

Bleak House and the Reign of Metaphor

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The case for *Bleak House* that it is the unquestionable evidence of Dickens's mature artistry, fully justifiable even in terms of the cramped post-Jamesian ideology which has permeated, until quite recently, modern concept of the art of the novel, seems to rest largely on the successful construction of "a model in little of English society in his time,"¹ a structure tightly organized by the elaborate use of overt symbolism. From the fog in the opening chapter down to the disease which ravages the heroine's face the novel is saturated with symbols or metaphors.² It would not be an exaggeration to say that this plenitude discovered in the first of his "dark novels" originated and has sustained modern reassessment of Dickens's whole achievement since Edmund Wilson. The power and aptness of the symbolism in *Bleak House* are undeniable and its influence on such writers as Kafka, Joyce and even Henry James attests to the urbanity as well as the modernity of Dickens's art. However, if we are to forget for a moment the experiences gained in the literary history of more than a century after Dickens's death and to read the novel with prelapsarian innocence, the symbolism of Dickens as manifested in the novel may *not* turn out to be one "of a more complicated reference and a deeper implication than these metaphors that hang as emblems over the door."³ Though it is powerful and often surprising, what strikes the innocent reader in the first place is its directness and simplicity; metaphor here seems to serve as a vehicle of straightforward satire in the form of obvious allegory just like the Roman figure of Allegory in Tulkinghorn's chambers which points to the body of the murdered lawyer. Here in his "finest piece of construction", as T.S. Eliot had said,⁴ Dickens seems to have succeeded, for the first time in his career, in creating a work with a perfectly integrated plot structure knitted together by direct interrelations and rigorous referential rules among its components. It is so perfectly and so tightly organized that it admits virtually no independent performance of the metaphors loaded with profound and complex meanings. Even an innocent reader is unlikely to miss the simple correlation between the mud and fog of the world dominated by the Court of Chancery and "the condition of England" at mid-century, the one grand metaphor of the novel. The parallel between the Lord Chancellor and Krook is so deliberately established that scarcely any reader can fail to be reminded of Krook's death by spontaneous combustion when the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is finally terminated with the disputed estate all consumed in costs. Metaphor here is generally so transparent and unambiguous that the

complaints of the contemporary reviewers about Dickens's "exaggeration" and "caricature" can hardly be said to have missed the point.⁵ The chances are that we have been too easily carried away by the creeds of modernism and the sheer force of Dickens's writing which presents these undisguised metaphors in rich, portentous language.

This is not to deny that in *Bleak House* there are examples of sophisticated use of metaphor with profound implications and reverberations, nor is it my intention to revert to the older view of Dickens's art as grotesque-comic, essentially caricaturist. Many passages written in metaphoric language of deep resonance can be cited from the novel; there are, for example, the wet landscape of Chesney Wold in which the diluvian desolation is subtly combined with the inner waste land of Lady Dedlock, the infernal decay of the dreadful slum Tom-All-Alone's, Esther's pursuit of her mother with Inspector Bucket which is in effect a descent into the nether world, and, of course, the justly famous opening paragraphs. Even when the novelist threatens to fall into blank verse as in his earlier works, the modern reader is never embarrassed by the poetic and dramatic truths of these scenes in the novel. However, it should be noted that they are comparatively rare and constitute only a minor part of the novel's symbolism. What we encounter in the novel oftener are symbols of unabashedly direct reference which appear so frequently in the novel that one is made to wonder sometimes if this is a realistic novel or a piece of allegorical romance. In addition to Krook's death by spontaneous combustion we have, for example, the caged birds of Miss Flite, the mad woman who haunts the Chancery and its precincts, perennially expecting the Day of Judgement. The names of the birds are "Hope, Joy, Youth, Peace, Rest, Life, Dust, Ashes, Waste, Want, Ruin, Despair, Madness, Death, Cunning, Folly, Words, Wigs, Rags, Sheepskin, Plunder, Precedent, Jargon, Gammon and Spinach." (Ch.14, p.253).⁶ It would be superfluous to explain what these birds stand for in the novel's thematic development in which the joys of youth, hopeful future and peaceful life of Richard Carstone, Ada Clare and other people trapped in the labyrinth of law and legal documents are gradually and steadily being wasted and destroyed. When the semantic organization of a metaphor is so nakedly present to the eye, the force it retains should derive from its pertinence and the dense symbolic atmosphere and context in which these birds are placed. Then there is the "Telescopic Philanthropy" of Mrs Jellyby (Ch.4). The content of the chapter is nothing less and nothing more than that the title eloquently expresses. Mrs Jellyby who can see the natives of the happy settlement of Borrioboola-Gha on the banks of African rivers is quite unable to notice the degraded condition of her own children and her disorderly household, feeling no compunction at the evident wrong she has done to her daughter Caddy in holding her in bondage as her amanuensis. It is certainly possible to interpret this presentation of a chaotic, broken household

