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The Broken Glass: Vision and Comprehension in *Bleak House*

IAN OUSBY

After the first glance, there were slight features in the midst of this crowd of objects, which sprung out from the mass without any reason, as it were, and took hold of the attention whether the spectator would or no. Thus, the revolving chimney-pots on one great stack of buildings seemed to be turning gravely to each other every now and then, and whispering the result of their separate observation of what was going on below. Others, of a crook-backed shape, appeared to be maliciously holding themselves askew, that they might shut the prospect out and baffle Todgers's. The man who was mending a pen at an upper window over the way, became of paramount importance in the scene, and made a blank in it, ridiculously disproportionate in its extent, when he retired. The gambols of a piece of cloth upon the dyer's pole had far more interest for the moment than all the changing motion of the crowd. Yet even while the looker-on felt angry with himself for this, and wondered how it was, the tumult swelled into a roar; the hosts of objects seemed to thicken and expand a hundredfold; and after gazing round him, quite scared, he turned into Todgers's again, much more rapidly than he came out; and ten to one he told M. Todgers afterwards that if he hadn't done so, he would certainly have come into the street by the shortest cut; that is to say, head-foremost.

*Martin Chuzzlewit*, “Town and Todgers's”

In classic pieces of Dickens criticism, both Dorothy Van Ghent and J. Hillis Miller have singled out this passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit*—it describes the view from the roof of Todgers's, the boardinghouse where Mr. Pecksniff and his daughters stay in London—as crucial to Dickens' view of the relation between the ob-
server and the scene that he attempts to comprehend.\footnote{1} The physical world, especially that complex and crowded urban world of which the Todgers's roof affords a bird's-eye view, poses disquieting problems of perception. Rather than presenting itself to the eye in a passive and orderly manner it takes on a fractious and menacing life of its own. The spectator quickly abandons any attempt to view the scene as a continuous and ordered whole, becomes fascinated by separate and unrelated details, and finally falls victim to a rising hysteria. As Miss Van Ghent and Miller suggest, these difficulties of perception recur throughout Dickens' work; the present essay will examine their role in \textit{Bleak House}.

From the beginning, the narrative of \textit{Bleak House} presupposes a correspondence between the external appearance of things and their inner condition. The physical muddle which the book's opening paragraphs evoke so powerfully is the outward manifestation of a deeper, moral disorder: a loss of coherence, vitality and connection. The characters' struggles to understand this disordered environment—and these form perhaps the book's central theme—are thus continually expressed through acts of perception in the simplest sense: they try to see the world clearly and to see it whole.

In this effort they are largely unsuccessful, for the world abounds in impediments to clear vision. In the opening description it is shrouded in fog and unnatural darkness. The soot-blackened landscape, the narrator remarks in the first of a sequence of apocalyptic images, appears to be in mourning "for the death of the sun"; even the gas lamps have "a haggard and unwilling look."\footnote{2} The end of the second paragraph presents a vignette which typifies the condition of the characters, with their partial and inadequate view of their surroundings: "Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds."

This evocation moves quickly from the general to the particular,


Vision in *Bleak House* from a description of nameless but typical inhabitants of London to the Court of Chancery, at once emblem and cause of the pervading malaise. Here, in a striking image, the Lord High Chancellor is seen, “addressed by a large advocate with great whiskers, a little voice, and an interminable brief, and outwardly directing his contemplation to the lantern in the roof, where he can see nothing but fog” (2). This obviously echoes, on smaller scale, the earlier image of a world deprived of the sun’s light, and it aptly hints at that view of Chancery which the book is quick to develop in more explicit terms; for the Court’s labyrinthine activities lack any guiding light, and they obscure rather than illuminate the subjects of their proceedings. This motif of defective vision reappears later in connection with the Court. At the opening of chapter 32, for example, the narrator notes of Lincoln’s Inn: “From tiers of staircase windows, clogged lamps like the eyes of Equity, bleared Argus with a fathomless pocket for every eye and an eye upon it, dimly blink at the stars” (443). The law has, moreover, the knack of reducing everything it touches to a similar state of sightlessness. Tom-All-Alone’s, the property of Jarndyce versus Jarndyce, is, as Mr. Jarndyce describes it to Esther, “a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stoned out” (96).

