STRUCTURE AND IDEA IN *BLEAK HOUSE*

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> I propose therefore that we enquire into the nature of justice and injustice, first as they appear in the State, and secondly in the individual, proceeding from the greater to the lesser and comparing them. (*The Republic*, tr. Jowett)
>
> 'Tis the Last Judgment's fire must cure this place,
> Calcine its clods and set my prisoners free.
> (Browning, " Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came ")

If anything can supply an intelligible principle of Dickens's development as a novelist, it is the constant strengthening and focusing of his protest against social injustice. This pervasive concern with social justice is the link connecting the otherwise light-hearted and high-spirited meanderings of Pickwick in a world of coaching inns and manor farms to the sinister events which are preparing in the dark world of Chancery in *Bleak House* or of the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit*. Speaking of this last novel, Shaw remarked in his often quoted preface to *Great Expectations* that it " is a more seditious book than *Das Kapital*. All over Europe men and women are in prison for pamphlets and speeches which are to *Little Dorrit* as red pepper to dynamite." Shaw had, like Macaulay, his own heightened and telling way of putting things, but to a world which persisted in regarding Dickens as the great impresario of soap opera, Shaw's comments needed to be made. The indifference of society to the suffering of its members; the venality, brutishness, or sheer ineptitude of its public servants; its perverse substitution of the virtues of the head for those of the heart; the hopeless inadequacy of its political and philanthropic institutions: these are the recurring motifs of Dickens's novels, from the scenes in the Fleet Prison in *Pickwick* to the symbolic dust heap in *Our Mutual Friend*.

Dickens's aroused social conscience has of course led some of his critics into seeing his work as more doctrinaire, more rigorously ordered than it is. Thus T. A. Jackson and Jack Lindsay have

tried to assimilate Dickens's "line" to the orderly fabric of Marxism, an attempt which few other critics regard as admissible. And Shaw, of course, tended to exaggerate the explosive force of the novels as propaganda. Nevertheless, in spite of Dickens's reluctance to make common cause with any philosophically grounded reform movement, it is possible to abstract from the novels a more or less consistent point of view toward society and its ills. This ground has been covered so often, and there is such substantial agreement on the articles of Dickens's creed, that I shall limit myself to the briefest summary.

The first point to be observed is that Dickens is not a radical who wants to tear society apart and rebuild it according to first principles. With all its anomalies and incidental absurdities, Dickens never really questioned the basic class structure of English society. It is certainly sounder to align him with the "conservative" tradition exemplified by Carlyle and Ruskin, for he shares with them a kind of perpetual and indignant astonishment that human beings should so far surrender their own nature as to consign their most fundamental interest to machines. The machines, of course, are the literal ones which were reshaping England into something brutal and ugly, but they are also the ones, figuratively speaking, represented by such doctrinaire systems of thought as Benthamism or the political economy of the Manchester School, or by the social or political institutions which assumed that human beings could be administered to by systematic processes in which the basic fact of man's spirituality might be conveniently ignored. Democratic government, for example, or evangelical religion.

Dickens's distrust of institutions and of intellectual systems is not the product of experience, for this distrust is clearly evident in *Pickwick*, and though it accumulates emotional charge, it is not really deeper in the late novels. His anti-intellectualism, if I may give it a currently fashionable name, is a kind of instinctive response to any attempt to stifle or destroy the irrational part of man's nature, hence Dickens's affectionate regard for the weak-minded and the prominent symbolic role given to the non-rational entertainments of Sleary's Circus in *Hard Times* (the logical culmination of a series, beginning with Mr. Vincent Crummles and Mrs. Jarley). The only forces of social amelioration to which Dickens gives his unqualified assent are man's native impulses of

benevolence and self-sacrifice. At first he is prepared to believe that these impulses are strong enough in normal human beings to combat the various evils of society. Pickwick's benevolence is irrepressible and unconquerable. But either because the evils have grown greater, or because Dickens's faith in the humanity of ordinary people has grown less, the early optimism fades and is replaced by a heavy and virtually impenetrable gloom, lightened only occasionally, and inadequately, by acts of private charity and self-sacrifice. The fierce indignation that breaks out in the early novels becomes a kind of brooding melancholy as Dickens looks at the world in the ripeness of his age.

Though Dickens's social criticism runs through all his novels, it gathers to its greatest clarity and intensity in the six novels which comprise the bulk of his later work: *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, *Hard Times*, *Little Dorrit*, *Great Expectations*, and *Our Mutual Friend*. Of these *Bleak House* is the most comprehensive criticism of society and may fairly be taken to represent Dickens's mature diagnosis of, and prognosis for his age. *Bleak House* is also one of his most artful books, and unlike *Hard Times*, another very artful book, it is quintessentially Dickensian in spirit and technique. In the present essay I propose to examine *Bleak House*, both as an embodiment of Dickens's social protest and as a narrative structure, in an effort to see how structure and idea engage each other.

I

The main theme of *Bleak House* is responsibility. The content of the book may most succinctly be described as a series of studies in society's exercise (more often the evasion or abuse) of responsibility for its dependents. In his earlier novels Dickens characteristically locates the source of evil in specific human beings, the villains in his typically melodramatic plots. Sometimes he makes evil grow out of sheer malignity (Quilp), but even when the evil represented is of a predominantly social character it is generally personified, in the acquisitiveness of a Ralph Nickleby, for example, or the officious cruelty of a Bumble. But *Bleak House* has no villain. It offers a jungle without predators, only scavengers. Evil is as impersonal as the fog which is its main symbol. The Court of Chancery, the main focus of evil in the novel and the

mundane equivalent of hell, harbors no devil, only a rather mild and benevolent gentleman who is sincerely desirous of doing the best he can for the people who require his aid. Esther describes the Lord Chancellor's manner as "both courtly and kind," and remarks at the conclusion of her interview, "He dismissed us pleasantly, and we all went out, very much obliged to him for being so affable and polite; by which he had certainly lost no dignity, but seemed to us to have gained some" (pp. 29-30).[1] This is not irony; by an inversion of the mephistophelian paradox, the Lord Chancellor is "*ein Teil von jener Kraft, die stets das Gute will und stets das Böse schafft.*"