as symbolic of the condition of a greater house, England itself, with its ruling classes obsessed with the political strife among Doodle, Coodle and Poodle while the destitute poor are “dying around us everyday” (Ch.47, p.705); in fact we are clearly invited to make this connection. What we have to note in the first place, however, is the plainness of the metaphor of the broken home and the careful preparation and control Dickens has exercised in making its meaning crystal-clear to the reader. Given such explicit presentation of symbolic correspondence between the signifier and the signified, one is obtuse indeed if one fails to discern what the author is so painstakingly trying to express.

Thus the symbolism in *Bleak House* is simple, plain and straightforward though its power must be granted. Here England is literally shrouded in fog and slopping in mire; the Court of Chancery is Krook’s rag and bottle warehouse in which law suits are consumed in spontaneous combustion; Richard and Ada are the birds with the names of Youth, Hope, Joy etc. caged in the absurd madhouse of legal documents from which death is the only escape; the lawyer Mr Vholes is a cannibal who devours his client to the last morsel.⁷ The cumulative effect which the rigid referential system of the novel’s simple, direct metaphors has on the actual reading experience of the novel is undeniable. Although these metaphors are “emblems” hanging over the door, they are tightly and intricately connected to each other in the entire texture of the novel’s thematic patterns of responsibility, guilt and innocence. In the final analysis, therefore, they are justified in terms of the power which they have acquired in piling themselves up, gaining in depth and scope during the course of the novel. We certainly feel a sense of fulfillment as well as inevitability when metaphor is made an instrument in the drama at such critical points in the novel’s plot development as the death of Lady Dedlock at the gate of the horrible burial-ground in which the body of her former lover Captain Hawdon alias Nemo has been interred and the fleeing of the caged birds by Miss Flite after the termination of the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Nevertheless the fact remains that the symbolism of *Bleak House* is always eloquently present and that metaphor reigns supreme in the text of the novel. In fact the world of *Bleak House* may be called a kingdom of metaphor, for the specific metaphors seem undisguisedly and unabashedly to exercise a ruling power over the plot, the themes, the characters, and the language of the novel.

In view of such strong control by metaphor it is inevitable that certain characters in the novel are made to act mechanically as if they were puppets manipulated by the angry satirist who disguises himself as the narrator of the novel’s third-person narrative. The Jellybys, Mr Turveydrop, Chadband, and Mrs Pardiggle, Harold Skimpole, and the Smallweeds, at any