The novel’s second chapter follows the same structure as the first. It moves from an evocation of a typically deadened and debilitated landscape—this time the country seat of the Dedlocks, Chesney Wold—to a description of the dilemma of its inhabitants. Here, as before, the link is accomplished by a description of the difficulties encountered by the characters in viewing their environment. After a marvelously rich and detailed account of the dank and gloomy family estate, the narrative shifts adroitly to Lady Dedlock’s viewpoint: “The view from my Lady Dedlock’s own windows is alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink” (9). A few sentences later the scene that Lady Dedlock observes is described in some detail:

My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper’s lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon

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3 Compare my analysis of this scene with that offered by C. B. Cox, “A Dickens Landscape,” *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1960), 58–60. Cox argues that the decaying park of Chesney Wold and Lady Dedlock’s distant prospect of it are emblems of her inner condition, “a sophisticated boredom which has lost all real contact with life” (59).
the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. (9)

When the reader encounters this passage for the first time the parenthetical phrase serves adequately to account for her apparent detachment and her concealed chagrin. Childless herself, she can only be a silent and distant spectator of such domestic scenes. But when the passage is read in the light of the novel's denouement it takes on a more precise reference to her fate. The spectacle of the child "chased by a woman" recalls Lady Dedlock's separation from her illegitimate daughter, Esther Summerson. One further notes in chapter 18 that the lodge is actually the scene of Lady Dedlock's first interview with Esther.

If the lodgekeeper and his family form a suggestive tableau, its significance is increased by the fact that to Lady Dedlock it remains merely a tableau. She is separated from it by the window, and what she sees is in fact a picture, a "view in Indian ink." It is described in terms that make it the verbal counterpart of those dark and brooding plates with which "Phiz," the illustrator, punctuates the text. And if the modern reader is quick to see the scene as a visual symbol, it would to a Victorian audience have been strongly reminiscent of those popular narrative paintings—works like Arthur Hughes's "The Tryst" or Augustus Egg's "Past and Present"—which tell a melodramatic or sentimental story by means of small visual hints. Lady Dedlock, as her manner of frozen detachment would suggest, has become an outsider in her own life, merely a passive and helpless observer of her own fate.

Many of the other characters live, like Lady Dedlock, in attempted denial of their responsibilities; and in their case, too, this attitude is signified by their visual relation to the world around them. Mrs. Jellyby, full of charity towards misery abroad but indifferent towards misery at home, is, as the title of the chapter which introduces her warns, an exponent of "Telescop' Philanthropy." Esther notes at their first meeting:

She was a pretty, very diminutive, plump woman, of from forty to fifty, with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if—I am quoting Richard again—they could see nothing nearer than Africa! (36)
Harold Skimpole, the eternally irresponsible child, is even more detached from his immediate environment. He continually withdraws from the messy entanglements of his personal life—his downtrodden family and his string of debts—to the dreamy contemplation of imagined scenes. His attitude to misery abroad is far more disturbing than Mrs. Jellyby's bossy philanthropy, for Skimpole views his imaginary scenes solely as objects of aesthetic appreciation:

"Take the case of the Slaves on American plantations. I dare say they are worked hard, I dare say they don't altogether like it, I dare say theirs is an unpleasant experience on the whole; but they people the landscape for me, they give it a poetry for me, and perhaps that is one of the pleasanter objects of their existence." (253)

Commonly, however, people do not enjoy such detachment: they are irrevocably trapped in the thick of things. "I admired," Esther says of her first walk through London, "the long successions and varieties of streets, the quantity of people already going to and fro, the number of vehicles passing and repassing, the busy preparations in the setting forth of shop windows and the sweeping out of shops, and the extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse" (48). Obviously here "admire," to judge from Esther's tone, retains much of its secondary meaning of "to wonder at." For the physical world of Bleak House, like the view from the roof of Todgers's, is of a disordered variety which quickly bewilders the visual sense: Esther's first impression of the streets of London is that they are "in such a distracting state of confusion that I wondered how the people kept their senses" (28). Krook's shop is an apt emblem for the physical condition of things: an ill-lit assortment of items, hopelessly unrelated and disordered.

