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Evolution and Epilepsy in Bleak House

ANNA NEILL

At the end of How the Mind Works, Stephen Pinker talks about the arts as a non adaptive by-product of human evolution. To an evolutionary psychologist, he observes, art, like cheesecake or pornography, is best understood as a technology for stimulating sensual enjoyment. The gratification we experience in art is the effect of having our “pleasure buttons”¹ pressed, and the “highfalutin” literary-critics who endeavor to extract serious meaning from, especially, popular culture fail to grasp the psychology that drives the consumption of art, not to mention the utterly peripheral nature of their own intellectual enterprise from the point of view of species survival.² Later in the chapter, he moves to a discussion of the riddles of the mind that remain unsolved by modern neuroscience: consciousness in the sense, not only of coherent subjective awareness and the unified center of experience known as the “self,” but also the puzzle of free will in an apparently deterministic universe.¹ Like enjoying a good novel, the contemplation of such questions is “biologically frivolous.”³ They cannot be adequately addressed by human intelligence, for natural selection simply has not equipped us with the means to solve them. After all, the mind need only support our survival in roughly the same way as it did for our remote ancestors.

In an analysis intended to highlight Pinker’s simplification of the role of art in human experience, Joseph Carroll has shown how Bleak House emphasizes the adaptive advantage that literary culture confers on those who have access to it. The petty-

mindedness and spitefulness of the Smallweeds, he points out, is directly linked to the family's disapproval of story books and fables, whereas Esther's survival and self-determination confirm her capacity to create an imaginative world through which she can "fashion an environment that is adequate to [her] needs of self-development."⁴ In what follows, I will suggest that the novel offers another kind of response to Pinker's assertions, one that highlights, not the activity of the self-determining will, but rather the mental events that escape its disciplining influence. In its depiction of strange alterations of consciousness and the spectral forms they sometimes generate, Bleak House, previews a later-century, physiologically-based investigation of some of the phenomena that point to Pinker's unsolvable mysteries of the mind.

The adaptive talent described by Carroll, which enables characters in the novel to thrive socially and emotionally through habits of mental discipline, is not really delivered by the chance advantage that Darwin was later to identify as the key mechanism of evolutionary change. Instead, Bleak House reflects aspects of an ameliorative evolutionism that sees positive species change as the product of individual effort. The principle that organisms strive towards ever greater complexity was established at the turn of the century with Jean Baptiste Lamarck's theory of heritable acquired characteristics, and popularized in Robert Chambers's Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (1844), which argued for the innate progressive tendency of all phenomena. In the 1850s and 1860s, Herbert Spencer formulated the theory of development as a synthetic principle of scientific knowledge, arguing that all nature intrinsically moves upward into increasing levels of complexity. Concomitantly, he interpreted non-progressive change as the return to a more primordial state of being, and balanced his

account of evolution as the tendency to increasing heterogeneity with a principle of “dissolution,” or a propensity to drift back to more primitive, homogenous states. Even as it brings very non-Darwinian principles of self-improvement and development to fictional life, I will argue, Dickens’s novel also invokes the figure of dissolution, which permeates the narrative voices in Bleak House.

These voices are sensitive, not only, as Carroll argues, to the self-improving potential of the mind, but also to its opposing tendencies. Such tendencies take the form, not of small-mindedness or moral weakness, but rather of voluminous mental states in which clairvoyant glimpses into the story that will follow or ghostly visitations penetrate and disarrange the otherwise ordering activities of consciousness as it seeks to make sensory and cognitive sense of the world it encounters. These states infect Esther’s story in particular (although, as we shall see, they do also affect the omniscient narrator), suspending both her coherent sense of self, situated in a particular place and a particular time, and her self-determining will. At such moments, her mind, flooded by subjective awareness, becomes attuned to a range of possible identities or phantom selves, past, present and future. This state represents the inverse of adaptive success: As Esther’s objective consciousness recedes, her will falters, and she is temporarily unable to look at herself sternly as an objective observer, or to fashion her social position as the “useful, amiable [and] serviceable,” “little woman” of obscure origins to whom friends turn for comfort and advice.⁵

Despite the range of nervous disorders that Esther’s dreamy episodes might point to, there are several reasons why I will read them here as symptoms of epilepsy. The first and probably least compelling of these is biographical: Dickens himself suffered what

may have been epileptic seizures as a child.⁶ He also witnessed the phrenologist John Elliotson's magnetic treatment of the epileptic Elizabeth O'key in 1838.⁷ The second reason is that, while the only true epileptic character in Bleak House, Mrs. Snagsby's servant Guster, is very minor, the much more prominent Bradley Headstone of Our Mutual Friend and Monks of Oliver Twist also suffer from grand-mal seizures, which seem to function metaphorically as symptoms of their villainy and mental anguish. Thus, while more critical attention has been paid to the figures of monomania and hysteria than to epilepsy in Dickens's work, "fits" brought on by an obsessive preoccupation with something or somebody, or by a horrified discovery of the subject's implication in a network of events or characters, or by response to a psychic trigger (like Monks's loathing reaction to the sound of thunder), suggest that fanaticism and fixation, along with falling and writhing, may be interpreted as symptoms of epilepsy.⁸ Through his contact with asylum physicians,⁹ Dickens was aware of studies of mental illness that identified overlap and potential diagnostic confusions among epilepsy, hysteria and monomania.¹⁰