Dickens found in the Court of Chancery specifically, and in the law generally, the true embodiment of everything that was pernicious. The law touched Dickens often enough in his private life, and the actual cases of victims of legal proceedings always roused his indignation even when he was not personally involved. The result was a vein of legal satire beginning with the Bardell-Pickwick trial and running throughout the novels, but it is not Dickens's private grievance against the law that I am here concerned with. The law was to become for him a means by which as an artist he could most faithfully and effectively image a world gone wrong. Like Jeremy Bentham, Dickens was appalled by the chaos of the British law; its random accumulation of statute law, common law, and precedents in equity; its overlapping and conflicting jurisdictions; its antiquated and mysterious rituals and procedures. But Bentham was only appalled by the lack of intelligible system, not by the law itself, and he accordingly set out to put things right. Dickens, on the other hand, who shared with such other Victorian writers as Browning, Trollope, and W. S. Gilbert a profound misunderstanding and distrust of the legal mind, was as much disturbed by legal system as the lack thereof. It is perhaps suggestive that Dickens's satire does not merely attack abuses of the law, it attacks the fundamental postulates of the British legal system. Dodson and Fogg are contemptible less because they are lawyers than because they are grasping, mean, and hypocritical human beings. Dickens aims a subtler shaft at Perker, Mr. Pickwick's solicitor, an amiable and seemingly harmless man who cannot restrain his admiration for the acuity of Dodson and Fogg, and it is Perker, not his oppo-

[1] Page references are to the Everyman edition.

nents, who is the prototype of the lawyers of *Bleak House*: Tulkinghorn, Vholes, and Conversation Kenge. None of these proves to be guilty of anything approaching sharp practice; on the contrary, they are all offered as examples of capable and conscientious legal practitioners, and the evil they give rise to is not a consequence of their abusing their functions but of their performing them as well as they do. Conversation Kenge may be taken as expressing the opinion of the legal fraternity at large when he holds up for Esther's admiration that "monument of Chancery practice," Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the case in which "every difficulty, every contingency, every masterly fiction, every form of procedure known in that court, is represented over and over again" (p. 18). To Dickens this is a little like the surgeon who can describe a sutured incision as "beautiful." He despised lawyers (and here Vholes is his principal example) because they drew their living from human misery without contributing significantly to alleviate it. But Dickens's feeling toward the cannibalistic Vholes is only incidental to the main point, which is the concept of the law implied by Kenge's rhapsody.

The law, especially British law, is an instrument of justice which often seems to the layman to put a higher value on consistency and orderly procedure than on justice itself. That in any given instance the law is capable of doing manifest injustice, no one would deny, but that the elaborate body of procedures, fictions, and precedents is the safest guarantee against capricious or arbitrary judgment, and in the long run, in the majority of cases, the most efficient mechanism of seeing justice done is the common ground for the defence of systems of jurisprudence. Justice becomes a by-product of law, and the law itself, by a kind of natural descent from the primitive trial by combat, assumes the character of an intellectual contest in which attack and counterattack, the play of knowledge, ingenuity, and skill, are of transcendent interest, even when the result is a matter of indifference. It amounts to no paradox, then, to say that the lawyer cares nothing for justice; he cares only for the law. Of the justice, that is to say, of the social utility of his professional activity he is presumably convinced antecedently to his engaging in it, but he goes about his business secure in the knowledge that justice will best be served by his shrewdness in outwitting his adversary. To the lawyer the law is intellectual, abstract, and beautiful, like a game of chess, and it is just here that the fundamental ground

of Dickens's quarrel with him lies. Justice for Dickens was generally open and palpable. He couldn't understand why man's natural emotional response to injustice wasn't a sufficient impetus to lead him to correct it if he could. With the abstract and intellectual approach to the evils of life Dickens had no sympathy and no patience at all, and the law, therefore, became for him a comprehensive symbol of an attitude toward life that seemed to him perverse and wrong. Dickens's anti-intellectualism is concentrated and brought to bear in his satire on the law.

But there is special point and relevance to the attack on Chancery in *Bleak House*. In the first place, Chancery exemplifies more perfectly than the law courts properly so-called the characteristically slow and circuitous processes of British jurisprudence. Its ritual was more intricate, its fictions more remote from actualities, its precedents more opaque, than those of the Queen's Bench, or the Exchequer, or the Court of Common Pleas. And of course the slowness of Chancery proceedings was legendary. Holdsworth emphasizes this point neatly by quoting Lord Bowen: "Whenever any death occurred, bills of review or supplemental suits became necessary to reconstitute the charmed circle of the litigants which had been broken. . . . It was satirically declared that a suit to which fifty defendants were necessary parties . . . could never hope to end at all, since the yearly average of deaths in England was one in fifty, and a death, as a rule, threw over the plaintiff's bill for at least a year." [2] The High Court of Chancery, then, provided a microcosm of the legal world of 19th century England, magnifying the law's essential features and reducing its flaws to absurdity. In the second place, Chancery is specially appropriate as an image of the kind of responsibility that *Bleak House* is really about. The Lord Chancellor's legal responsibility is of a curious and distinctive character. The law courts, with their various ramifications and subdivisions, civil, criminal, and ecclesiastical, exist to provide a bar where anyone who believes himself injured according to the common or statute law may plead his case. But the law has many loopholes, and it is desirable that some provision be made to redress wrongs which are not covered by any existing law. Moreover a considerable body of potential litigants—chiefly widows and orphans—being unable to plead in their own behalf, must be protected against injustice. The Lord

[2] William S. Holdsworth, *Dickens as a Legal Historian* (New Haven, 1929), p. 91.

Chancellor's Court was devised for just such a purpose, to provide relief where the ordinary channels of legal procedure offered none. The origin of the Lord Chancellor's judicial function is described by Blackstone:

> When the courts of law, proceeding merely upon the ground of the king's original writs, and confining themselves strictly to that bottom, gave a harsh or imperfect judgment, the application for redress used to be to the king in person assisted by his privy council . . . and they were wont to refer the matter either to the chancellor and a select committee, or by degrees to the chancellor only, who mitigated the severity or supplied the defects of the judgments pronounced in the courts of law, upon weighing the circumstances of the case.[3]

From a court of appeals the Chancellor's Court developed into an ordinary court of equity in which a plaintiff could sue for redress by the presentation of a bill, and it claimed, furthermore, exclusive jurisdiction in supervising the proper administration of trusts and wills. It must be remembered, too, that antecedent to his judicial responsibility the Lord Chancellor bore a responsibility which was ecclesiastical and eleemosynary. Let me quote Blackstone once more on the Chancellor's office:

> Being formerly usually an ecclesiastic, (for none else were then capable of an office so conversant in writings,) and presiding over the royal chapel, he became keeper of the king's conscience; visitor, in right of the king, of all hospitals and colleges of the king's foundation; and patron of all the king's livings under the value of twenty marks *per annum* in the king's books. He is the general guardian of all infants, idiots, and lunatics; and has the general superintendance of all charitable uses in the kingdom. (III, 48)

Incorporating in his single office all the " charitable uses in the kingdom," the Lord Chancellor furnishes Dickens with a compendious symbol of all the ways in which one human being can be charged with the care of another: he is a father to the orphan, a husband to the widow, a protector to the weak and infirm, and an almoner to the destitute. What better focus of attention in a book about human responsibility could Dickens find than a suit in Chancery?