The characters can rarely attempt to view this dense "crowd of objects" clearly or completely. Like the "chance people on bridges" in the opening chapter, they are reduced to "peeping." In fact, the word "peep" echoes through the book, neatly conveying the partial and fragmented view of things which people usually achieve. Esther, for example, after her arrival at Bleak House, watches the dawn prospect from her window change "at every new peep" (92) and then decides to "take a peep at the garden" (92). Mrs. Snagsby, curious about Tulkinghorn's business with her husband (the lawyer is trying to find out where Nemo lives), "peeps at them through the
window-blind” (134); and, shortly afterwards, at Nemo’s death-bed, Miss Flite “peeps and trembles just within the door” (143). It is obviously no coincidence that the youngest member of the Jellyby family, a relentlessly curious and peripatetic child, should be named “Peepy.”

The term “peep” suggests a childish inquisitiveness, or a timid and old-maidish activity. But in Bleak House curiosity can quickly take less innocuous forms. Krook, for example, leads an endlessly watchful life, casting rapacious glances on his visitors, Esther and the wards of Chancery, like the glances that his cat bestows on Miss Flite’s birds. Similarly, Mademoiselle Hortense, Lady Dedlock’s maid, has “a watchful way of looking out of the corners of her eyes without turning her head, which could be pleasantly dispensed with—especially when she is in an ill-humour and near knives” (158). But this watchfulness bears scant results. In Hortense’s case it is merely self-destructive: becoming embroiled in the mystery of Lady Dedlock’s past, she first kills Tulkinghorn and then is herself trapped by the police detective, Inspector Bucket. Krook, for all his vigilance, can never make sense of his rubbish-heap of possessions. He cannot even learn to read the vital letters between Nemo and Lady Dedlock which he owns. Like the man on the roof at Todgers’s, he can view individual details clearly enough, but can never understand the whole. Tony Jobling reports to Guppy: “He can make all the letters separately, and he knows most of them separately when he sees them; . . . but he can’t put them together” (450).

The world of objects does not remain passive and inanimate under people's watchful gaze. As in the scene from Martin Chuzzlewit, it assumes a life of its own and becomes in its turn watchful. The family portraits in the Dedlock mansion, for example, are presented not simply as furniture or background but as a silent audience to the human drama. At times they share the well-bred but bewildered curiosity of the living Dedlocks themselves: “A staring old Dedlock in a panel, as large as life and as dull, looks as if he didn’t know what to make of it—which was probably his general state of mind in the days of Queen Elizabeth” (157).4 In a sim-

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ilar fashion the fire in the Lord Chancellor’s room is described as a witness to the first meeting between Esther and the wards of Chancery, Richard Carstone and Ada Clare: “Our all three coming together for the first time, in such an unusual place, was a thing to talk about; and we talked about it; and the fire, which had left off roaring, winked its red eyes at us—as Richard said—like a drowsy old Chancery lion” (30). The image adds a nicely disquieting touch to an already ominous occasion. More obviously sinister is the way that the idea of the inanimate world assuming eyes is used in the scene where Tulkinghorn discovers Nemo’s body: “No curtain veils the darkness of the night, but the discoloured shutters are drawn together; and through the two gaunt holes pierced in them, famine might be staring in—the Banshee of the man upon the bed” (136).

At this point the world of things seems to form a silent conspiracy, possibly hostile but at least indifferent to the fate of its human inhabitants. The sense that landscapes, especially the landscape of the city, represent an alien and baffling system pervades the book. The spectator is continually presented with a labyrinth to which he has lost—if indeed he ever possessed—the clue. In this respect Jo, the book’s naked unaccommodated man, suffers from an extreme form of a problem which plagues most of the other characters. Jo’s illiteracy makes him utterly unable to detect any meaning or order in the surrounding world, let alone any benevolent relation to himself:

It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postman deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! (220)

themselves to the looker-on as a whirling circular motion; the effect is to create giddiness, much as the view from the roof of Todgers’s produced vertigo. In chapter 56, for example, Inspector Bucket makes a number of rapid deductions about the paralyzed Sir Leicester Dedlock’s wishes concerning the missing Lady Dedlock and proceeds equally quickly to act upon them. His behavior is incomprehensible to Mrs. Rouncewell, the Dedlock family housekeeper: “Mrs. Rouncewell, who holds the light, is giddy with the swiftness of his eyes and hands, as he starts up, furnished for his journey” (763). The same idea is repeated a little later in describing the confusion and helplessness of Sir Leicester after his wife’s disappearance: “He withdraws his hand, and falls to looking at the sleet and snow again, until they seem, by being long looked at, to fall so thick and fast, that he is obliged to close his eyes for a minute on the giddy whirl of white flakes and icy blots” (788).