The third reason is that nineteenth-century neurologists became increasingly interested in the dreamy states of mind precursory to or even constitutive of an epileptic seizure (the latter being what we now recognize as "complex partial epilepsy"). The altered perceptions, ghostly visions, and prescient awareness that can attend the heightened subjectivity characteristic of the dreamy state seem especially intriguing in Bleak House, where the division of narrative labor between third- and first-person voices alerts us to how the subjective mind negotiates the objective world, and where the connections between the many improbably related characters and their stories unfold

through hazy presentiments as much as they do through the accidents and coincidences of the plot: dreamy minds make connections across time and space, linking the poorest of London's poor with a great country family, orphaned nobodies with titled somebodies, and the multi-generational suit in Chancery with the ancient line of the Dedlocks. The minor, usually comically rendered scenes of Guster's seizures invite us to read epilepsy into the dreaminess of narrative voice where consciousness seems often to hover at a great distance from the objective events it means to depict. A dreamy voice which represents the mind under the pressure of dreadful self-recognition threatens the very order and revitalizing potential of narrative meaning. Like the abyss of Chancery, this voice plots uncertain and hazy possibilities and connections more than it does outcomes and advantages.

Evolution and Dissolution: Herbert Spencer and John Hughlings Jackson

Dickens's interest in the treatment of mental illness in the 1850s is documented in Household Words, which published numerous articles on asylum reform, including two co-written by Dickens himself.¹¹ His knowledge of John Elliotson's phrenology-based mesmerism and his friendship with the asylum physician and reformer, John Conolly, tie him to mid-century debate about mental science and medical practice.¹² At the same time, the detail in which he describes nervous symptoms in his fictional and non-fictional characters have given him the reputation of a "street psychologist" who practiced "neuro-psychiatry" on his characters ahead of his own medical time.¹³ My focus here is on how his depictions of disorganized consciousness anticipate the studies of epileptic dreamy

phenomena made by the neurologist John Hughlings Jackson after 1876. Indeed, in his descriptions of “dreamy states” (coined to describe nervous discharges that are symptoms of epilepsy proper, rather than simply warnings), Jackson quoted from David Copperfield,¹⁴ as did his associate and follower James Crichton-Browne in an 1895 lecture on “Dreamy Mental States.”¹⁵ While Dickens’s admiration for the asylum reformers’ moral treatment of madness suggests a source for the powerful figure of self-discipline in the novel, the attention he gives to the complex relations between inner psychic movements and nervous organization reflects a more neurologically evolutionist perspective, replacing the fixed, innate faculties of phrenology with a more dynamic understanding of mental physiology and experience. In this respect he looks ahead to Spencer’s concept of dissolution, fully formulated in the 1860s, as an inevitable counter-movement to evolution, and farther to Jackson, who explored how dreamy symptoms of seizure expressed dissolution in the highest centers of the nervous system.

Spencer himself first used the term “dissolution” in Social Statics (1850), but only formulated it as a general principle of evolution in “Progress, its Law and Cause,” published in the Westminster Review of April 1857. In First Principles (1862), he argues more fully that evolution requires the transformation, by means of adaptive responses to the environment, from “an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity.”¹⁶ As they evolve, he demonstrates, chemical compounds, organisms, social institutions, and political structures and economies all become increasingly differentiated, specialized and heterogeneous. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1855), he argues specifically that the evolving nervous system can be described as a “progress from co-ordinations that are small and simple to those that are larger and compound and to

those that are still larger and doubly compound.”¹⁷ In his later account of the process of dissolution, however, a reverse movement towards indefinite, incoherent homogeneity occurs: complex molecules break up and their constituents take on looser structures; solids assume liquid and then gaseous forms; organisms decay and die; states dissolve through social unrest; commercial societies resume a crude division of labor.¹⁸ Complicating his own usual assumption that all nature strives towards perfectibility, Spencer proposes that understanding the present state of any phenomenon demands knowledge of both its former, primitive and of its future, decayed forms. “Intellectual progress consists largely, if not mainly, of widening our acquaintance with this past and this future.”¹⁹