occasion when they make their appearance, never fail to meet the expectations of the reader which are formed by his first encounters with them. Among them the progress or rather steady decline both in body and spirit of Richard Carstone is the most marked example. Dickens's intention of making him the symbolic victim of the debilitating effect of Chancery has become plain early in the novel when under the colonnade of the court Miss flite, showing marked interest in the wards of Jarndyce, comments: "It is a good omen for youth, and hope, and beauty when they find themselves in this place, and don't know what's to come of it." (Ch.3, p.81) This singular blessing from the mad woman cautions the reader in regarding Richard as belonging to the class of stereotypical Dickens heroes; good, honest, ingenuous, open-hearted, and invariably insipid Nicholas Nicklebys, Martin Chuzzlewits and David Copperfields. Although Richard seems to be, like most of these heroes, launched on a career full of hope and promise resembling that of Richard Whittington to whom Richard himself refers as his namesake (Ch.6, p.110), the cool, detached way in which he is depicted in the novel sets him apart from the start. Here Dickens seems to present the weaknesses of his favorite heroes as just what they are; Richard, though honest and good, has no force of character and no firm principles or ideas to found his own life upon. Just as all the heroes in the former novels have been unable to find a fixed course of life, so can Richard never attach himself to any one profession. The significant difference from the other heroes is that these weakness of his character are consciously exploited by the author in the thematic structure of the novel. Richard is meant to be and succeeds in being an epitome of the corrosive, crippling effects of the suit of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, an instrument in Dickens's angry indictment of the inhuman legal system. This might be regarded as an indication of the progress or change in Dickens as a novelist who is now able to analyze the character of his hero critically, but such objective treatment of the hero falls short of creating a genuinely rounded character. As Richard is more and more ruthlessly dragged away down the passage of deterioration by the author determined to use him as the one prominent symbol of youth, hope etc. destroyed by the system, he comes nearer and nearer to being a puppet, a sacrificial lamb offered to the temple of law. Metaphor proves its brutal force accorded to it in the novel by disintegrating the character of Richard totally and mercilessly.

Are we to see *Bleak House*, then, as something more like a piece of pure satire or an allegory having affinities with medieval allegories and romances? And this in spite of the high place it has been granted among the English novels by modern critics who unanimously recognize Dickens's claim to greatness as a novelist as founded on this work if not on any other? The rigid referential framework of the novel's symbolism certainly seems to justify such a conclusion. The names of the characters themselves sometimes point to direct allegorical

reference; such names as Dedlock, Krook, Smallweed, flite are obvious examples while names like Woodcourt and Summerson may have thinly veiled indications of their roles; the surgeon would court the summer son (if he could) who shines over the bleak vista dominated by Chancery. However, the statement that the novel should be read primarily as an allegory rather than a realistic novel is true only so far as the reign of metaphor is unquestionably established and sustained in the novel. While the kingdom of metaphor seems to have perfect control over the action and the characterization in the novel, its supremacy becomes doubtful if we are to look more closely at some of the characters and events that apparently escape the powerfully established referential framework. The real complexity and profound implications that *Bleak House* presents seem to me to consist in these significant exceptions that do not prove but disrupt the rule.

first of all there are John Jarndyce and his Bleak House. Even if the law suit which is the central metaphor and structural pivot of the novel bears his name, he steadily and resolutely refuses to concern himself in it. Though he is the heir to Tom Jarndyce whose name is certainly connected to the dreadful slum of Tom-All-Alone's, he rejects the inheritance of the suit which drove his great uncle to despair and suicide. It may be in legal terms impossible to disengage himself totally from the suit because after so many years of futile proceedings no one can understand the actual state of affairs in it, but it is possible for John Jarndyce to make himself morally and spiritually free from its contagious influences. After explaining the history of the law suit to Esther he concludes by saying: "These are things I never talk about, or even think about, excepting in the Growlery here" (Ch.8, p.147). John Jarndyce succeeds in protecting his moral integrity by confining the unpleasant matters in "a small room next to his bedroom"; he would imprison the suit rather than be imprisoned by it. Originally, however, this Growlery had engulfed the entire house and its owner. The name of Bleak House had been nothing less than the symbol of desolation and loneliness in which anyone who had become entangled in the suit found himself. Tom Jarndyce renamed the house that was formerly called the Peaks:

He gave it its present name, and lived here shut up, day and night poring over the wicked heaps of papers in the suit, and hoping against hope to disentangle it from its mystification and bring it to a close. In the meantime, the place became dilapidated, the wind whistled through the cracked walls, the rain fell through the broken roof, the weeds choked the passage to the rotting door. When I brought what remained of him here, the brains seemed to me to have been blown out of the

house too; it was so shattered and ruined.(Ch.8, p.146).

