as "The Dancing School" or as mordant as the intricately emblematic "Attorney and Client, Fortitude and Impatience", it is those ten murky tableaux, all but one derived from the Lady Dedlock plot, that most effectively actualize the portentous Gothic atmosphere of Bleak House. The novel's illustrations, on the whole, merit a more extensive treatment than I can give them; my commentary is therefore limited to a dozen or so of the most revelatory--by which I mean the most "Gothic"--of Phiz's etchings, several of which are reproduced below.

The frontispiece (Fig. 1), picturing the place in Lincolnshire when "the waters are out", establishes a sombre, apprehensive mood as efficiently as do the first two chapters of the novel, yet this rather stagnant scene is additionally, and fairly rigidly, allegorical. As rendered here, barely distinguishable in the grey twilight and palely menaced by the bordering vegetation, Chesney Wold has the aspect of a haunted castle. One appreciates how punctiliously Phiz fol-

lows the text on this score: the quagmires and "melancholy trees" that Dickens specifies are suggestively sketched, while the whole dismal prospect seems rank with mould and rot, "as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves". The family manor, indeed, appears quite literally to be fading away, the object presumably being to symbolize, in one definitive image, both the passing of the old feudal order and, more broadly, the languishing of contemporary English civilization.

Juxtaposed in ironic and, almost certainly, deliberate contrast to this scape of vanished glory is the intimate title-page vignette of Jo, the crossing-sweeper, caught loitering, broom in hand, on market-day. The two drawings, in fact, face each other in the original bound edition (1853) of Bleak House,<sup>3</sup> and such a contiguity alerts the wary reader to the comprehensiveness of the novel's social interests even before he reaches the table of contents. As well, it emphasizes "the indifference of the powerful classes toward the powerless", as Michael Steig suggests,<sup>4</sup> and further hints at some tangible connection between the high and the low, the precise nature of which the narrative bids fair to unfold. Artful pictorial clues of this sort are wholly characteristic of Phiz's collaborations with Dickens.

Two very different etchings, diverse even stylistically, thus gain a measure of their meaning simply from their mutual proximity. Generally though, in the interpolated plates, this strategy is cleverly reversed: Phiz implies a



continuity between subjects widely separated in the text through the use of illustrational motifs.<sup>5</sup> Such visual coherence is by and large effectively maintained in the eerie pair of etchings concerning the odious Mr. Krook. The one, titled "The Lord Chancellor Copies from Memory", presents the rag dealer in his cluttered shop, chalking the letter "J" (for Jarndyce) in flawless legal script as Esther attends uneasily. While handsome enough in itself, with careful shading and much arresting detail, in most respects this striking plate wants the inexpressible macabre-poetic force of Dickens's own account of the incident (in chapter 5). One remarks with some disappointment that the piled-up rubbish of Krook's warehouse (not conspicuously forensic, apart from an enormous, and undoubtedly emblematic, set of scales at the left of the picture) is blandly realized, exhibiting little of that magical singularity which, for instance, distinguishes Cattermole's Gothic interiors for The Old Curiosity Shop. And Krook himself more resembles a harmless eccentric than the gnarled old root designated in the text--such exorbitantly grotesque imaginings are perhaps best viewed with the inward eye.

Despite failures of this nature (which may, in any case, merely reflect the limitations of the illustrator's art), the etching has, as Steig says,<sup>6</sup> a spooky, ominous quality that almost subliminally prepares one for Krook's bizarre death, represented in the complementary plate, "The

Appointed Time" (Fig. 2). Some of the signs and tokens in "The Lord Chancellor" are far from propitious: the black rag doll curiously suspended from the shop window, the grinning demon's mask adjacent to it, the cat crouched like some fiendish familiar on its master's shoulder, all look darkly threatening, while the mysterious halation surrounding Krook seems intended as an obscure foreshadowing of his phenomenal doom.