In his studies of the pathophysiology of epilepsy, Jackson used Spencer’s models of evolution and dissolution to describe changes in nervous organization. Jackson is best known for his work on cerebral localization, replacing the static model of the brain offered by phrenologists with a dynamic, evolutionist account of the physical laws of mind. Along with David Ferrier, he mapped the sensory-motor functions of the cerebrum and explored how these effected changes in the brain and hence in mental organization. He is also known as the co-founder and editor of the journal Brain, and as the discoverer of what is now called “Jacksonian epilepsy,” whose convulsions he traced to lesions in the motor regions of the brain. Jackson’s discoveries of the origin of various forms of epilepsy in discharging lesions in particular parts of the cortex, enormously advanced medical knowledge of the illness. His studies of the “dreamy state,” for which he assembled a large number of clinical examples, eventually led to its cerebral localization in the medial temporal region.²⁰

Like Spencer, Jackson saw the brain evolving through the recombination of nervous arrangements to create permanent and more complex nervous arrangements—a movement from the automatic to the increasingly voluntary--as well as through permanent changes caused by interaction between these highest centers and the external environment. Hence the highest nervous functions (represented in conscious awareness) are determined by the most complex nervous arrangements. Dissolution, on the other hand, is a “ ‘taking to pieces’ in order from the least organized, most complex and most voluntary, towards the most organized, the most simple and most automatic.”²¹ The highest centers of the nervous system, (which Jackson located in the frontal, pre-frontal, and occipital lobes) normally exercise inhibitory control over the lower centers.²² Because they are the highest and most complex, these are the centers that manifest nervous dissolution first, thus bringing about a reduction to a more automatic condition of the organism. Hence the excessive discharge of nervous energy that causes a seizure provokes a loss of voluntary movement and an increase in involuntary or automatic activity.

In Jackson’s account, all parts of the body are represented, re-represented, and then re-re-re-represented at each level of the nervous centers: lower, middle and higher. Each level is increasingly complex in its representations of different regions of the body, and increasingly distant from the part to which it corresponds. In a healthy organism, there is a highly complex cooperation between the movements of different regions: one center does not represent one organ, but a whole muscular region and the interaction of muscles within that region. Higher, or co-coordinating centers represent “in more complex...combinations the part of the body which those lower represent directly in

simpler [...] combinations.”²³ Ultimately, this means that, in these highest centers, each unit represents all parts of the body at the same time that it represents one specially.²⁴

When, for example, a man is pricked on the back, he experiences both the nervous stimulation in the region affected, and the stimulation as a state of consciousness: the prick is to *his* back. Object consciousness and subject consciousness are intertwined, creating simultaneously a universal and a local awareness. Hence, when organic disease causes dissolution in the hierarchy of nervous arrangements, it disturbs this relationship between objective and subjective mind.

Jackson speculates that, if the whole body is represented in the units making up the division of the highest centers, with each part of the organ containing nervous arrangements for movements of the whole body, then it can be said that each unit is “the whole division in miniature” but “each of it is the whole of it in different miniature.”²⁵ Thus each unifying or synthesizing center is “a series of miniature higher centers, each of which is in some degree ‘potentially’ the whole organism...in a different degree and order of representation of all parts.”²⁶ These units, essentially the material basis of mind, therefore exist as potential, as much as they do actual, triggers of particular nervous and mental states. Reduced activity, or dissolution, in these centers is likely to increase automatic behavior. Although he does not say so directly (perhaps because, as he cautions, his description of the nervous cartography that underlies consciousness is only conjectural), this theory of nervous representation suggests an origin for the voluminous mental phenomena that he calls “dreamy.” If an arrangement between subjective and objective awareness co-coordinated by the center disintegrates, a flooding of the psyche with a multitude of subjective states that are normally “stored” as potential states in the

units that make up the center is likely to occur. Dreamy states, his case studies show, are nearly always experienced as a kind of expanded consciousness, or “a diminished object consciousness with increased subject consciousness.”²⁷

In his lectures on the dreamy state as a variety of epilepsy, Jackson records experiences from clinical cases. These include “a feeling of being somewhere else” or “in a strange country,”²⁸ and “a blending of past ideas with present” “as if reminiscent of a former life.”²⁹ One patient talks about experiencing “curious sensations...a sort of transportation to another world, lasting a second or so.”³⁰ Another says “it is not of anything that has happened in real life, but is like what has happened.”³¹ Having argued that loss of consciousness is not necessary for a diagnosis of epilepsy, Jackson proposes that the disease may manifest as a defective consciousness of present surroundings co-existing with an “overconsciousness” or dreamy recognition of “some other and quasi-former surroundings.”³²

In large part the dreamy state has been ignored, he suggests, because in itself it only represents “slightly raised activities (slightly increased discharges) of healthy nervous arrangements.”³³ This almost-commonplace character of the state is alluded to, Jackson remarks, in the reports of a medical man who himself suffered from brief episodes of altered consciousness. Jackson quotes the passage from David Copperfield that this physician refers to:

We all have some experience of a feeling which come over us occasionally of what we are saying and doing having been said or done before, in a remote time—of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago,

by the same faces, objects, and circumstances—of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remembered it.³⁴