At one end of the scale is the Lord Chancellor in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the other is Jo, society's outcast, with no proper place of his own, " moving on " through the atrocious slum of Tom-

[3] Sir William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (London, 1800), III, 50-51.

All-Alone's, itself a "monument of Chancery practice," for its dismal and neglected appearance proclaims its connection with Chancery. Who will take responsibility for Jo? Not government, engaged in an endless wrangle over the proper emolument for the party faithful; not religion, in the person of Mr. Chadband sermonizing over Jo's invincible ignorance; not law, concerned only with Jo's "moving on"; not organized charity, which finds the natives of Borrioboola-Gha or the Tockahoopo Indians a great deal more interesting than the dirty home-grown heathen. Jo subsists entirely on the impulsive generosity of Snagsby, who relieves his own feelings by compulsively feeding half-crowns to Jo, or on the more selfless generosity of Nemo, who supplies Jo's only experience of human companionship until Esther, and George, and Allan Woodcourt come to his aid. Jo's function as an instrument of Dickens's social protest is clear. In his life and in his death he is a shattering rebuke to all those agencies of church and state which are charged with the care of the weak and the helpless and the poor, from the Lord Chancellor's court down to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. And Jo's experience throws a strong glare on the causes of their inadequacy; they fail conspicuously and utterly because they are nothing more than machines, because they are illuminated from the head, never from the heart, because, ultimately, they fail to acknowledge Dickens's most important moral and social maxim, that human beings can live together only on terms of mutual trust and love.

Between the Lord Chancellor and Jo, Dickens illustrates every relation of dependency which is possible in civilized society, in every one of which, as we have seen, the Lord Chancellor himself participates by a species of legal fiction. Consider, for example, the condition of parenthood. Every child begets a responsibility in his parents; in *Bleak House* Dickens examines a wide range of cases in order to trace the extent to which that responsibility is successfully discharged. Only a very few parents in the sick society of this novel manage to maintain a healthy and normal relation with their children; one must contrive to get as far from the shadow of Chancery as Elephant and Castle, to find a domestic happiness like the Bagnets's. The virtuous mean of parental devotion is the exception, more often we have the excess, like Mrs. Pardiggle's ferocious bullying of her children, or still oftener the deficiency, instanced by Mrs. Jellyby's total neglect of her

family, or Harold Skimpole's similar behavior toward his. But the real symptom of disease is the frequency with which we find the normal relation between parent and child inverted. Skimpole is, as he frequently avers, a child, but the engaging qualities which this pose brings to the surface are quickly submerged again in his reckless self-indulgence, and his avocations, harmless or even commendable in themselves, the pursuit of art and beauty, become like the flush of fever, a sign of decay when we recognize that they are indulged at the expense of his responsibilities as the head of a family, and that his existence is so thoroughly parasitical. But just as there are parents who turn into children, a few children turn into parents. Charley Neckett, for example, at the death of her father is rudely thrust into maturity at the age of thirteen with a brother of five or six and a sister of eighteen months to care for. Esther describes her as " a very little girl, childish in figure but shrewd and older-looking in the face—pretty-faced too—wearing a womanly sort of bonnet much too large for her, and drying her bare arms on a womanly sort of apron. Her fingers were white and wrinkled with washing, and the soap-suds were yet smoking which she wiped off her arms. But for this she might have been a child, playing at washing, and imitating a poor working-woman with a quick observation of the truth " (p. 192). Even Esther herself exhibits a kind of reversal of roles. Like Charley (and a good many other characters in the story) she is an orphan, and her relations with the other inmates of Bleak House are curiously ambiguous and ill-defined. She is ostensibly the companion of Ada Clare and the ward of Mr. Jarndyce, both of which offices confer upon her a dependent status, yet in this household she assumes the moral leadership, a leadership which is explicitly recognized by the others' use of such nicknames as Little Old Woman, Mrs. Shipton, Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden. Esther's relation with Mr. Jarndyce (whom she calls " Guardian ") is further complicated by their betrothal; for as long as this lasts she stands toward him simultaneously as mother, daughter, and fiancee. In the Smallweed family the children all appear unnaturally old; only the senile display the attributes of childhood: " There has been only one child in the Smallweed family for several generations. Little old men and women there have been, but no child, until Mr. Smallweed's grandmother, now living, became weak in her intellect, and fell

(for the first time) into a childish state" (pp. 263-64). The most complete and perfect inversion of all, however, is to be seen in the Turveydrop household, where young Prince labors unceasingly to maintain his father in the style to which he has become accustomed as an imitation Regency beau. The selfish old parasite, who sends his son off to his dancing school in Kensington while he goes himself to dine comfortably at the French House in the Opera Colonnade, is absolutely stunned by Prince's "ingratitude" at thinking of marriage with Caddy Jellyby, and the young couple must sue on their knees for Mr. Turveydrop's consent:

'My dear father,' returned Prince, 'we well know what little comforts you are accustomed to, and have a right to; and it will always be our study, and our pride, to provide those before anything. If you will bless us with your approval and consent, father, we shall not think of being married until it is quite agreeable to you; and when we *are* married, we shall always make you—of course—our first consideration. You must ever be the Head and Master here, father; and we feel how truly unnatural it would be in us, if we failed to know it, or if we failed to exert ourselves in every possible way to please you.'

Mr Turveydrop underwent a severe internal struggle, and came upright on the sofa again, with his cheeks puffing over his stiff cravat: a perfect model of parental deportment.

'My son!' said Mr Turveydrop. 'My children! I cannot resist your prayer. Be happy!' (pp. 301-302)

The irony is enforced by the fact that from this marriage can come only a stunted, malformed, deaf-mute child. Generally speaking, the society of *Bleak House* is one in which the normal responsibility of parent for child has most often been abused or shirked.