The second plate in the sequence, of the catastrophe itself, is, I think, the logical culmination of such unfavourable iconography. Here Phiz employs basically the same imagery as in the earlier scene, but more fantastically, as if to accord with the uncommon circumstances. In conformity with the narrative, Lady Jane makes another appearance, now maddened with terror at the sight (and smell) of the greasy patch of flooring, her back arched and her tail bristling impressively. And, in this phantasmal world where things regularly reveal themselves as more animated than people, the rag doll has grown eyes which survey the room with a semblance of alarm. There was perhaps no way for Phiz to approximate the bombast of Dickens's prose, either in its sensationalism (a graphic visualization of the event would be merely disgusting) or in its virtually untranslatable tone of apocalyptic wrath. It should be noted too that he seriously mitigates even his best effects in this plate by giving the two human spectators, Guppy and Tony Jobling, ab-

surdly inapt expressions of comic disbelief (though these possibly convey something of the sick humour that infuses the episode). In general, however, the text is well-served, and this secondary but nonetheless estimable function clearly remains the principal objective of the illustrator.

The appropriately sooty look of both these etchings, though accomplished through conventional technique, to some degree anticipates the dramatic texturing of the dark plates in the latter half of the novel. And, while we need not overstate the case, the artist's ingenuity--or, alternatively, the author's--may have been such that the transitional style of the Krook "diptych" was exactly calculated. Surely the nauseously heavy vapour that rolls through the Lord Chancellor's chambers in "The Appointed Time" bears an appreciable figurative relation to the still thicker and blacker obscurity of a muddy panorama like that designated "The Night". If Phiz does not and, one rather suspects, cannot evolve a mode of illustration wholly adequate to the almost incredible eclecticism of Dickens's symbolism, at any rate in these etchings he makes palpable the metaphorical blindness central to the design of the novel.

Phiz's rendering of Krook's disagreeable end is premonitory in another sense as well. It is the first plate to seem significantly underpopulated. Guppy and Jobling, of course, cower to one side in a broad caricature of abject terror, but what absorbs our attention more immediately

is the empty chair from which all the offensive matter emanates. Suddenly and unaccountably, the junk collector has vanished ("...the burning smell is there--and the soot is there, and the oil is there--and he is not there!"),<sup>7</sup> and the point is made more poignant by the survival of his personal effects: his spectacles, his pipe, his cap and gown. Bearing in mind Dickens's rather horrible characterization of Grandfather Smallweed as "a mere clothes-bag with a black skull-cap on the top of it",<sup>8</sup> one may suppose that Krook too has been thoroughly "thingified", that, figuratively, he has arrived at that dubious state of nonexistence for which so many others appear destined in a dehumanizing, materialistic culture. And Phiz manages somehow to give such nullity tactile dimensions. Indeed, the peculiar quality that defines this etching, and not a few of those that follow, might accurately--if somewhat paradoxically--be termed "absence".

Certainly, the word is just to describe the distinctive feature of "The Ghost's Walk" (Fig. 3), the first of the dark plates in the novel proper. As in the text (ch. 36), the chilly grandeur of the balustrades at Chesney Wold provides a kind of objective correlative to Esther's dread of herself on abruptly learning of her secret kinship with the doomed house of Dedlock. Again, the Gothic iconography seems meant to adumbrate, in accessible terms, the decline and death of the aristocracy. With the subtler modulation allowed for by the new (and taxing) dark plate method,<sup>9</sup> Phiz

achieves some extraordinarily evocative effects: the castle turrets gleam dimly in the dusk, and the sky has a hazily forbidding cast impossible to simulate through ordinary means. The only living creature at all in evidence in this depressingly barren scene is a solitary bird (bat?) gliding inconspicuously over the park. The centre of interest is, however, the shrieking gargoyle in the foreground, and its prominence in the composition possibly connotes the inhuman isolation--the dissociation--of Dickens's nightmare world.

Phiz wisely makes no vulgar attempt to materialize the (in any case, equivocal) ghost of family tradition, but instead insinuates the spectral through a cunning, if somewhat artificial, deployment of light and shadow. A comparable indefinite supernaturalism informs "Sunset in the Long Drawing-room at Chesney Wold" and likewise the post-mortem view of Tulkinghorn's room "A New Meaning in the Roman", both plates once more conspicuously devoid of human interest. The former, easily the most luxuriant of Phiz's designs for Bleak House, displays the trappings of nobility in tireless detail, and chiefly in rococo: a lady's fan lies carelessly discarded on the floor, a guitar rests on the chaise longue and all around the pictured Dedlocks gaze down vacantly from their gilded frames. Except in oils or statuary, nothing of human shape disturbs the dull repose of this show of hereditary wealth, and the moral of the etching is perhaps not undividable. The unearthly shade that rears up, appar-