Not only are such attacks are so slight as to barely disrupt the continuum of normal mental experience but, as Dickens emphasizes here, they are almost universally experienced. What Jackson refers to as “reminiscence” is an everyday manifestation of the dreamy state, a fragment of what is in more extreme cases is experienced as fantastic “recollection,” and a strange mingling of apparent memory and clairvoyant anticipation.³⁵ Here, though a “healthy” mind may barely pause to notice it, surrounding objects and people assume a heightened significance, manifesting as figures and events from a past so remote that it could not possibly belong to an individual memory. Objects in the external environment appear simultaneously to belong in that dim past and to stimulate predictions of the immediate future, like forewarning ghosts. These phantoms of subject consciousness are everywhere in Dickens, often anticipating revelations that the plot will later bring to light. Bleak House, I suggest, foregrounds these everyday episodes of dreaminess and, in so doing, explores the origin of clairvoyant and apparitional visions in the neuropathology of epilepsy.

Bleak House

Dickens shared the optimism of many of his scientific contemporaries that physical causes would eventually be found to explain the strangest most seemingly non-material effects. “Wonders will never cease,” an article from the September 1859 issue of

All The Year Round, cautions its readers, but perhaps eventually they will belong to the “manuals of science” rather than the “curiosities of superstition.”³⁶ A natural-lawful explanation for the appearance of ghosts, he proposed, could be found in further investigation of nervous and brain physiology. Specters are the forms generated in mental states where present and remembered experiences are allowed to mingle.³⁷ Dickens’s own connections experiments with mesmerism were not investigations into the occult but studies of the magnetic influences at work in the strange sympathy between minds and across physical barriers.³⁸ Louise Henson has described how Dickens’s ghost stories were frequently misread as evidence of spiritualism. This interpretation, she points out, ignored how the stories, like so many of the articles he published, are far less interested in the possibility of the existence of a spirit world than in the place that apparitions occupy in the mysteries of the physical universe. Hence he insists on segregating the “preposterous state of mind” from the “medical, legal, or other watchful experience.”³⁹ In what remains, I will argue that this segregation is not, in fact, fully enforced in Bleak House. In fact, the narrators who perform the role of watchful observers are vulnerable to the spectral visions that disturb the order of the objective world. Objective knowledge seems to dissolve into apparitional landscapes as often as spirits are disciplined to obey the laws of physical nature.

Although Esther demonstrates the “self-determining power” that William Benjamin Carpenter argues preserves the agency of the will over the automatic activity of the mind,⁴⁰ there are many moments in her story when she is not able to control this mental activity. The most obvious instance is during her illness when divisions of time between childhood, adolescence and youth “became confused with one another” (p. 513)

and when her sense of independent self dissolves into an image of the terrifying connectedness of everything: “a great flaming necklace” that is “strung together somewhere in great black space” (p. 514). Yet these experiences of unreality and the altered sense of self that signals the onset of the illness are not entirely new for Esther. When she and Charley first leave to visit Jenny’s cottage and help the orphan Jo, they pause at the gate leaving Bleak House, where Esther observes a strange light in the sky overhanging the darkened skyline of London. The spectacle is both “beautiful and awful,” “immovable and heaving,” revealing the terrible worldliness of London’s “waste” with the light of a seemingly divine fire (p. 450). Struck by this strange conflation of opposites, Esther experiences a doubleness in her own psyche as she has “for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was,” even though she is quite sure that she had no thought of “what was soon to happen”—referring perhaps to the symptoms of the illness but more probably to the discovery of her parents’ identities (p. 450). Here, in a subjective response to an atmospheric effect (as Monks responds to thunder in Oliver Twist), Esther’s objective consciousness is flooded by that subjective awareness. She then undergoes one of those not-quite-describable moments of detachment from identity that Jackson records, in this case linked to form of a peculiar clairvoyance, in which she experiences viscerally the effects of the knowledge of her parentage that is yet to come.

Her dreamy states and the revelations they entail, are always characterized by a feeling of indistinctness, whether something undefinable as it is at the garden gate, or the haziness of the light under the atmospheric conditions of dawn, twilight, fog, or shadow, or by a dreamlike or confused state of mind. The first time she meets Lady Dedlock, her

face is “in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances” (p. 268); the second time, just before mother reveals herself to daughter, Esther “cannot say what was in my whirling thoughts” as she is struck by “something in her face I had pined for and dreamed of as a little child” p. (532). While she and Inspector Bucket are searching for Lady Dedlock at the end of the novel, premonitions of her death take on physical symptoms as “thoughts [that] shudder through me” (p. 804), but they also have an unreality to them as “I was far from sure that I was not in a dream” (p. 803). Recalling the walk to the burial ground where they will find the body, Esther admits to “confused impressions”; “it was neither night nor day” (p. 844). Almost-everyday fluctuations of consciousness, as Jackson would emphasize, Esther’s memories of events are here like her memories of childhood--vague and fragmentary yet overflowing with premonition. Or they are like her still more ordinary state of sleep in which objects become “indistinct and mingled” (p. 57), and the separate identities of others as well of herself dissolves.