In reading the title of the novel the reader may have expected to meet a house just like this and he may have suspected earlier that Chesney Wold with its Ghost's Walk might be the one referred to by the name. Yet, here in the actual Bleak House everything has been changed; when Esther, Richard and Ada arrive at the house for the first time, they are welcomed by an elderly "upright, hearty, robust" man in "a ruddy little room, all in a glow with a blazing fire." Their guardian and the house in which he lives have nothing dreary about them; both may have some irregular traits but always in a delightful and pleasant way. Thus the reader's expectation is betrayed early in the novel because John Jarndyce has refused to be an element in the symbolic patterns of the novel; he has destroyed the direct referential ties between the symbol and the things it stands for. There may remain other Bleak Houses in the novel; Tom-All-Along's, for example, which Jarndyce refers to as being "much at this day what Bleak House was then." But the one prominent symbol of the general condition of things and people in mid-Victorian society has already transformed itself into something else before the beginning of the novel; John Jarndyce in Bleak House has become an evident instance of oxymoron. We have to note the significance of this transformation because it stands in clear opposition to the reign of metaphor in the novel.

The heroine, Esther Summerson, is another exception to the rule. At first it looks as if Esther constituted in herself the symbolic center of the elaborate patterns of reference, a vanishing point in which all the themes and forces at work in the novel seem to converge. There is no question about the importance of her presence in the novel, even though we may have reservations about her goodness so repeatedly denied yet so often reported by herself.⁸ She is the narrator of one half of the novel and provides the stable viewpoint for the reader in assessing the situations and characters that she experiences and encounters. Her symbolic role seems equally unquestionable and even greater than her role as the narrative and moral center of the novel. She is the illegitimate child of Lady Dedlock, the offspring of her youthful love affair with Captain Hawdon. Thus she is the living symbol of her mother's guilt who has married the rich aristocrat Sir Leicester Dedlock concealing that blemish on her honor. Although she herself is quite innocent, the words of Miss Barbary who is believed by Esther to be her godmother but is actually her aunt, might be true; "It would have been far better, little Esther, that you had had no birthday; that you had never been born!"(Ch.3, p.64). For her existence itself poses a great menace to Lady Dedlock as Tulkinghorn, the family lawyer morbidly intent on gaining power over the strong woman, delves into her past history with unfaltering resolution. She is the walking curse for her mother, a constant reminder of her sin and the precariousness of her life in

the fashionable sphere. In the complex network of intercourse among the stratified social classes presented in *Bleak House* Esther is made manifestly the focal point. Her mother wanders gracefully through the high aristocratic world admired by the wealthy sycophants around her as well as by her devoted husband while her father, known only as Nemo, wastes his life away in a squalid room above Krook's shop eating opium. Thus in Esther Summerson the extremes in the hierarchy of classes are symbolically brought together. She stands in the center of the novel as the most prominently realized metaphor, second only to the great suit itself, testifying to the powerfully controlled system of references.

However, the striking fact is that she does not act up to the role or function assigned to her as the grand metaphor for the problem of guilt and innocence and the paradoxical interlocking of the disparate strata in society. It is undoubtedly possible to consider her existence itself as fulfilling the symbolic function, but significantly she is nothing more than that. She does not burn herself in spontaneous combustion nor does she deteriorate under the burden of her inherited guilt as Richard does under similarly negative inheritance. Throughout the novel she does not change at all, always remaining in her role as the housekeeper of Bleak House; even after her marriage her status is exactly the same as it was before since she marries only to become the mistress of another Bleak House. Although the psychology of her spiritual development constitutes the major interest of her narrative, the symbolic, moral meaning of her character never undergoes any significant change; Esther's virtuous and amiable qualities have already been formed in her childhood despite the guilty secret shadowing her birth and have become firmly fixed in her nature. So far, so good. But what about her physical change, the loss of her beauty, her old face, by smallpox?⁹ Is this not, surely, the one indisputable evidence of her fulfilling the role assigned to her in the novel's symbolic scheme? The answer is yes, partly; that is, so far as the scars left on Esther's face bear witness to the power of symbolism in the novel. Of greater importance, however, is the failure or transformation of the metaphor of disease as demonstrated by the ineffectuality of the loss of her beauty in changing the relationships between Esther and the people around her. Metaphor, with the brutal force and violence granted to it in this textual empire, tries to subdue her, to impel her to perform an active role in it. Yet Esther Summerson resists this coercion and comes triumphantly out of the harsh struggle.