The pattern of inversion reasserts itself when we turn our attention to another relation of dependency—marriage. Of course there are obvious instances of the neglect of marital (as well as maternal) responsibility like Mrs. Jellyby's high-minded disregard of her family, and there are equally obvious instances of abuse of the obedience enjoined by the marriage sacrament, like the abject submission of the brick-makers' wives to their husbands' brutality. Esther and Ada find one of these women furtively bringing comfort to the bereaved mother of a dead child, but with one eye always on the door of the public house:

'It's you, young ladies, is it?' she said, in a whisper. 'I'm a-watching for my master. My heart's in my mouth. If he was to catch me away from home he'd pretty near murder me.'

'Do you mean your husband?' said I.
'Yes, miss, my master.' (pp. 101-102)

But setting these instances aside, we are confronted in *Bleak House* by a stereotype of marriage in which the normal economic and social functions of husband and wife are reversed. Mr. Snagsby's uxoriousness remains within the bounds of conventional Dickensian social comedy and by itself is neither morbid nor especially significant:

> Mr Snagsby refers everything not in the practical mysteries of the business to Mrs Snagsby. She manages the money, reproaches the Tax-gatherers, appoints the time and places of devotion on Sundays, licenses Mr Snagsby's entertainments, and acknowledges no responsibility as to what she thinks fit to provide for dinner; insomuch that she is the high standard of comparison among the neighboring wives, a long way down Chancery Lane on both sides, and even out in Holborn. (p. 119)

But, as in the case of Skimpole, what begins in the light-hearted vein of comedy quickly darkens, and the relation assumes an unhealthy taint. Mrs. Snagsby, who enters as the conventional loud-voiced shrew, becomes, before her final exit, a shrinking paranoiac, "a woman overwhelmed with injuries and wrongs, whom Mr Snagsby has habitually deceived, abandoned, and sought to keep in darkness. . . . Everybody, it appears . . . has plotted against Mrs Snagsby's peace" (pp. 673-74). And the Snagsby menage is further significant in that it provides a pattern of the marriage relation that is disturbingly common. Mr. Bayham Badger's uxoriousness far surpasses Mr. Snagsby's. It extends so far, in fact, that he is willing to suffer total eclipse in favor of his predecessors, Mrs. Badger's former husbands. And even the happy and amiable Bagnets display a domestic arrangement which, in spite of Matthew's stoutly (though not very convincingly) maintained fiction that "discipline must be preserved," places Mrs. Bagnet firmly in command of the family fortunes and policy. There is special meaning and pathos, however, in the union of Rick Carstone and Ada Clare, perhaps the only truly romantic pairing in the whole story (for, it must be noted in passing, some of the most admirable characters either are denied or deliberately evade the responsibilities of marriage—Mr. Jarndyce, Captain Hawdon, Boythorn, and Trooper George). This couple, the epitome of youth and hope and beauty, is doomed to

frustration and tragedy because they take the contagion of Chancery, but that infection is itself made possible by the fact that the moral resources in their marriage, the courage, strength, and devotion, all belong to Ada. The corruption that marks the society of *Bleak House* may find its center and aptest symbol in Lincoln's Inn Hall, but its true origin is in the decay of the most fundamental social institution, the family. When parents will not or cannot take care of their children, when husbands refuse to be masters in their own houses, above all when these relations are not illuminated and softened by love, it is useless to expect those public institutions in which the relations of the family are mirrored to supply their defects.

But Dickens does not limit himself to the family. His novel is an intricate, if not always very systematic study of the bonds which link human beings together. Here are masters and servants, landlords and tenants, employers and employees, professional men and clients, officers and men, all enforcing the inescapable truth that men and women share a common destiny.[4] I do not propose to examine these various relations in detail; examples will suggest themselves to every reader of *Bleak House*. I believe that the breadth and the closeness of Dickens's analysis of society imply both his conviction that man cannot evade the consequences of his brotherhood with every other man, and his belief that human brotherhood can never be adequately affirmed or practiced through agencies which are the product of the intellect alone.

II

Edmund Wilson called *Bleak House* a novel of the "social group"; E. K. Brown called it a "crowded" novel. Both statements are undeniable; neither one offers any particular help in understanding how Dickens brought artistic order to a novel as broad in scope as *Bleak House*. A number of astute critics have grappled with the problem of structure in this novel, and the

[4] I must take exception to two recently offered interpretations of *Bleak House*, the one maintaining that the only order to be found in the novel is supplied by the consciousness of the narrator(s) (J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* [Cambridge, Mass., 1958], pp. 160-224), the other that the order implied by the pat manipulation of events is a reflection of Dickens's own faith in a controlling providence (Harland S. Nelson, "Dickens' Plots: 'The Ways of Providence' or the Influence of Collins?" *Victorian Newsletter*, Spring, 1961, pp. 11-14).

general tendency of their labors, at least in recent years, has been to refer the problem, not to such an obvious structural principle as plot, but to the infinitely more complex and subtle principle of language. Thus Norman Friedman, J. Hillis Miller, and Louis Crompton all seek the novel's fullest and deepest statement of meaning in the patterns of diction, imagery, and symbolism.[5] The insights derived from this species of criticism may be valuable; all three of these critics have important contributions to make. But so narrow a critical perspective has its dangers as well as its attractions. The art of the novel, as Dickens conceived and practiced it, was still a story-telling art, and though it is certainly true that his language, at least in the mature works is richly charged and implicative, I do not believe that any acceptable reading of *Bleak House* can be reached without reference to those ingredients which are constituted by its participation in a story-telling tradition—I mean specifically, plot and the closely related layers of character and point of view.

First the plot. "Plot" here means the record of events, organized according to some intelligible principle of selection and arrangement. The narration of unrelated (even though sequential) events does not give rise to plot; time sequence alone does not organize experience in any meaningful way. The loosest kind of organization is supplied by character; events may be related in that they happen to the same person, whether or not they reveal any growth, either in the character himself, or in our understanding of him. A somewhat more complicated structure arises when events are related to each other by their common illustration of a single idea or of several related ideas. Finally, events may be organized according to a causal sequence in which each successive event is in some way caused by the one which precedes it. Now only in the last sense does plot function as the unifying element in a story, for though it is possible for a story to *have* a plot in either of the first two senses, we would, in those cases, probably refer the story's unity to, respectively, character or theme.

It is virtually impossible to subsume the events of *Bleak*

[5] Norman Friedman, "The Shadow and the Sun: Notes Toward a Reading of *Bleak House*," *Boston University Studies in English*, III (1957), 147-66; J. Hillis Miller, *op. cit.*; Louis Crompton, "Satire and Symbolism in *Bleak House*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, XII (1957-58), 284-303.