In all of these moments, her awareness of the external world is overwhelmed as her subject consciousness is intensified, while her strange sense of not-self, or of a ghostly self, is sometimes prelude to a strong premonition. Even when she has not the faintest idea of her connection to Lady Dedlock, she feels that “I-I, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing—seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady” (p. 268). Earlier, the first morning she wakes up in Bleak House, she watches objects within and outside her room emerge “from the indistinctness of last night,” “disclos[ing] the scene over which the wind had wandered in the dark, like my

memory over my life” (p. 105). She is referring to a moment the previous night, when she had allowed her mind to wander back over her childhood and then “raise[...] up shadowy speculations” (p. 95) about her parentage. The simile draws the dim forms of the external world—the objects in the dawn light--into the territory of her wandering mind where thoughts of the past summon up the ghostly figures of her parents.

Such apparitional moments, or simply the confusion and indistinctness that often accompanies them, are often defeated by Esther’s will. She evades the disarming “shadowy speculations” about her parentage by recalling “Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!” (p. 95). She avoids the “fitful, dazzling”(p. 244) habits of mind that destroy her cousin Richard, by exercising the “application and concentration” that he lacks, and she recovers from the aura-like “dread and faintness” (p. 532) that precedes her mother’s revelation by reflecting upon her “sacred obligation” (p. 538) not to alert others to her discovery. Perhaps most powerfully, when she first looks at herself in the mirror after the illness has altered her features, she overcomes the estrangement from her own image by reminding herself firmly that she must begin life afresh as something other than a beauty. At such moments her story celebrates the victory of will over mental confusion and self-loss.

There is, however, a character that experiences a far more extreme loss of volition than Esther, experiencing not a dreamy state, but rather grand-mal epileptic attacks. Guster has “fits”, attributable, the narrator suggests, “to a tender heart, and a susceptible something that might have been imagination” (p. 164) if it had not been for her stifling upbringing at the hands of the parish. In accordance with Jackson’s cartography of nervous disorder, such emotional and intellectual undernourishment results in less

activity in the higher nervous structure, suggesting that Guster might more susceptible to a disorder in the lower and more automatic centers. Like Esther, and like Jo, whose unhappy plight “sends her into a fit of unusual duration” (p. 164), Guster is an orphan. Unlike Esther, however, she only communicates the distressed state of her nerves and mind through her convulsions, and her ghostliness is that of the improbable séance specter so derided by Dickens: when she announces the visit of the Chadbands, she “comes rustling and scratching down the little staircase like a popular ghost.”(p. 281).

In The Commercial Traveller, Dickens seems to speculate about the interiority of the female epileptic that he denies Guster in Bleak House. Here, the narrator visits a ward for the “idiotic and imbecile” in the Wapping workhouse full of women who “drop,” “roll,” and “tear.”⁴¹ Among these, the one who reputedly has the worst attacks of them all, is a young woman who sits “with her face turned up, pondering.” The traveller wonders

Whether this young woman, brooding like this in the summer season, ever thinks that somewhere there are trees and flowers, even mountains and the great sea? Whether, not to go so far, this young woman ever has any dim revelation of that young woman who is not here and will never come here, who is courted and caressed, and loved, and has a husband, and bears children, and lives in a home, and who never knows what it is to have this lashing and tearing come upon her? And whether this young woman, God help her, gives herself up then, and drops like a coach-horse from the moon?⁴²

The traveller's compassion for the girl, his dismay at the bleakness of her life, is expressed here, not in the form of a satire on the poverty of institutional care, but rather as an imaginative description of an alternative life of domestic contentment that she will probably never live. As the creation of the sick woman's mind, this other self arises as a "dim revelation." This spectral self then in turn signals the onset of a grand mal seizure. The odd thing is that it is the narrator himself who earlier claimed to have encountered the ghost of a drowned man on the swing bridge over the locks near the workhouse. Although he describes this "apparition" with not a little irony—it too appears like a séance grotesque with "a ghastly grin and a sound like gurgling water in its throat"—the ghost functions as a premonition, warning him about the desperate condition of the female residents of the workhouse.⁴³ To read this encounter as a clairvoyant episode is also to recognize the narrator's own implication in the scene with the epileptic girl: the speculations about what might have been come from him, and the "other young woman" is the apparitional creature of his mind as much as it is of the girl's.