The disease is originally contracted by Jo the crossing sweeper. It is quite probable that he is infected by it at the burial-ground where he leads Lady Dedlock in disguise to show the grave of Captain Hawdon. When he is given shelter by John Jarndyce, the disease is passed on to Charley who is Esther's maid. Esther catches it from Charley by tending her. The symbolic meaning of the disease is thus quite obvious; literally a caution in terms of a sanitary question to

the snug upper classes, it serves to show how the different strata of society are fatefully linked to each other and how the inheritance of guilt will ultimately overtake even the pure and innocent heroine. Esther's life is spared only to display the visible marks of the metaphor to the reader as the proof of its potency. However, paradoxically, for Esther herself the metaphor does not work. It is true that she is physically altered, but her relationship with the people around her does not change at all. The loss of her beauty is no doubt a moment of great crisis to her, because now she has to face her own inner hidden yearning, her love for Allan Woodcourt, and also because the momentary reunion with her mother takes place while she is convalescing at the lodge of Boythorn in the neighborhood of Chesney Wold. Lady Dedlock explains the mystery of her birth to her daughter and Esther is tormented by the idea of her very existence being a great danger to her mother. But when she returns from a secret walk to Chesney Wold, running back from it as if pursued by her own footsteps echoing on the Ghost's Walk, she finds two letters awaiting her, one from Ada and another from John Jarndyce, both professing constant love:

Two such letters together made me think how far beyond my deserts I was beloved, and how happy I ought to be. That made me think of all my past life; and that brought me, as it ought to have done before, into a better condition.

For, I saw very well that I could not have been intended to die, or I should never have lived; not to say should never have been reserved for such a happy life. I saw very well how many things had worked together, for my welfare; and that if the sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what I had in the morning feared it meant. I knew I was as innocent of my birth as a queen of hers; and that before my Heavenly Father I should not be punished for birth, nor a queen rewarded for it. I had had experience, in the shock of that very day, that I could, even thus soon, find comforting reconcilments to the change that had fallen on me. (Ch.36, p.571.)

These words, though still burdened with the iterated idea about the general conspiracy to make her happy, strongly challenge the implications the overriding metaphor in the novel is trying to allocate to her symbolic status. Here Esther unscrupulously and unequivocally asserts her innocence and rejects the tyranny of metaphor; the repeated reference to a queen (if not to the Queen) in the passage bears testimony to the vigor of her rejection and defiance. In spite of the deformed face there is no question about the truth of her assertion of innocence. Esther is placed at the symbolic center but when the system of allegorical references tries to transform her

to make her conform to her function, it fails, or is itself transformed as in the case of John Jarndyce and his Bleak House. Her changed face is not the symbol of her inherited guilt and social responsibility but of her unchanging goodness. The disfigurement does not cause changes in other people's attitudes toward her; John Jarndyce's proposal of marriage is not the sign of changed relationship but rather a recognition of comradeship in the struggle against the encroachment of metaphor. For him as well as for Ada and Allan Woodcourt Esther has not changed at all; what has been changed is metaphor itself which is now made to contribute to the reorganization or, rather, reconfirmation, of human relationships around Esther Summerson.

Another important figure which finally escapes the reign of metaphor is Sir Leicester Dedlock. The crucial role Sir Leicester plays in the novel has not been given the attention it deserves, though many critics have noticed the significant change of his character at the end of the novel. He seems at first not to have any other role than that of Lady Dedlock's husband. As an aristocrat he is depicted in very conventional terms and is mainly used as a device in the melodrama involving his lady and his Mephistofelian lawyer. Though he is not so mercilessly ridiculed as his cousin Volumnia is by the angry narrator, he is at the center of the bitter political satire of Doodles and Coodles. As a character he is simply a void, one of the puppets manipulated and exploited by the satirist for the purpose of revealing the folly and self-deception of England's ruling classes. In other words he is another of the mechanical figures with which the novel abounds, just one additional indicator of the reign of metaphor. Yet, for all this, he surprises us when, at the great crisis of his family honor and of himself after the revelation of his wife's guilty secret, he emerges as a figure of true nobility and heroic dignity. He is understandably stunned by the fall of his great idol, yet even while tearing his white hair and sinking to the ground assailed by a stroke, he can pronounce her name "with something like distinctness in the midst of those intrusive sounds, and in a tone of mourning and compassion rather than reproach". (Ch.54, p.800). All the "constrained formalities and conventionalities of his life" melt away in this critical moment and he is transfigured from a puppet manipulated in the kingdom of metaphor into a genuine human being whose impassioned yearning for the one woman he cares gives him no rest while lying paralyzed in bed. Calling Volumnia, George and Mrs Rouncewell to witness, he solemnly declares that he is "on unaltered terms with her" and that he recalls "no act [he] has done for her advantage and happiness."