ently out of nowhere, as if to engulf Lady Dedlock's image, has a more private--though still immediately obvious--significance; interestingly, it finds roughly its opposite number in the splendid "Roman" plate. While in one the evening gloom foretells the end of life in familiar Christian terms, in the other the morning sunlight ironically discloses traces of a brutal murder. The bloodstain which, as Dickens informs us, "might be almost covered with a hand",<sup>10</sup> is the focus of the latter composition. All the major lines ineluctably converge on it, not only the shaft of daylight streaming through the window but also (adding a fantastic touch) the pointed finger of an amazed Allegory on the ceiling. If the troublesome patch and the unoccupied chair close by inescapably recall "The Appointed Time", the echo was surely premeditated. The point of either and, in some sense, of nearly every one of the dark plates in Bleak House is, to quote Mr. Weevle once again, that "he is not there."

"Tom-all-Alone's" (Fig. 4), among the most celebrated of Phiz's illustrations for the novel, continues much in this vein, affording proof that alienation is not strictly an upper-class ailment. Hogarth's "Gin Lane" evidently served as the prototype<sup>11</sup> but, if anything, Phiz's is the blacker conception--barer, dirtier and, I believe, more Gothic. While this Tom only spottily suggests the noxious urban inferno of the text (Phiz is, after all, not Gustave Doré), the etching does succeed in communicating, through the

most economical means, a powerful sense of the death and decay endemic to the place. A rat in one corner and piles of filth distributed throughout are quite enough to signify the pestilence--physical and moral--that Dickens reckons Tom's revenge. The hideous thoroughfare indeed has the likeness of a contemporary ruin and, as Michael Steig astutely perceives,<sup>12</sup> the angled beams that shore up the crumbling tenements so insecurely lend the scene a formal symmetry uneasily at odds with what we know to be their purpose. The main timber, which, gibbet-like, overhangs (and neatly frames) the upper edges of the picture, in fact seems all that prohibits a total structural collapse. Such an unusual device tends also to promote a feeling of enclosure suitable to the milieu as Dickens envisages it. But then the whole blasted landscape looks disturbingly claustrophobic: the eye perforce is drawn into the blind depths of the composition, moving from the wooden outer arch, which appears virtually extrinsic to the plate, to the crazy, narrow houses, inclining slightly forward, and finally to the slender second arch into the churchyard, through which a few tumbled-down tombstones are just discernible. The contrast between this pest-hole (where, of course, Nemo lies buried and from which, symbolically, Tom's avenging ghost issues forth) and the church tower looming imposingly and impersonally over the pollution is a bitter spectacle indeed. Almost, one feels, as a caustic corrective to such grossly misplaced religiosity, Krook's

horrid black doll reappears, this time inexplicably depending from a doorway; under the circumstances, it now must seem a devil doll.

If, both in detail and design, "Tom-all-Alone's" evokes Hogarth, it might not be too fanciful to submit that, in a general way, "The Lonely Figure" (Fig. 5) bears the imprint of Turner. Inevitably, considering the nature of his chosen medium, Phiz's lighting effects are less dramatic, his definition rather sharper but, for all this, the etching reveals an interest in such lofty subjects as the smallness of man and the enormity and indifference of Nature more or less consistent with the thematic concerns of Romantic painting. The prospect is still too finite ever to be counted sublime, yet Phiz's version of the flight of Lady Dedlock (ch. 56) attests to an appetite for the picturesque which Dickens's fiction, with its unwavering social perspective, could rarely do anything to appease. (The artist had better luck in his collaborations with Ainsworth and, most especially, Charles Lever.)<sup>13</sup> As in previous dark plates, the view is at once manifestly English and disconcertingly alien. One notes, in particular, how the implements of the brick-maker's trade have been imbued, by some unknown agency, with an air of indefinable peril. One, a curious spike-wheeled contraption set precariously on a hillock, appears about to roll down and flatten Lady Dedlock as she makes for a ramshackle shelter; the other, a mill of some sort, stretches



out "like an instrument of human torture"<sup>14</sup> as if to impale her. And spanning the horizon at regular intervals, looking remarkably like Mexican pyramids, as Steig observes,<sup>15</sup> are the brick kilns. These weird stone outcroppings, perhaps more than any other aspect of the scene, reflect the dream-like disorientation of that wintry day and night.