Just as manifestations of the dreamy state become the property of, not only cerebral disease, but the ordinary observing mind in this scene, in Bleak House epilepsy not only inflicts Guster's and Esther's stories, but also the quality of large portions of the anonymous narrator's tale. The fog that covers all of London in the opening paragraphs of the novel famously provides a metaphor for the murky conduct of Chancery. This fog makes forms indistinct and undistinguishable. It is the first of many of the narrator's descriptions of atmospheric effects that estrange the observer from a familiar environment, like the "dilating" (p. 654) effect of dusk over Tom-all-Alone's, or the

twilight over Chesney Wold that changes known forms into “distant phantom[s]” (p. 593). In this last description, the evening landscape is in sympathy with the ghostly presence haunting the house and its contents, in particular casting a menacing shadow over the portrait of Lady Dedlock. Uncannily, in describing the way that Chesney Wold is still inhabited, in portrait form, by the generations of Dedlocks who have lived there, the narrator’s omniscience expands speculatively from the present, visible world into the worlds of the lived past, the future, and the dead:

The present summer evening, as the sun goes down, the preparations are complete. Dreary and solemn the old house looks, with so many appliances of habitation, and with no inhabitants except the pictured forms upon the walls. So did these come and go, a Dedlock in possession might have ruminated passing along; so did they see this gallery hushed and quiet, as I see it now; so think, as I think, of the gap that they would make in this domain when they were gone; so find it, as I find it, difficult to believe that it could be, without them; so pass from my world, as I pass from theirs, now closing the reverberating door; so leave no blank to miss them, and so die. (pp. 592-3)

Here the narrator breaks the rules of third-person anonymity, projecting his voice into the body of a Dedlock and there inhabiting a subjective, first-person ‘I’ whom we have not encountered before. This spectral intrusion into the objective world then itself becomes the occasion for an imaginative, if not clairvoyant, representation of the dead ancestors

that moves simultaneously into the past and into the future. It is the moment in this narrator's tale that parallels Esther's vertiginous reflection following her illness that "I felt for myself as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes" (p. 653). The narrator's Dedlock imagines himself as a dead ancestor who in turn tries to imagine a future in which he is no longer the living master of the house. This layering of spectral voices and the collapse of linear time it temporarily effects is dizzying. Reader and narrator recover their balance only when the living and the dead are separated again by the closing of the "the reverberating door" (p. 593). Then the portraits assume a comfortably caricature-like quality as they come to satirical life in the light of the sunset: a Justice winks; and an ancestress in high-heels assumes a halo.

The narrator's prescience is sometimes manifest in the subjunctive mood of the voice that asks, as it does in the passage above, about what a character, real or imagined, "might have" thought or whether, for instance, Tulkinghorn would see a woman pass if he looked out the window at a certain moment. It is the voice that suggests "it may be the gathering gloom of the evening or it may be the darker gloom within herself" that casts a shadow on Lady Dedlock's face "as if" she wished for Tulkinghorn's death (p. 598, my emphasis), and it is the voice that examines the scene of Tulkinghorn's murder with cinematic precision while imagining the ghost stories that the details it notes will spawn. This voice sacrifices both omniscient knowledge of the minds of characters (the knowledge that Tulkinghorn himself, "always at hand, haunting every place" [p. 681], possesses and uses to his own dark ends), as well as knowledge about the visible world based on "forensic" evidence of the kind Guppy assembles, for intuitive anticipation of possible revelations or events to come. Hence, even as the narrator describes how Bucket

“mounts a high tower in his mind” (p. 798) to deduce the whereabouts of Lady Dedlock in the dramatic closing scenes of the novel, that narrative voice almost imperceptibly slips away from the detective’s rational, speculating mind to uncover the mystery for the reader well in advance of Bucket and Esther’s too-late discovery. At this moment, Bucket’s reasoned deduction surrenders to a subjunctive mood that carries the reader beyond ordinary perception and discovery, not by penetrating the objective and subjective worlds of all places and all characters, but by inhabiting a field of the possible:

Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? If, as he folds the handkerchief and carefully puts it up, it were able, with an enchanted power, to bring before him the place where she found it... would he descry her there? On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of the wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind...there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself. It is the figure of a woman too, but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion. (p. 798)

Such dissolution, manifest in the drifting away from definite forms and signs, offsets what elsewhere seems like the narrator’s evolutionist perspicacity. The narrator opens his first chapter with the twin images of a megalosaurus wandering up Holborn Hill and of “new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud” (p. 11) created by London’s foot walkers, collapsing the comings and goings of the present into the vastness of

geological time and intimating the interconnectedness of events as they are shaped by inevitable and unchanging natural forces. “What connexion,” he asks, “can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, very curiously been brought together!” (p. 235). Given the mid-century popularity of Robert Chambers’s Vestiges and the fact that Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology had gone through seven editions by 1851, it is hard not to interpret the “gulfs” he invokes here as those among natural forms and species as well as among social classes. Yet he has little faith in evolutionary progress. Although he stresses that moral and intellectual strength are realized in the interaction between a human being and its environment, these are not acquired characteristics that will be passed down to future generations what amounts to a progressive improvement of the species, for neglect and indifference will always return a creature to its most primitive form. Hence even the “lower animals” at Chesney Wold, he speculates, might have more “motions of fancy” (95) than the stunted imaginations of the servants and stable hands that take care of them, and an “educated, improved, developed dog, who has been taught his duties and knows how to discharge them” (p. 238) can, unlike the poor, uneducated orphan Jo, respond to his environment with more than brute sense. Hence too the dog, we are reminded, if turned wild, like Jo, will produce descendents that lack any of these domestic talents. Because he is continually being “moved on,” Jo’s mental and physical condition ironizes the very idea of evolutionary progress in a city where everything is “moving to some purpose”(p. 291).