His formal array of words might have at any other time, as it has often had, something ludicrous in it; but at this time it is serious and affecting. His noble earnestness, his fidelity, his gallant shielding of her, his generous conquest of his own wrong and his own pride for her sake,

are simply honourable, manly, and true. Nothing less worthy can be seen through the lustre of such qualities in the commonest mechanic, nothing less worthy can be seen in the best-born gentleman. In such a light both aspire alike, both rise alike, both children of the dust shine equally. (Ch.58, pp.850-1)

When Sir Leicester proves his knightly heritage with such unreservedly truthful behavior, the lurid melodrama involving the discovery of an illegitimate child, the murder of the demonic lawyer by a French woman, the flight and death of a great lady in ignominy, is transformed into a real tragedy of convincingly actualized human situation. The death of Lady Dedlock at the gate of the burial-ground in a poor woman's clothes might be meant to be allegorically appropriate; nonetheless its full imaginative significance carries itself far beyond the realm of allegory. For it is the termination of the journey of Esther and Inspector Bucket in search of her through the snow and the thaw, country and the city, a journey heavily charged with emotions. It is almost like a hallucinatory vision or dream pilgrimage experienced by Sir Leicester himself who has entrusted Bucket with his message of "full forgiveness." During the course of this journey radical changes in the priorities of textual signification have already been brought about. Consequently what we feel at the end of Esther's purgative journey is a sense of fate engendered by the intensity of human passions as epitomized in the love and death of Honoria Dedlock.

It is the passions, indeed, that the structure of explicit symbolism has tried to conceal or suppress under its satirical framework. We have to note that there are a number of stories in the novel which, although not told in sufficient detail and sometimes carefully hidden, deal with intense feelings of desire, love and hatred of those concerned in them. First of all there is the story of Tom Jarndyce referred to above, a story of neurosis and suicide very imperfectly told by John Jarndyce. Lawrence Boythorn once loved Miss Barbary, the sister of Lady Dedlock; but very few facts are given to the reader about the history of this woman who seems to have incarcerated herself and her feelings in the austere temple of religion. Of the imperative emotions burning inside Mlle Hortence we can get only fugitive glimpses. Lady Dedlock's youthful love affair with Captain Hawdon is the most conspicuous example of such suppressed or hidden stories, having immediate relevance to the story of Esther. We know next to nothing about this seminal incident in the past even though the mere sight of Nemo's handwriting can cause a good deal of flutter in the heart of the proud lady. In fact, until the full story is told by Tulkinghorn in front of Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock what suggests the existence of such a story is given only in the form of broken, apparently disconnected signs such as a piece of

handwriting, stifled outbursts of emotion, a nameless name and old papers. Tulkinghorn might be regarded as the interpreter of these signs, dedicated to the quest for the lost ties and connections among these irritatingly alien items strewn among the taut texture of transparent symbols. finally he succeeds in establishing the one-to-one correspondence of meanings among these signs, but the moment of his triumph is also the moment of his death, of defeat for the signifying system of reference in the novel. For what he has discovered or correctly interpreted unleashes the dangerous predator in the form of unreason, something that can never be controlled by logical systems. The powerful servant of the sign and its system is killed by Mlle Hortence who clearly represents one essential aspect of Lady Dedlock. It is as if something that has been repressed under the rigid referential system, the reign of metaphor, unexpectedly rebelled against it to assert its ultimate ascendancy.¹⁰