The Dedlock tragedy finally plays itself out in the penultimate dark plate, a simple, eloquent study ironically captioned "The Morning". Indeed, there is nothing hopeful about this picture: the single lamp burning over the iron gate sheds only the feeblest light, and the pitiful figure sprawled across the steps without much individuality looks emphatically stone cold dead. Quite possibly, Phiz (or Dickens) planned the plate to represent the consummation of Lady Dedlock's earlier presentiment of imminent disaster--"What was [Tulkinghorn's] death but the keystone of a gloomy arch removed, and now the arch begins to fall in a thousand fragments, each crushing and mangling piecemeal!"<sup>16</sup> Certainly, the rubble heaped around the crooked grave markers inside the burial ground and the mottled archway (if not crumbling, at any rate cracked and discoloured) above it do much to further this impression. The etching, in any case, completes the pictorial sequence begun in "Consecrated Ground" (a somewhat bloodless depiction of the churchyard from the opposite angle) and continued, as we have seen, in "Tom-all-Alone's". Fittingly, the mood induced at length is one of

deathly calm, as of all energy now irrevocably spent.

The last of the illustrations for Bleak House, and unfortunately among the least satisfactory, is "The Mausoleum at Chesney Wold"--as static and uninteresting a composition as Phiz ever devised. Conceptually, this endpiece remains moderately provocative, and reasonably successful as a visual summation of the novel's themes. The grim finality inherent in the rather gruesome subject matter in truth gives the etching almost the status of a coda. One can certainly respect the overall intention: the plate seems unmistakably designed as a categorical--though by no means jubilant--reiteration of the irrelevance of the nobility to Victorian England, and even the morbidity appears appropriate to a work whose main concern, in many ways, is the cold death of the heart. But that said, one can only regret that the execution fails to measure up. In view of the extraordinary illusions of perspective compassed in "Tom-all-Alone's" and some of the other dark plates, this latest is surprisingly flat and uninvolving. Flanked by a couple of clumsy demons, the vault itself looks squat and ugly, and the surrounding foliage, rather crudely roughed in, is straggly at best. That such a trite construction terminates a variable but often brilliant series of etchings is, of course, doubly to be deplored.

Whether one judges this singularly inelegant memento mori tranquil and elegiac or forlorn and cruelly despairing--

difficult to say which--one must concede that solemnity and long shadows are markedly out of keeping with the perfectly happy ending that Dickens supplies. It may be simply that ruination makes a more engrossing picture than affirmation (as vice is often livelier and more alluring than virtue), but Dickens's romantic idealism apparently disposed his illustrator to less exalted efforts than did the darker side of his imagination. Though Esther figures in something like half of the illustrations--a record which no other character can remotely match--the little woman never registers as a sufficiently distinct presence pictorially. In all but a few plates, she visibly recedes before the towering grotesques (Krook, Skimpole, Turveydrop) with whom she is frequently depicted, and in several, her features are partially or wholly concealed behind her bonnet. Of course, one may argue, and with some justice, that such passivity accurately reflects her role in the novel as a self-effacing yet perceptive observer of the human scene. Her special beauty, after all, rests not in her physiognomy (which, anyway, could not be rendered without offence beyond that crucial tenth number) but in her resolve of purpose and generosity of spirit. As one might expect, Phiz cannot conceive a precise visual parallel to Dickens's peculiar brand of sentimental mysticism. However, he does manage to suggest--albeit somewhat obliquely--Esther's symbolic function as Dame Durden, housekeeper for the world. In pointed contrast to her tortured

mother, Esther is never once pictured alone, and a number of illustrations show her quietly engaged in relieving the weary or the indigent, or otherwise connecting. "Nurse and Patient", portraying Esther's attendance at her maidservant Charley's sickbed, is typical in this regard. The conception may be banal--a routine Victorian evocation of patient womanhood--but Phiz lends this homely vignette a wonderful amount of conviction.

Yet it is not honest Esther that we likely remember from the illustrations but the solitary figure of Lady Dedlock, buffeted by the elements and finally expiring at her lover's grave. Sensational images of this sort carry a potency beyond their specific context, fixing in our minds a frighteningly hopeless and doom-laden Gothic milieu in which puny humanity is easily overwhelmed. Still, by its very nature, Phiz's is a recreative rather than a creative art and, as Dickens's genius grew more abstract and mysterious, as, in Q.D. Leavis's phrase, he became his own illustrator,<sup>17</sup> he no longer had need of quite such elaborate visual reinforcement. Only illustrations of almost unimaginable virtuosity would be equal to Dickens's description of Coketown in his next novel, and even in Bleak House, one feels, at times, a slight sense of strain and occasionally a little frustration at the ineffable not being caught. Phiz's achievement remains a sizable one nonetheless. In dwelling on violent death, on emptiness, on things instead of people, he

admirably conveys the horror of Dickens's Chancery world.