Esther Summerson, the novel’s heroine, experiences a similar “hallucinatory incoherence” as she falls asleep on the evening after her arrival in London:

At first I was painfully awake, and vainly tried to lose myself, with my eyes closed, among the scenes of the day. At length, by slow degrees, they became indistinct and mingled. I began to lose the identity of the sleeper [Caddy Jellyby] resting on me. Now it was Ada; now, one of my old Reading friends from whom I could not believe I had so recently parted. Now, it was the little mad woman worn out with curtseying and smiling; now, some one in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one. (45)

Of course, this has much of the after-supper dream about it: it is a kaleidoscopic version of the visual impressions left by Esther’s first day in London. But, in a deeper sense, it also reflects the confusion and ignorance about her identity and her surroundings from which Esther suffers, and which are especially relevant at this point in her life. She has been brought up in ignorance of her real parentage by her aunt, Miss Barbary, and she is now passing through London on her way to meet for the first time her guardian, Mr. Jarndyce, and to become the housekeeper of Bleak House.

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6 The phrase is used by Miller, p. 163, in connection with the description of fog which begins the book.
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The growth of Esther's understanding of herself and her past is one of the book's main movements. Dickens' preoccupation with how his characters see their surroundings plays a crucial role in his description of her *Bildung*: Esther's development is signified by moments of progressively clear vision of the world around her. If she begins with a muddled and unclear view of her surroundings, typical of the characters in the novel, she quickly begins to transcend this condition. At the end of the book the inner and outer disorder of the world still remains, but Esther herself has become a testament to the power of the individual to achieve a clear-sightedness which is at once literal and metaphorical.

Shortly after the moment of "hallucinatory incoherence" mentioned above, Esther moves from London and the Jellyby household to Bleak House. The change wrought by her establishment in this friendly and life-giving atmosphere is neatly imaged in an account of the view from her bedroom window which greets her when she wakens at Bleak House for the first time:

It was interesting when I dressed before daylight, to peep out of window, where my candles were reflected in the black panes like two beacons, and, finding all beyond still enshrouded in the indistinctness of last night, to watch how it turned out when the day came on. As the prospect gradually revealed itself, and disclosed the scene over which the wind had wandered in the dark, like my memory over my life; I had a pleasure in discovering the unknown objects that had been around me in my sleep. At first they were faintly discernible in the mist, and above them the later stars still glimmered. That pale interval over, the picture began to enlarge and fill up so fast, that, at every new peep, I could have found enough to look at for an hour. Imperceptibly, my candles became the only incongruous part of the morning, the dark places in my room all melted away, and the day shone bright upon a cheerful landscape, prominent in which the old Abbey Church, with its massive tower, threw a softer train of shadow on the view than seemed compatible with its rugged character. (92)

Inevitably, the scene is reminiscent of that first view of Lady Dedlock looking out on the park of Chesney Wold. However, Esther and Lady Dedlock have very different perceptions of the world outside their windows. The prospect before Lady Dedlock exists merely as a set of static, frozen vignettes. Esther, by contrast, looks out upon a landscape in a process of continual and orderly change—a change, moreover, which continually enlarges and clarifies her
view. Where Lady Dedlock remains a detached and distant observer, Esther, immediately after the quoted passage, is shown going out to explore and to become a part of the landscape she has seen from a distance.

Of course, her development is far from complete at this point, for she has yet to learn the identity of her parents. The solution to that mystery begins to emerge during her visit to Boythorn when she sees Lady Dedlock in the local church. Esther's response is a semiconscious recognition of Lady Dedlock's resemblance to herself and to Miss Barbary: "But why her face should be, in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances . . . I could not think" (250). Shortly after this she falls ill of the disease unwittingly brought to Bleak House by Jo. As is common in Dickens' fiction, the illness signifies an important crisis in the sufferer's life: Esther emerges from it tested and matured, ready for her recognition scene with Lady Dedlock.