It is here that the legend of the Ghost's Walk at Chesney Wold, one of the few among the inadequately told and suppressed stories that are presented with any satisfactory detail comes to reveal its profound relevance. It is the story of the Royalist Sir Morbury Dedlock and his lady who, having "none of the family blood in her veins," (Ch.7, p.,140) favored the cause of the enemies of King Charles the first. She informed her friends of the Royalist meetings held at Chesney Wold and, while trying to lame the favorite horse of her husband, was herself lamed by an accident and pined away, laying a curse on the proud Dedlocks. Thus it is a tale of rebellion of a passionate woman against her lord. If we are, for once, to indulge in a liberal interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the legend, it may be no exaggeration to say that the story of Sir Morbury and his lady, reenacted in essence in the days of Sir Leicester who is always afraid of the insurgence of a modern Watt Tyler, is a metaphor for the text of *Bleak House* itself. The rigid control by metaphor of the characters and events in the novel in the cause of scathing anatomy of the society and its institutions of the time comes to be undermined by its own internalized logic. If the system and the metaphor are so inhuman in the world of Chancery, humanism can only be asserted either by cutting oneself from the referential system of the metaphor, as John Jarndyce and Esther demonstrate, or by shattering the entire framework by irrational emotions, even by madness. Can it be that Mr Dick, the good-natured madman from *David Copperfield*, the novel immediately preceding *Bleak House*, who tried to write the Memorial of the Lord Chancellor but was always hindered by the intrusion of the head of King Charles the fist into his manuscript, has finally succeeded in completing his work here, a novel of mutiny against the reign of metaphor?

NOTES:

1 J. Hillis Miller, "Introduction" to *Bleak House*, ed. Norman Page (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971), p.11.

2 In this essay no attempt at a nice discrimination between these two words is made. As even a summary discussion of the problem of literary representation will occupy a good deal of space, I have tried to restrict my use of these words inside the bounds of conventional definitions; symbol with more specific and restricted semantic content than metaphor, symbolism denoting the broader yet finite system of reference comprising both metaphor and symbol.

3 Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (London: Methuen, 1961). p.34.

4 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p.462.

5 See, for example, George Brimley's review of *Bleak House* in *Spectator*, 24 Sept. 1853, reprinted in *Dickens the Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p.286.

6 The references are to the Penguin edition and will be indicated by chapter and page numbers in parenthesis hereafter.

7 The indignant tones of the novel's third person narrator and the manifestly allegorical satire can be historically justified. The real condition of England during the "hungry forties," especially of the poor in London, is recorded in two famous contemporary sources: Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (1844), and Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-62; based on his series of articles begun in 1849; the publication of *Bleak House* in monthly numbers started in March, 1852). In reading Mayhew, especially, one meets truly terrible facts about the slum life in London at the time which make Tom-All-Along's look like a very tame representation. For the study of *Bleak House* in the social and political context of the time see, John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, "The Topicality of *Bleak House*" in *Dickens at Work* (London: Methuen, 1857), pp.177-200.

8 The most successful attempt at rescuing Esther Summerson from the obloquies of the critics has been made by Alex Zwerdling in "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," *PMLA*, 88 (1973), 429-39. Zwerdling regards her as "a subtle psychological portrait clear in its outlines and convincing in its details."

9 Actually the name of the disease is never mentioned in the text of the novel. This will support the view that stresses its symbolic meaning, but contemporary readers could hardly have failed to identify it, given the sanitary condition of the time. See George Rosen, "Disease,

Debility, and Death” in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, ed. H.J. Dyos and Michael Wolff (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), Vol.2, pp.625-667.

10 In talking about repression and ascendancy of passions I am not dealing in psychoanalytic interpretation of *Bleak House*. For recent interpretations of *Bleak House* in terms of Freud and Foucault see, among others, Lawrence Frank, *Charles Dickens and the Romantic Self* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp.97-123; John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), pp.201-283; and Christine van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance: Language, Gender, and Authority from fielding to Joyce* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), pp.101-131.