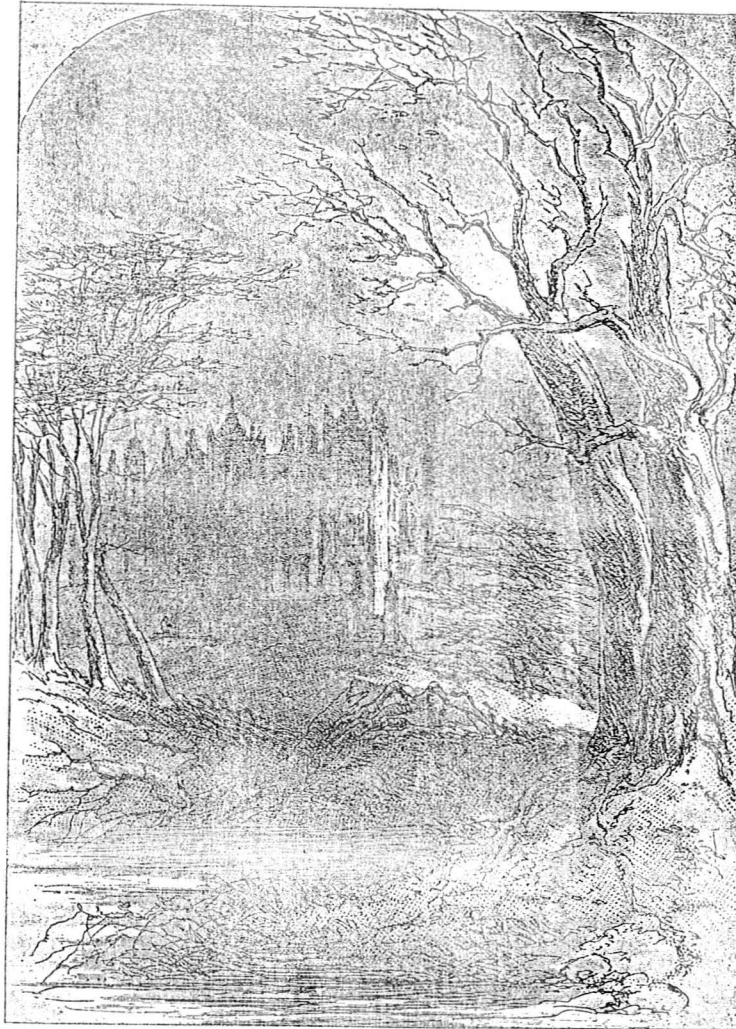
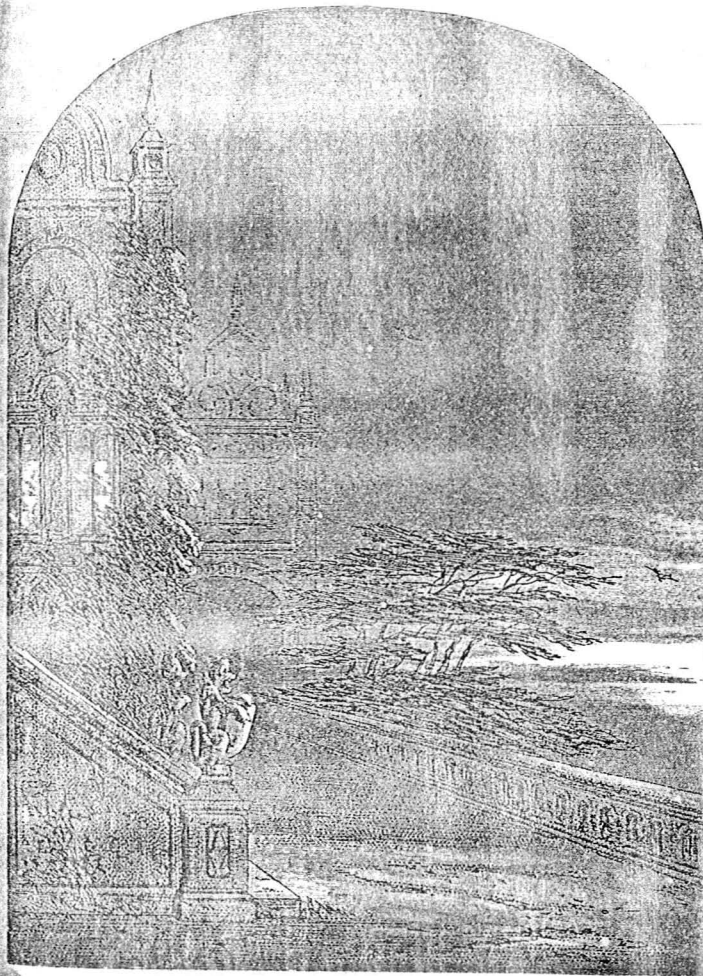