This social dissolution, imaged as a descending hierarchy of social beings, traverses the episodes and descriptions of mental dissolution. When Guster offers Jo

food, asks him whether he has any parents, and lays the “first decent hand” upon him, she has to repress “symptoms favorable to the fit” (p. 384). Meanwhile Jo herself is rendered, as he so often is, mute and “petrified” (p. 383). Both have suffered, like Esther, because they are orphaned, and both are most vulnerable to a psychomotor dysfunction at the moment they experience feelings of domestic tenderness, just as just as Esther is, I have argued, affected by her own inklings of familial connection. Yet neither, like her, has capacity for self-direction that can summon her to duty with a commanding, “Esther!” Esther’s superior mind (the result of the education and affection she has received as much as of native determination) often enables her to restrain her own minds tendency to dissolution which, as we have seen, gives her an expanded awareness of the relationships among people and places. Jo is also paired with Esther, however, as a character that belongs to the improbable connection between Chesney Wold and Tom-All-Along’s. He is “unconscious of the link” and he “sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by replying that he ‘don’t know nothink.’” (p. 235). Esther, on the other hand, has a “knowledge of details perfectly surprising” (p. 624) and the capacity, however dreadful she finds it, to understand her own place in the unfolding mystery.

Looking back on her illness, Esther reflects that her object in reporting its horrifying symptoms is to contribute to medical knowledge: “It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity” (p. 514). This reflects her effort to shape her narrative as an expression of duty rather than hubris. But when the activity of her mind escapes the disciplining exercise of her will, her story becomes something other than the record of “progress” it claims to be by the title of her first chapter. Ostensibly, the ending secures the providential narrative, as

the “goodness and tenderness of God” (p. 911) reveals itself in the blessing and restoring of good characters who have suffered: Ada, Charley, and Caddy. This blessing is expanded in the formation of something like Rousseau’s petite société around the marriage of Esther and Woodcourt, whose goodness ensures the happiness of all those whom they touch: patients, friends, and children alike. Chesney Wold is left to “darkness and vacancy” (p. 910), while Bleak House becomes the scene of new life and a generation liberated from the moral quicksand of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Yet Esther’s closing reflection seems to shift the narrative emphasis on moral restraint and its domestic and social rewards back to the more peculiar activity of her mind. In response to her husband’s suggestion that the mirror should show her that, despite the scars of her illness, she is prettier than ever, she responds privately in the form of an incomplete phrase whose mood is subjunctive: “they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—.” (p. 914). This phrase ends the novel with moral as well as semantic uncertainty: what if she were more beautiful than before her illness? The mirror suddenly ceases to be an instrument of self-discipline. It is possible to read this closing speculation as another moment of dissolution, a form of knowing that is neither that of third-person narrative omniscience nor of first-person moral self-fashioning. Instead it represents a heightening of subjectivity as awareness of the objective world becomes confused. Esther’s closing half-thought invokes the ghostly form that represents the dissolving of a conscious moment into a host of potential states. It suggests, that is to say, the dimness and unreality that accompany the mind’s release from the certain forms of daylight.

ABSTRACT

In Dickens's novels, nervous seizures trigger dreamy, clairvoyant episodes in which normally imperceptible connections and relations among events and characters come to light. During such episodes, which the neurologist John Hughlings Jackson would describe as "voluminous" states of consciousness, the boundaries of the self dissolve, and the mind becomes attuned to a range of possible identities or phantom selves. The specters unleashed in this state of nervous "dissolution," haunt Bleak House even as they illuminate relations among members of vastly different social worlds and the great institutional forces that finger the most intimate events of the mind.

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¹ Steven Pinker, How the Mind Works (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999), p. 539.

² Pinker, How the Mind Works, p. 523.

³ How the Mind Works, p. 521.

⁴ Joseph Carroll, Literary Darwinism: Evolution, Human Nature, and Literature (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 63-8, 67.

⁵ Charles Dickens, Bleak House (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 569 and 640.

All further references cited in the text.

⁶ Peter Ackroyd, Dickens (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p. 82; William Gordon Lennox and Margaret A. Lennox, Epilepsy and Related Disorders, 2 vols. (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1960), vol. 1, p. 704.

⁷ Fred Kaplan, Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), p. 38.

⁸ On monomania and hysteria in Dickens's novels see Katherine Cummings, Telling Tales: The Hysteric's Seduction in Fiction and Theory (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991); Evelyne Ender, Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth-Century Fictions of Hysteria (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995); Hippolyte Taine, "Charles Dickens: son talent et ses oeuvres," Revue des deux mondes (1 February 1856): 618-47.