House into a single causal sequence, or even into several, as long as we understand by " events " what that word normally signifies, that is, births, deaths, betrothals, marriages, whatever, in short, is likely to be entered in the family Bible, and perhaps also such other occurrences (of a less public and ceremonial nature) as quarreling, making love, eating, drinking, working, etc., which may have an interest of their own. *Bleak House* is full enough of " events " in this sense; I count nine deaths, four marriages, and four births. The difficulty is in assigning their causes or their consequences. What are we to make of the death of Krook for example? The question is not one of physiology; I don't propose to reopen the question of spontaneous combustion. The question is properly one of psychology: how is Krook's death related to the play of human motives and purposes? The answer, of course, is that it is not so related at all; it is a simple *deus ex machina* whose only artistic justification is to be sought at the level of symbolism. Rick Carstone's death, by contrast, is integrated with plot, for though its physiological causes may be as obscure as those of Krook's death, its psychological causes are palpable and satisfying. Or take Esther's marriage to Allan Woodcourt. Is it, like the marriage of Jane Austen's heroines, the inevitable culmination of a pattern of events, or is it merely a concession to popular sentiment, like the second ending of *Great Expectations*? A great many, perhaps most, of the " events " of *Bleak House* consist of such hard and stubborn facts—stubborn in that they are not amenable to the construction of any intelligible law; they exist virtually uncaused, and they beget effects which are quite disproportionate to their own nature or importance. Events have a way of taking us by surprise, for even though Dickens is careful to create an appropriate atmosphere whenever he is about to take someone off, the time and manner of death are generally unpredictable.

The artistic center of the novel is generally taken to be Chancery, but if so it seems to me that Chancery functions as a symbol, not as a device of plot. We are permitted glimpses from time to time of what " happens " in Chancery, but Jarndyce and Jarndyce obviously follows no intelligible law of development, and so it is meaningless to talk about a Chancery plot or subplot. Furthermore, though Chancery affects the lives of many,

perhaps all, of the characters in *Bleak House*, it does not do so in the sense that significant events take place there. The only event in the Court of Chancery that proves to have significant consequences for the people outside is the cessation of Jarndyce and Jarndyce when the whole property in dispute has been consumed in legal costs. But this is itself a conclusion reached by the stern requirements of economics rather than by the arcane logic of the law. Chancery affects men's lives the way God does, not by direct intervention in human affairs, but by commanding belief or disbelief.

In a few instances events align themselves in something approaching a genuine causal sequence. The story of Rick Carstone, for example, who undergoes a slow moral deterioration because he is gradually seduced into believing in Chancery, provides an example of a meaningful pattern of events. But Rick's story is neither central, nor altogether satisfying, principally, I believe, because it is observed only at intervals, and from without.[6] It remains true that it is all but impossible to describe what happens in *Bleak House* by constructing a causal sequence of events.

The difficulty largely disappears, however, when we stop trying to discover a more or less systematic pattern of events, and try instead to define the organization of the book in terms of discovery, the Aristotelian anagnorisis. The plot, in this case, is still woven of " events," but the word now signifies some determinate stage in the growth of awareness of truths which are in existence, potentially knowable, before the novel opens. Events, in the original sense of that term, become important chiefly as the instrumentalities of discovery. Krook's death, for example, leads to the unearthing of an important document in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and incidentally to the disclosure of a complex web of relations involving the Smallweed, Snagsby, and Chadband families. The murder of Tulkinghorn or the arrest of Trooper George are red herrings, designed to confuse the issue, but ultimately they make possible the complete unveiling of the pattern of human relations that it is the chief business of the novel to

[6] As Edgar Johnson has argued, Dickens was not to do justice to this theme until *Great Expectations* (*Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph* [New York, 1952], p. 767).

disclose. The progressive discovery of that pattern is, then, the "plot" of the novel, and it constitutes a causal sequence, not in that each discovery brings about the next, but in that each discovery presupposes the one before. We need to know that Lady Dedlock harbors a secret which she regards as shameful before we can discover the existence of some former connection between her and Nemo, and we need to be aware of that connection before we can add to it the more important discovery that Esther is the daughter of Nemo and Lady Dedlock. And so on, until the whole complicated web stands clearly revealed.

This kind of structure is, as everyone knows, the typical pattern of the detective story. Such fundamentally human concerns as crime and punishment lie outside the scope of detective fiction, in which the murder may take place before the story begins, and the retribution may finally catch up with the murderer after it ends. The plot of the detective story consists simply in the discovery—withheld, of course, as long as possible—of the one hypothesis which will account for all the disparate facts or "events" that make up the story. The interest is centered, in classical specimens of the genre, not in the events, but in the process by which the events are rendered meaningful, ordinarily in the activity of the detective as he proceeds toward a solution. *Bleak House*, of course, has many detectives. Not counting the unforgettable Inspector Bucket "of the Detective," a great many characters are at work throughout the novel at unravelling some private and vexing problem of their own: Mr. Tulkinghorn, stalking Lady Dedlock's secret with fearful persistency, or Mr. Guppy approaching the same mystery from Esther's side, or Mrs. Snagsby endeavoring to surprise her husband's guilty connections, or even Esther herself, troubled by the riddle of her own mysterious origin and still more mysterious participation in the guilt of her unknown mother. But the presence or activity of a detective is incidental to the main scheme of such fiction, from *Oedipus the King* onward, to present a mystery and then solve it. The beginning, middle, and end of such an action can be described only in terms of the reader's awareness; the beginning consists of the exposition in which the reader is made aware of the mystery, that is of the facts that require explanation; the end consists of his reaching a full understanding of the mystery which confronted him, for when all is

known the story must come to an end. The middle, then, is comprised of his successive states of partial or incorrect knowledge.

The mystery presents itself, in the typical detective novel, with crystalline purity. Someone has been murdered; the problem is to discover, in the graphic but ungrammatical language of the usual cognomen, Who done it? In *Bleak House* the problem is somewhat different. It is true that there is a murder, and that the murderer must subsequently be picked out of three likely suspects, but the main mystery, the one that sustains the motion of the whole book and gives it a unity of plot, is not a question of determining the agent of some past action (though the mystery *may* be formulated in these terms) so much as it is a question of establishing the identity of all the characters involved, and in the world of *Bleak House* one's identity is defined according to his relations to other people. Two recent writers, James H. Broderick and John E. Grant, consider that the novel is given its shape by Esther's successful quest for identity, or place, in the society of the book,[7] and I see no reason why the establishment of identity, not merely for Esther, but for all or most of the characters may not provide a workable principle of structure. Esther's identity is secure when she discovers who her parents are, and this is certainly the heart of *Bleak House's* mystery, but that discovery comes shortly after the middle of the book, when Lady Dedlock discloses herself to Esther. The novel is not complete until all the relations of its various characters are recognized and established (or re-established) on some stable footing. Sir Leicester Dedlock must adjust his whole view of the world to conform to the discovery he makes about his wife; harmony must be restored between Mr. Jarndyce and Rick; Esther must discover her true relation to Mr. Jarndyce—and to Allan Woodcourt. Even the minor characters must be accounted for: Trooper George must become once again the son of Sir Leicester's housekeeper and the brother of the ironmaster; Mr. and Mrs. Snagsby must be reconciled as man and wife; all misunderstandings, in short, must be cleared away.