Fig. 1



*The Appointed Time*

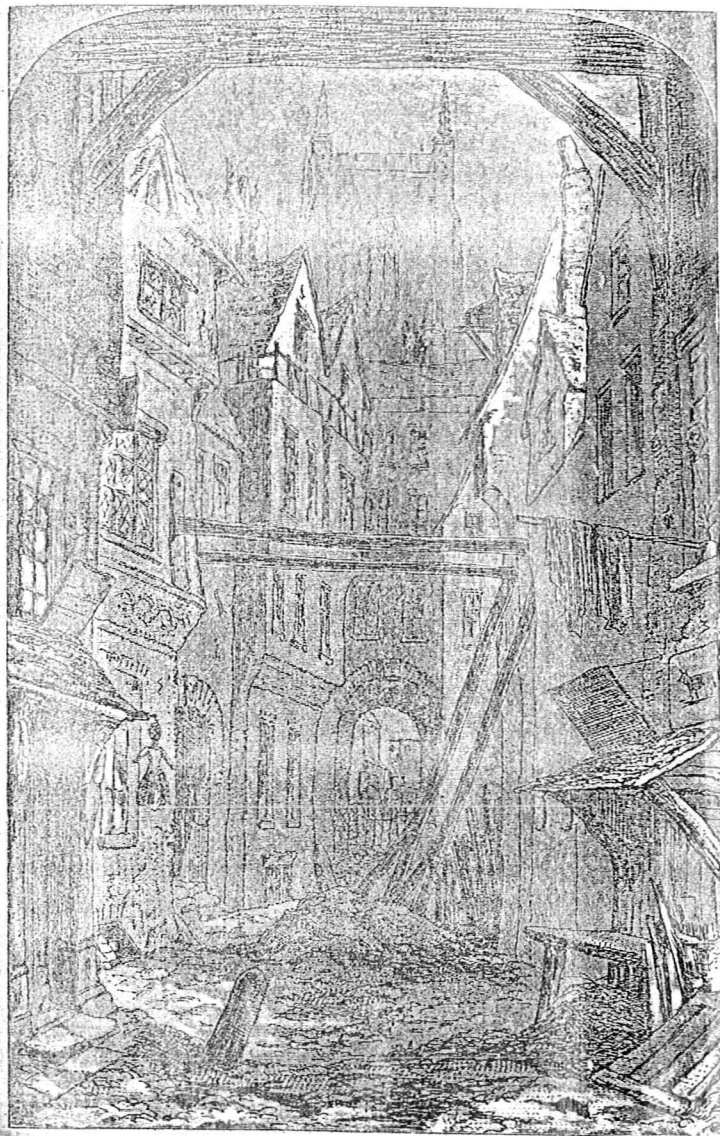
Fig. 2



*The Ghost's Walk*  
(p. 514)

Fig. 3





*Tom-all-Alone's*

(p. 627)

Fig. 4

*The Lonely Figure*  
(p. 767)



Fig. 5

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Q.D. Leavis, "The Dickens Illustrations: Their Function", in Dickens the Novelist, pp. 332-371; Michael Steig, Dickens and Phiz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978). All illustrations are reproduced from the Oxford Illustrated edition of Bleak House (1971).

<sup>2</sup>Clayborough, Grotesque, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup>It should be noted that the frontispiece and title-page were originally published, along with two other plates, in the final double number of Bleak House. Their eventual disposition at the beginning of the first volume edition was, however, obviously precalculated.