⁹ On Dickens's connections with the asylum physicians see Richard A. Hunter and Ida Macalpine, "Dickens and Conolly: An Embarrassed Editor's Disclaimer." TLS 11 (August 1961): 534-35, cited in Graeme Tytler, "Dickens's 'The Signalman,'" The Explicator 53, 1 (Fall 1994): 26-9; David Oberhelman, Dickens in Bedlam: Madness and Restraint in his Fiction (Fredericton, Canada: York Press, 1995); Susan Shatto, "Miss Havisham and Mr. Hopes the Hermit: Dickens and the Mentally Ill." Dickens Quarterly 2, 2 (June 1985): 43-9 and 2, 3 (Sept. 1985): 79-83.

¹⁰ See Jean-Etienne Esquirol, Mental Maladies: A Treatise on Insanity, translated by E.K. Hunt (Philadelphia: Lea and Blanchard, 1845). Esquirol argues that hysteria, in particular, shares many of the symptoms of epilepsy, including precursory moodiness, convulsions, and often a permanent change in the psyche of its victim (p. 151). See also Moritz Heinrich Romberg, A Manual of the Nervous Diseases of Man, 2 vols. (London: Sydenham Society, 1853), vol. 2, p. 202; Theodore Herpin, Du pronostic et du traitement curative de l'épilepsie (Paris: Ballière, 1852), pp. 459-65; S. A. Tissot, Traité de l'épilepsie (Paris: P.F. Didot, 1770). Owsei Temkin provides a helpful summary of the nineteenth century debate about the relationship between epilepsy and hysteria. See

Temkin, The Falling Sickness: A History of Epilepsy from the Greeks to the Beginnings of Modern Neurology, 2d ed., (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1971), pp. 351-9.

¹¹ See “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree,” Household Words 95 (17 January 1852): 385-89 and “Idiots,” HW 167 (4 June 1853): 313-17.

¹² See Oberhelman, Dickens in Bedlam, pp. 7-20.

¹³ Leonard Manheim, “Dickens’s Fools and Madmen,” Dickens Studies Annual 21 (1971): 69-97, 73.

¹⁴ See below, p.10.

¹⁵ James Crichton-Browne, Stray Leaves from a Physician’s Portfolio (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1927), pp. 1-42, 2.

¹⁶ Spencer, First Principles (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1896), pp. 412-16.

¹⁷ Herbert Spencer, The Principles of Psychology, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1873), vol. 1, p. 67.

¹⁸ Spencer, First Principles, pp. 531-50.

¹⁹ Spencer, First Principles, p. 280

²⁰ See R. Edward Hogan and Kitti Kaiboriboon, “The ‘Dreamy State’: John Hughlings Jackson’s Ideas of Epilepsy and Consciousness,” American Journal of Psychiatry 160, 10 (October, 2003): 1740-47; Temkin, The Falling Sickness, pp. 288-323.

²¹ John Hughlings Jackson, “Evolution and Dissolution of the Nervous System,” lectures collected and reprinted in James Taylor, ed., Selected Writings of John Hughlings Jackson 2 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1958), vol. 2, pp. 45-91, 46.

²² Walter J. Friedlander, The History of Modern Epilepsy (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001), p. 39.

²³ Jackson, "Evolution and Dissolution," Selected Writings 2: 100.

²⁴ "Evolution and Dissolution" Selected Writings, 2: 101

²⁵ "Evolution and Dissolution" Selected Writings, 2: 96.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jackson, "Intellectual Warnings of Epileptic Seizures," Medical Times and Gazette, 23 December 1876, p. 702.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Jackson, "Lectures on the Diagnosis of Epilepsy," Medical Times and Gazette, 6 February 1879, pp. 141-3, 142.

³⁰ Jackson, "On a Particular Variety of Epilepsy ("Intellectual Aura"), one case with symptoms of organic brain disease," Brain 11 (1888): 179-207, 186.

³¹ "A Particular Variety of Epilepsy," pp. 199-200.

³² "A Particular Variety of Epilepsy," p. 183.

³³ "A Particular Variety of Epilepsy," p. 181.

³⁴ "A Particular Variety of Epilepsy," p. 185.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ All the Year Round, 17 September 1859, pp. 497-500, 497.

³⁷ See Louise Henson, "Investigations and Fictions: Charles Dickens and Ghosts," in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell (eds.), The Victorian Supernatural (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), pp. 44-63..

³⁸ See Oberhlelman, Dickens in Bedlam, p. 9; Fred Kaplan, Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 55-86.

³⁹ Quoted by Louise Henson, “‘In the Natural Course of Things’: Ghosts and Science in Charles Dickens’s All The Year Round,” in Louise Henson et al., eds., Science and Culture in the Ninteenth-Century Media (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 113-124, 119.

⁴⁰ William Benjamin Carpenter, Principles of Mental Physiology (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881), pp. 386-395.

⁴¹ All The Year Round 18 February 1860, pp. 392-6, 393.

⁴² Ibid., p. 394.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 392.