One of the most curious features of *Bleak House*, one of the attributes which is most likely to obtrude itself and bring down

[7] "The Identity of Esther Summerson," *Modern Philology*, LV (1958), 252-58.

the charge of staginess is Dickens's careful husbandry of characters. That he disposes of so many may perhaps be worthy of remark, but still more remarkable is the fact that he makes them all, even the most obscure, serve double and triple functions. Mr. Boythorn, for example, the friend of Mr. Jarndyce who is always at law with his next-door neighbor, Sir Leicester Dedlock, doubles as the rejected suitor of Miss Barbary, Esther's aunt. And it is surely a curious coincidence which sends Rick, when he is in need of a fencing teacher, to Trooper George, who is not only related to the Chesney Wold household through his mother, but also deeply in debt to Grandfather Smallweed (Krook's brother-in-law), and of course he has served under Captain Hawdon, Esther's father. Mrs. Rachael, Miss Barbary's servant, turns up again as the wife of the oily Mr. Chadband, and even Jenny, the brickmaker's wife, appears fortuitously to change clothes with Lady Dedlock. These examples, which might easily be multiplied, irresistibly create the impression, not of a vast, chaotic, utterly disorganized world, but of a small, tightly ordered one. That the novel thus smacks of theatrical artifice constitutes a threat to the " bleakness " of *Bleak House,* for we are never confronted, in this world, by the blank and featureless faces of total strangers, the heart-rending indifference of the nameless mob; all the evils of this world are the work of men whose names and domestic habits we know, and for that reason, it would appear, are deprived of most of their terrors.

Perhaps the most serious charge that can be brought against the artistry of *Bleak House* grows out of some of the characteristic features which I have been discussing. How can the discerning reader avoid being offended, it will be argued, by a novel which obviously wants to say something serious and important about society, but at the same time contrives to say it in the most elaborately artificial way possible? How can we be serious about social criticisms which come to us through the medium of the most sensational literary genre, and are obscured by every artifice of melodrama? The objection seems to be a damaging one, but I wonder if Dickens's employment of the techniques of the detective story and of melodrama may not enforce, rather than weaken, his rhetorical strategy. The plot, as I conceive it, consists of the progressive and relentless revelation of an intri-

cate web of relations uniting all the characters of the novel, by ties of blood or feeling or contract. And Dickens's assignment of multiple functions to the minor characters is merely a means of reinforcing and underscoring our sense that human beings are bound to each other in countless, often unpredictable ways. It is difficult to see how Dickens could have found a clearer, more emphatic way of drawing up his indictment against society for its failure to exercise responsibility than by his elaborate demonstration of human brotherhood.

The bleakness of *Bleak House* is the sense of hopelessness inspired by the knowledge that men and women, subjected to the common shocks of mortality, will nevertheless consistently repudiate the claims which other people have on them. The sense of hopelessness is intensified and made ironic by the closeness, figuratively speaking, of their relations to other people (sometimes, of course, the closeness is literal, as in the hermetic little community of Cook's Court, Cursitor Street). It is appropriate that the novel should be shaped by discoveries rather than by events, for the sense of hopelesness, or bleakness, can hardly be sustained in a world that can be shaped to human ends by human will. The events of this novel are accidental in a double sense; most of them are unplanned and unpredictable, and they are moreover non-essential to the view of human experience that Dickens is concerned to present. Human relations, the ones that are important, are not constituted by events (though they may be revealed by events — Esther's smallpox, for example), because events just *happen,* they follow no intelligible law either of God or man. Human relations are inherent in the nature of society, and the duty of man is therefore not something arbitrary and intrinsically meaningless which can be prescribed and handed down to him by some external authority (like law); it is discoverable in, and inferrable from, his social condition and only needs to be seen to command allegiance. The tragedy of *Bleak House* is that awareness of human responsibility invariably comes too late for it to be of any use. Nemo's or Coavinses', or Jo's membership in the human race is discovered only after his death, and Sir Leicester Dedlock awakens to recognition of the true nature of the marriage bond only when his wife has gone forth to die. Still, it is important to *have* that awareness, and the most effec-

tive way to produce it, surely, is to make its slow growth the animating principle of the novel.

III

If we choose to talk about the plot of *Bleak House* as constituted by a growing awareness of human relations and human responsibilities, sooner or later we must raise the question: *Whose* awareness? The problem of point of view is so important in the detective story, in fact, that it is most often met by the creation of a special point-of-view character. The classical instance, of course, is Dr. Watson, but Dr. Watson has had countless avatars. *Bleak House* is enough of a detective story so that it must reckon with some, at least, of the problems that Dr. Watson was invented to solve. The mystery must be preserved, so the narrator's perspicacity must have rather clearly defined limits, but at the same time the mystery must take hold of the reader, so the narrator must possess lively human sympathies and be capable of moral insights which are as just and true as his practical judgments are absurd. Such considerations impose limits on the choice of a narrative perspective for *Bleak House*, but there are other considerations which affect that choice too. The mystery whose solution dominates the novel is not such a simple, or at any rate such a limited problem as identifying a particular character as the criminal; Dickens's villain is a whole society, and its guilt cannot be disclosed by a sudden dramatic unveiling. Furthermore Dickens is only partly concerned with the disclosure of the truth to the reader; a more fundamental matter is the discovery by the participants of the drama themselves of the relations in which they stand toward all the other members of society. It is the story of Oedipus on a large scale.