<sup>4</sup>Steig, Dickens and Phiz, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup>Sometimes the captions alone are enough to indicate a correspondence. Note in particular the series of contrasts suggested by "The Young Man of the Name of Guppy" and "The Old Man of the Name of Tulkinghorn", "Light" and "Shadow", "The Night" and "The Morning".

<sup>6</sup>Steig, Dickens and Phiz, p. 136.

<sup>7</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 454.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 289.

<sup>9</sup>The mechanics of the dark plate process are explained in detail in Steig, pp. 106-107.

<sup>10</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 665.

<sup>11</sup>Steig, Dickens and Phiz, pp. 150-151.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>14</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, p. 767.

<sup>15</sup>Steig, Dickens and Phiz, p. 154.

<sup>16</sup>Dickens, Bleak House, pp. 758-759.

<sup>17</sup>Q.D. Leavis, "Dickens Illustrations", p. 363.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

- Ainsworth, William Harrison. Rookwood. London: George Routledge, 1857.
- Birkhead, Edith. The Tale of Terror. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1921.
- Brown, John Russell. Free Shakespeare. London: Heinemann, 1974.
- Burke, Edmund. A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. Edited by James T. Boulton. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.
- Butt, John and Kathleen Tillotson. Dickens at Work. London: Methuen, 1957.
- Carlyle, Thomas. Latter-Day Pamphlets. London: Chapman and Hall, 1858.
- . Past and Present. London: J.M. Dent, 1960.
- . Sartor Resartus. London: J.M. Dent, 1975.
- Chesterton, G.K. Charles Dickens. London: Methuen, 1906.
- Clark, Kenneth. The Gothic Revival. New York: Harper & Row, 1962.
- Clayborough, Arthur. The Grotesque in English Literature. London: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Collins, Phillip. Dickens and Crime. 2nd ed. London: Macmillan, 1964.
- Davis, Earle. The Flint and the Flame: The Artistry of Charles Dickens. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1963.
- Dickens, Charles. Bleak House. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- . Christmas Books. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.

- , Dombey and Son. Edited by Alan Horsman. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.
- , Great Expectations. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- , Hard Times. Edited by David Craig. Middlesex: Penguin, 1970.
- , The Letters of Charles Dickens. Edited by Madeline House and Graham Storey. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969. II.
- , Letters of Charles Dickens to the Baroness Burdett-Coutts. Edited by Charles C. Osborne. London: John Murray, 1931.
- , Little Dorrit. Edited by Harvey Peter Sucksmith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979.
- , Martin Chuzzlewit. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- , The Mystery of Edwin Drood. Edited by Margaret Caldwell. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972.
- , The Old Curiosity Shop. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- , Oliver Twist. Edited by Kathleen Tillotson. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966.
- , Our Mutual Friend. London: Oxford University Press, 1970.
- , The Pickwick Papers. London: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- , The Speeches of Charles Dickens. Edited by K.J. Fielding. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960.
- , The Uncommercial Traveller. London: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Eliot, George. Middlemarch. Edited by W.J. Harvey. Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.
- Ford, G.H. and Lauriat Lane, Jr., eds. The Dickens Critics. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961.
- Forster, E.M. Aspects of the Novel. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1927.

- Forster, John. The Life of Charles Dickens. Edited by J.W.T. Ley. London: Cecil Palmer, 1928.
- Garis, Robert. The Dickens Theatre. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. Cranford. Edited by Peter Keating. Middlesex: Penguin, 1976.
- Gissing, George. Charles Dickens: A Critical Study. London: Blackie and Son, 1926.
- Goldberg, Michael. Carlyle and Dickens. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. The House of the Seven Gables. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.
- , The Scarlet Letter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1900.
- Henderson, George. Gothic. Middlesex: Penguin, 1967.
- Houghton, Walter E. The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957.
- Howells, Coral Ann. Love, Mystery, and Misery: Feeling in Gothic Fiction. London: The Athlone Press, 1978.
- James, Henry. The Art of the Novel. New York: Scribner's, 1934.
- Johnson, Edgar. Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1952.
- Kiely, Robert. The Romantic Novel in England. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Lamb, Charles. The Essays of Elia. London: J.M. Dent, 1929.
- Leavis, F.R. and Q.D. Dickens the Novelist. London: Chatto & Windus, 1970.
- Lewis, Matthew. The Monk. Edited by Howard Anderson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- MacAndrew, Elizabeth. The Gothic Tradition in Fiction. New York: Columbia University Press, 1979.
- Mayhew, Henry. London Labour and the London Poor. 1851.
- Melville, Lewis. The Life and Letters of William Beckford