After her recovery the smallpox scars are the visible symbol of how much Esther has changed; but while the illness runs its course its main effect is to make her blind. It is quite literally a dark night of the soul. Esther is separated from contact with her usual surroundings and deprived of her bearings:

Before I had been confined to it [her sickroom] many days, everything else seemed to have retired into a remote distance, where there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life which had been really divided by years. In falling ill, I seemed to have crossed a dark lake, and to have left all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore. (488)

In her blindness she experiences dreams rather like that kaleidoscope of impressions quoted earlier. Here, however, the dreaming is a vital and necessary contact with her imagination: shut off from the physical world, she inhabits a "pure culture" in which she can work out the problem of her relation with Lady Dedlock.

Two visual images dominate her dreams. The first, that of the staircase, signifies her own laborious progress towards the truth about her identity. The second is more complex:

Dare I hint at that worse time when, strung together somewhere in great black space, there was a flaming necklace, or ring, or starry circle of some kind, of which I was one of the beads! And when my only prayer
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was to be taken off from the rest, and when it was such inexplicable agony and misery to be a part of the dreadful thing? (489)

From her first appearance Lady Dedlock has been associated with imagery of stars and of jewelry. The world of fashion to which she belongs is, the narrator suggests when he first describes it, "a world wrapped up in too much jeweller's cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun" (8). The idea of the necklace and its component beads, moreover, suggests that notion of vital interrelation implied by the denouement of the Esther Summerson–Lady Dedlock plot and explicitly enforced by the novel's larger theme of social responsibility.

The idea of blindness, then, and of visually symbolic dreams is essential to Esther's realization of her true identity. This process, however, is not complete until near the end of the book when, after the long coach journey with Inspector Bucket, she is brought to see the body of her mother at the graveyard where her father, Nemo, is buried. During this journey Esther's incomprehension of her situation is repeatedly indicated through her visual relation to her surroundings. The experience seems like a dream to her and, just as she had earlier gone blind, she here lapses into a confused and partial perception of the city landscape through which she is traveling:

We rattled with great rapidity through such a labyrinth of streets, that I soon lost all idea where we were; except that we had crossed and recrossed the river, and still seemed to be traversing a low-lying, waterside, dense neighbourhood of narrow thoroughfares, chequered by docks and basins, high piles of warehouses, swing-bridges, and masts of ships. (770)

Inspector Bucket, the police detective who leads the search for Lady Dedlock and who accompanies Esther on the coach ride, is an ideal guide, and not merely because of the ready sympathy he shows for her suffering. Almost alone among the characters in the book, he is clear and confident in his perceptions of the world around him. The confused and variegated spectacle of the city holds no terrors for him, as this description of his behavior at Tulkinghorn's funeral shows: "He has a keen eye for a crowd—as for what not?—and looking here and there, now from this side of the carriage, now from the
other, now up at the house windows, now along the people's heads, nothing escapes him" (713). Bucket, indeed, can transcend the partial viewpoint to which most of the characters are limited and see the world from a godlike eminence like that enjoyed by the third-person narrator. His speculations about the whereabouts of Lady Dedlock are described in a significant image:

He mounts a high tower in his mind, and looks out far and wide. Many solitary figures he perceives, creeping through the streets; many solitary figures out on heaths, and roads, and lying under haystacks. But the figure that he seeks is not among them. Other solitary figures he perceives, in nooks of bridges, looking over; and in shadowed places down by the river's level; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.  

Bucket, then, is Esther's guide in metaphorical as well as literal ways: he is her mentor in the last stage of her progress towards self-realization. For what he leads her to at the end of the tortuous journey through London is a picture, or tableau mort, for her to look at and understand: "I saw before me, lying on the step, the mother of the dead child. She lay there, with one arm creeping round a bar of the iron gate, and seeming to embrace it" (811). This is obviously a counterpart to that earlier tableau of the lodgekeeper, his wife and child which Lady Dedlock had viewed from her window at Chesney Wold. Like the earlier scene, the scene at the graveyard tells a story: it shows Lady Dedlock vainly trying to break through the barrier that separates her from her dead lover. Even the minor appurtenances of the scene are heavily symbolic: the night is just beginning to yield to the dawn, and the ice (Lady Dedlock's frozen detachment) is beginning to melt. The tableau represents a moment of clarity and order amidst confusion, and it completes Esther's education. It symbolizes her family history which, once properly understood, loses its sinister and destructive power over the present. For Esther, indeed, the scene holds a promise indicated by the title of a later chapter in the book: "Beginning the World."

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6 See Miller, pp. 203-4, for a useful discussion of the images of freezing and melting associated with Lady Dedlock.