Because of the staggering breadth of Dicken's design the selection of a narrative point of view is extraordinarily difficult. If he chooses an omniscient, third person point of view a good deal of the emotional charge is lost, particularly if the narrator remains (as he must) sufficiently aloof from the actions and events he describes to avoid premature disclosures. On the other hand, a first person narrator suffers equally important disabil-

ities. The most immediately obtrusive of these is physical and practical. How can a single character be expected to participate directly in all the relations the novel is about? How can one character contribute evidence (as opposed to hearsay) of events which take place in London, in Lincolnshire, and in Hertfordshire, sometimes simultaneously? The difficulty could be partly met by the selection of one of those numerous characters like Tulkinghorn or Mr. Guppy or young Bart Smallweed who seem to be always on the "inside," in control of events simply because they know about them, yet one difficulty yields only to be replaced by another. Characters like Tulkinghorn obviously lack the "lively human sympathies" which give to the first person point of view its special value, and as narrator Tulkinghorn (who is in any case disqualified on the more fundamental ground that he is killed) would offer no advantage over the omniscient point of view. The obvious solution to this dilemma is to have both points of view, alternating the narration between them.

The dual point of view in *Bleak House* has always served as a speck of grit, around which the commentators have secreted their critical pearls. E. M. Forster regards it as a blemish, though he thinks Dickens's talent can make us forget it: "Logically, *Bleak House* is all to pieces, but Dickens bounces us, so that we do not mind the shiftings of the view point." [8] Others defend the double point of view as artistically appropriate.[9] I regard the device as a concession to a necessity that I can see no other way of circumventing, but there are perhaps one or two things to be said about it.

Bleak House is a novel without a center. There is no single character to whom the events of the story happen, or with reference to whom those events are significant. It is not even possible (as I have already argued) to understand the novel as a unified system of co-ordinate plots or of plot and sub-plots. Except for this want of a center the novel might be compared to a spider web in which each intersection represents a character, connected by almost invisible but nonetheless tenacious filaments to a circle of characters immediately surrounding him, and ultimately, of course, to all the other characters. But the

[8] *Aspects of the Novel* (London, 1927), p. 108.

[9] For example, M. E. Grenander, "The Mystery and the Moral: Point of View in Dickens's 'Bleak House,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, X (1955-56), 301-305.

spider web has a center (and a villain), so a more appropriate comparison might be made to a continuous section of netting, or better still, to the system of galaxies which make up the universe. It appears to a terrestrial observer that all the other galaxies are receding from him at an unthinkable rate of speed, implying that his own post of observation constitutes the center of things. Yet the centrality of his own position is merely a function of his special point of view. So with *Bleak House*. Esther is, in this special sense, the "center" of the novel, not because she so regards herself, but because she supplies the central observation point, because relations are measured according to their nearness or farness from her just as astronomical distances are measured in parsecs—heliocentric parallax (in seconds of arc) as recorded for a terrestrial observer. To pass, for example, from Esther to Nemo (or some other intermediate character) to George to Matthew Bagnet is to move, so to speak, from the center outward. But Esther is not *really* the center of the novel. To think of her as such is to destroy or at least to do serious violence to Dickens's view of the world, and transform his indictment of society into a sentimental fable. To deprive the novel of its specious center, to provide it with a new perspective which, like stereoscopic vision, adds depth, is an important function of the omniscient point of view.

Dickens's handling of that portion of the narrative which is related by the omniscient observer (roughly half of the novel) is, on the whole, masterly. I do not know that any critic denies the full measure of praise for things like the opening paragraph or two of the novel, that magnificent evocation of the London fog which has been quoted so often that I may be excused from doing so here. The laconic, unemotional style, with its sentence fragments and present participles in place of finite verbs, the roving eye, which, like the movie camera mounted on an overhead crane, can follow the action at will, are brilliantly conceived and deftly executed. It is a descriptive style emancipated from the limitations of time and space, and accordingly well-suited to its special role in the novel. But Dickens's control of this narrator is uneven. Superbly fitted for the descriptive passages of the novel, his tight-lipped manner must give way to something else in passages of narration or, still more conspicuously, in those purple rhetorical passages that Dickens loves to indulge in. As

a narrator, the omniscient persona (now speaking in finite verbs in the present tense) suffers somewhat from a hollow portentousness, a lack of flexibility, and a rather pointless reticence which can become annoying, as in the narration of Tulkinghorn's death (though here again the descriptive powers get full play). The requirements of consistency do not seem to trouble Dickens when it is time to step forward and point the finger at the object of his satire. The narrative persona is dropped completely when Dickens speaks of Buffy and company, or apostrophizes the "right" and "wrong" reverends whom he holds responsible for the death of Jo. But these passages win us by their obvious sincerity, and we need not trouble ourselves over the fact that the mask has been inadvertently dropped. To insist on a rigorous consistency here is to quibble over trifles, for generally speaking the third person narration is adroit and effective.

The focus of discontent with the manipulation of point of view in *Bleak House* is Esther Summerson. Fred W. Boege writes: "There is nothing necessarily wrong with the idea of alternating between the first and third persons. The fault lies rather with Dickens' choice of a medium for the first-person passages. David Copperfield demonstrates that the conventional Victorian hero is not a commanding figure in the center of a novel. Esther Summerson proves that the conventional heroine is worse; for the hero is hardly more than colorless, whereas she has positive bad qualities, such as the simpering affectation of innocence." [10] I think it is essential to distinguish carefully between Esther's qualities as "heroine" and Esther's qualities as narrator, for though the two functions are not wholly separate, it ought to be possible to have a bad heroine who is a good narrator and vice versa. As a heroine she clearly belongs to a tradition that we tend to regard as hopelessly sentimental and out of date. She is sweet-tempered and affectionate, and she is also capable and strong and self-denying. The first two qualities almost invariably (at least within the conventions of Victorian fiction) render their possessor both unsympathetic and unreal. One thinks of Amelia Sedley or Dinah Morris or Dickens's own Agnes Wickfield, and prefers, usually, the society of such demireps as Becky Sharp or Lizzie Eustace. Still, Esther's strength of character

[10] "Point of View in Dickens," *PMLA*, LXV (1950), 94.

ought to save her, and give her a genuine hold on our regard, except for the fact that as narrator she is faced with the necessity of talking about herself, and her modest disclaimers ring false. When she tells us that she is neither good, nor clever, nor beautiful she forfeits a good deal of the regard that her genuinely attractive and admirable qualities demand. Esther the heroine is in a sense betrayed by Esther the narrator into assuming a posture that cannot be honestly maintained.