- of Fonthill. London: William Heinemann, 1910.
- Miller, J. Hillis. Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- Newsom, Robert. Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
- Orwell, George. The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus. London: Secker & Warburg, 1968. I.
- Parentalia; or, Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens. London, 1750.
- Phillips, Walter C. Dickens, Reade, and Collins, Sensation Novelists: A Study in the Conditions and Theories of Novel Writing in Victorian England. New York: Russell & Russell, 1962. Original edition 1919.
- Praz, Mario. The Hero in Eclipse in Victorian Fiction. Translated by Angus Davidson. London: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- The Romantic Agony. Translated by Angus Davidson. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.
- Pritchett, V.S. Books in General. London: Chatto & Windus, 1953.
- Railo, Eino. The Haunted Castle: A Study of the Elements of English Romanticism. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1927.
- Steig, Michael. Dickens and Phiz. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.
- Summers, Montague. The Gothic Quest. London: Fortune Press, 1938.
- Thompson, G.R., ed. The Gothic Imagination: Essays in Dark Romanticism. Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1974.
- Three Gothic Novels. Edited by Peter Fairclough. Middlesex: Penguin, 1968.
- Tillotson, Kathleen. Novels of the Eighteen-Forties. London: Oxford University Press, 1954.
- Van Doren, Mark. Nathaniel Hawthorne. Westport: Greenwood



Press, 1949.

Varma, Devendra P. The Gothic Flame. New York: Russell & Russell, 1966.

Walpole, Horace. The Letters of Horace Walpole. Edited by Mrs. Paget Toynbee. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904. VI.

Welsh, Alexander. The City of Dickens. London: Clarendon Press, 1971.

Wilson, Edmund. The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941.

Wilt, Judith. Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Worringer, Wilhelm. Form in Gothic. Translated by Herbert Read. London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1927.

#### Articles and Parts of Books

Annual Register, 1849. Chron., pp. 422-430.

Blount, Trevor. "Dickens and Mr. Krook's Spontaneous Combustion", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 1 (1970), 183-211.

----- . "The Graveyard Satire of Bleak House in the Context of 1850", Review of English Studies, N.S. 14 (1963), 370-378.

Brimley, George. Review of Bleak House in The Spectator, September 24, 1853, pp. 923-925.

Donovan, Robert A. "Structure and Idea in Bleak House", ELH, XXIX, No. 2 (1962), 186-201.

Frank, Lawrence. "The Intelligibility of Madness in Our Mutual Friend and The Mystery of Edwin Drood", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 5 (1976), 150-195.

Friedman, Norman. "The Shadow and the Sun: Notes Toward a Reading of Bleak House", Boston University Studies in English, 3 (1957), 147-166.

Harvey, William R. "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XXIV (1969), 305-316.

Heilman, Robert B. "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic", in

Robert C. Rathburn and Martin Steinmann, Jr., eds.,  
From Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958.

Hume, Robert D. "Gothic versus Romantic: A Revaluation of the Gothic Novel", PMLA, LXXXIV (March 1969), 282-290.

Humpherys, Anne. "Dickens and Mayhew on the London Poor", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 78-90.

Kirkpatrick, Larry. "The Gothic Flame of Charles Dickens", Victorian Newsletter, XXXI (Spring 1967), 20-24.

McMaster, R.D. "Dickens and the Horrific", The Dalhousie Review, 38 (1958), 18-28.

Miller, Thomas. Illustrated London News, Christmas Supplement (1849), p. 419.

Nelson, Lowry, Jr. "Night Thoughts on the Gothic Novel", Yale Review, LII (December 1962), 236-257.

Ronald, Ann. "Dickens' Gloomiest Gothic Castle", Dickens Studies Newsletter, VI (1975), 71-75.

Steele, Peter. "Dickens and the Grotesque", Quadrant, 82 (April 1973), 15-23.

Sucksmith, Harvey Peter. "The Secret of Immediacy: Dickens's Debt to the Tale of Terror in Blackwood's", Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XXVI (1971), 145-157.

-----, "Sir Leicester Dedlock, Wat Tyler, and The Chartists: The Role of the Ironmaster in Bleak House", in Robert B. Partlow, Jr., ed., Dickens Studies Annual, 4 (1975), 113-131.