Whatever one thinks of Esther as a person, the important question at the moment is her discharge of the narrator's responsibility. The sensibility which is revealed by her attributes as a character (the term " heroine " is somewhat misleading) is of course the same one which will determine the quality of her perceptions and insights as narrator, and it is here, I think, that some confusion arises, for it is generally assumed that Esther's simplicity, her want of what might be called " diffractive " vision, the power of subjecting every experience to the play of different lights and colors, is held to undermine or even destroy her value as narrator. We have become so used to accepting the Jamesian canons of art and experience that we refuse validity to any others. The attitude is unfortunate, not to say parochial. For James " experience " (the only kind of experience that concerned the artist) was constituted by the perception of it. " Experience," he writes in " The Art of Fiction," " is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative . . . it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations." This conception of experience is at the root of James's conception of the art of the novel, for it prescribes that the simplest kind of happening may be converted to the stuff of art by a sufficiently vibrant and sensitive point of view character. To a Lambert Strether the relations of Chad Newsome and Mme. de Vionnet are subtle, complex, and beautiful, because he is; but to another observer the same liaison is common and vulgar. Strether possesses what I have chosen to call diffractive vision, the ability to see a whole spectrum where the vulgar can see only the light of common day.

How can poor little Esther Summerson manage to perform the same function as a character with the depth and resonance of Lambert Strether? The answer, obviously, is that she can't. But I must hasten to add that she doesn't have to. The ontological basis of James's fiction is radically different from that of Dickens's; for in James what seems is more important than what is, and he accordingly requires a perceiving intelligence of the highest order. In Dickens, on the other hand, though he too is concerned with the characters' awareness, the relations which they are to perceive have a " real " existence which is not contingent on their being seen in a certain way. For this reason Esther does not have to serve as the instrument of diffraction; the light is colored at its source. To the sensitive Jamesian observer a single human relation appears in almost an infinite number of lights, and a single act may be interpreted in many ways. But Dickens does not work that way, at least not in *Bleak House*. Here the richness and infinite variety of human experience are suggested by the sheer weight of example, by the incredible multiplication of instances, and the narrator's chief function is simply to record them.

When Socrates and his friends Glaucon and Adeimantus differed over the nature of justice and injustice, Socrates proposed to settle the dispute, in the passage of the *Republic* from which my first epigraph is taken, by constructing an imaginary and ideal state in order to see how justice originates. The method is not at all unlike that of Dickens, who proposes to investigate the abstraction " injustice " by seeing how it arises in an imaginary replica of the real world. Both methods assume that what is universal and abstract is rendered most readily intelligible by what is particular and concrete, and furthermore that the particular and concrete establish a firmer hold on our feelings than the universal and abstract. For both Plato and Dickens are concerned not only with making justice and injustice understood, but with making them loved and hated, respectively. The method is perhaps suggestive of allegory, but it differs in important ways from any technique of symbolic representation. It is a species of definition which proceeds by attempting to specify the complete denotation of the thing to be defined. To the question, " What is Justice? " Plato replies by showing us his republic, perfect in all its details, and saying, " Justice is here." To a similar

question about injustice Dickens need only reply by unfolding the world of *Bleak House*.

Let me particularize briefly. One of the important ethical abstractions the novel deals with is charity (a useful check list of such abstractions might be derived from the names of Miss Flite's birds). Dickens nowhere provides a statement of the meaning of this concept except by supplying a wide range of instances from which the concept may be inferred. Mrs. Jellyby (for example), Mrs. Pardiggle, Mr. Quale, and Mr. Chadband demonstrate various specious modes of the principal Christian virtue, and Captain Hawdon, Mr. Snagsby, Mr. Jarndyce, and Esther provide glimpses of the genuine article. None of these characters, and none of the acts by which they reveal their nature can be said to *stand for* the general idea, charity; collectively they *are* charity, which is thus defined by representing, on as ample a scale as possible, its denotation. Similarly with the whole spectrum of moral ideas and human relations in *Bleak House*; Dickens offers his main commentary, not by names or labels, certainly not by analysis, and not even by symbolic analogues (though he uses them). His principal technique is the multiplication of instances. To say that in a novel which is as richly and palpably symbolic as *Bleak House* symbolism is unimportant would be in the nature of an extravagant paradox, and I have no intention of going so far. I wish only to direct attention toward a narrative method which seems to me to have been strangely neglected by comparison with the symbolism which has proved so fruitful of insight.

At any rate, I think Esther is vindicated as narrator. The narrative design of the novel really requires only two qualities of her, both of which she exemplifies perfectly. In the first place, she should be as transparent as glass. The complex sensibility which is a characteristic feature of the Jamesian observer would be in Esther not simply no advantage, it would interfere with the plain and limpid narration she is charged with. We must never be allowed to feel that the impressions of characters and events which we derive from her are significantly colored by her own personality, that the light from them (to revert to my optical figure) is diffracted by anything in her so as to distort the image she projects. One partial exception to this generalization implies the second of the two characteristics I have imputed to

her. In the second place, then, we require of Esther sufficient integrity, in a literal sense, to draw together the manifold observations she sets down. The most complex and elaborate act of synthesis is reserved for the reader, but to Esther falls the important choric function of suggesting the lines along which that synthesis should take place by drawing her observations together under a simple, traditional, and predictable system of moral values. If Esther occasionally strikes us as a little goody-goody, we must recall her function to provide a sane and wholesome standard of morality in a topsy-turvy world.

No critic, surely, can remain unimpressed by the richness of *Bleak House,* a quality which is both admirable in itself and characteristically Dickensian. But the quality which raises the novel to a class by itself among Dickens's works is its integrity, a product of the perfect harmony of structure and idea. Edmund Wilson long ago saluted *Bleak House* as inaugurating a unique genre, " the detective story which is also a social fable," but he provided no real insight into the method by which these radically unlike forms were made to coalesce. The secret, I believe, is partly in that instinctive and unfathomable resourcefulness of the artist, which enables him to convert his liabilities into assets, to make, for example, out of such an unpromising figure as Esther Summerson, just the right point of view character for the first-person portion of the novel. But the real greatness of *Bleak House* lies in the happy accident of Dickens's hitting upon a form (the mystery story) and a system of symbols (Chancery) which could hold, for once, the richness of the Dickensian matter without allowing characters and incidents to distract the reader from the total design. The mysterious and sensational elements of the plot are not superimposed on the social fable; they are part of its substance. The slow but relentless disclosure of the web of human relations makes a superb mystery, but what makes it a monumental artistic achievement is that it is also and simultaneously one of the most powerful indictments of a heartless and irresponsible society ever written. *Bleak House* is the greatest of Dickens's novels because it represents the most fertile, as well as the most perfectly annealed, union of subject and technique he was ever to achieve.

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