

Narrative Authority in *Bleak House*

ANDREI BALTAKMENS

Bleak House is presented as a two-fold narrative, divided between the first-person retrospective of Esther Summerson and the immediate third-person point of view of an anonymous “narrator”. It is also a novel dominated by a search for documentation, for legal papers, absent wills, missing love letters, a judgement in a case that is never set down, in a quest for definitive corroboration, for signs that will authenticate and confirm the connections between the dead past and the present, as a scrap of handwriting can link Honoria Barbary, Nemo and Captain Hawdon. The natural question, therefore, is which viewpoint in the novel can be received as authoritative? Which of these two accounts has the power to conclude; who can, as it were, “exactly say”?¹ Conventionally, this question has been implicitly resolved by identifying the third-person voice as that of an authorial narrator while relegating Esther to the supplementary role of an interesting but limited observer (though this position has altered considerably as more critical attention has been directed towards Esther). My intention is twofold: firstly, to trace the development of Esther as an authorial narrator in her own right, and secondly to observe the limitations and instability of the third-person narrator. Adjusting the balance between these narrative positions, I will examine how they complement and formally elaborate on each other, and the extent to which the text develops and sustains their authority.

Two narrative modes occupy *Bleak House*: the retrospective, first-person narrative of Esther Summerson and the third-person, present-tense narrative voiced by the figure I will call the *recorder*. I use this term rather than “narrator” because I want to avoid an *a priori* identification of the recorder with an omniscient narrator, and, as is usually the case, the author.² I also want to position Esther and the recorder as narrators in

their own right. Though they are aware of each other — as Esther speaks of “my portion of these pages” (p. 17), and the recorder observes her: “While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes” (76) — their differences are immediately apparent. Esther is fussy, domestic, coy, less linguistically skilled, fundamentally personal, as opposed to the remote, impersonal recorder who passes with an ironic deftness through the opening passages of the novel. As Esther pointedly notes: “I am not clever” (17). The recorder is decidedly clever: verbally adept, urbane and knowledgeable. But, where Esther represents emotional warmth in the novel, the recorder is not without personality. Though the third-person point of view detaches the “masculine” recorder from the other characters he is, by turns, angry, sardonic, prophetic, contemplative or melancholy, possessed of a range of moods and emotions. The real distinction, therefore, lies in the breadth of their insight, their narrative authority construed here as their power to command and situate the informative details of the text. In this sense Esther is seen as the most limited, constrained within her individualised point of view, whereas the recorder, not bound by the limits of presence, exercises such power that he is frequently identified as omniscient.³ Esther is placed in the subordinate position, holding only a portion of a wider construction located firmly within the recorder’s competence.

Of course, the critical view of Esther has changed considerably. Earlier reviewers were indifferent to Esther or praised her character for its verisimilitude to the Victorian feminine ideal.⁴ Many subsequent critics were dismissive of Esther, echoing Collins: “Esther is at best, I think, a very modest character” (126). Esther Summerson was famously “rehabilitated” in Alex Zwerdling’s article of 1973,⁵ and since then much critical attention has focused on Dickens’s adept psychological portrayal of Esther, while still trying to isolate her failures of imagination, or situate her in relationship with the “authorial narrator”.⁶ Much of this reading adheres to a different kind of psychological, or even political-psychological verisimilitude, analysing Esther as a cypher for the effects of repression, be it psychological or patriarchal, or Foucauldian

discipline (or policing).⁷ Nevertheless, approval for Esther's portrayal can swing far enough for Hornback to argue that Esther could be construed as the actual narrator of the third-person portion of *Bleak House*, in that this point of view is consistent with that of Esther's maturity. In any case, the effort has been to realign Esther's narrative with the rest of the text. My interest is in Esther's narrative itself.

It is not difficult to see how Esther attracts her share of critical distaste. Her manner as narrator can veer from the cloying to the obscurantist. Her positions are often contradictory. She notes that, "I seem always to be writing about myself" (102), but asserts sincerely that, "I mean all the time to write about other people" (102). With an unstable self-image, she exists to herself only when reflected in other people; even when writing about herself, she is often writing about what other people think of her. This manifests itself in passages in which Esther denigrates herself yet covertly draws attention to her own value. One early example is particularly overblown:

when they took me through all the rooms that I might see them for the last time; and when some cried, 'Esther, dear, say good-bye to me here, at my bedside, where you first spoke so kindly to me!' and when others asked me only to write their names, 'With Esther's love;' and when they all surrounded me with their parting presents, and clung to me weeping, and cried, 'What shall we do when dear, dear Esther's gone!' and when I tried to tell them how forbearing, and how good they had all been to me, and how I blessed, and thanked them everyone; what a heart I had! (28)

Esther insists that she is praised without cause, but relates this praise at tedious length. Similar to this are Esther's avowals of confusion and ignorance, her inability to present her perspective as valid. She tends to dismiss her observations, undermining her authority: "I write down these opinions, not because I believe that this or any other thing was so, because I thought so, but only because I did think so" (204). Her observations are often framed in a form of irony that can occlude their acuity, since for Esther irony comes very close to

false modesty, as when she observes Mr Turveydrop bestow his blessing on Caddy: “The benignity as he raised his future daughter-in-law and stretched out his hand to his son (who kissed it with affectionate respect and gratitude), was the most confusing sight I ever saw” (293). Her sentimentality, her elaborate gestures of modesty, her tendency to diminish the force of her own judgements, make her a highly suspect narrator.

Esther’s defenders have long noted that the psychology of this behaviour is coherent and believable. For Esther, carrying the guilt of her genesis, is “set apart” (19), both (apparently) orphaned and illegitimate. Consequently, she is compelled to offer up proofs to the reader of the love and respect that should be hers automatically. Childhood repression, the certainty that, “Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace, and you were hers” (19), has instilled in Esther a particular habit of evasiveness, of drawing attention while deflecting it. But, while we observe the effects of this on Esther’s childhood, Dickens makes another point. Little Esther chooses a doll to whom she can tell, “all I had noticed since we parted” (17). While critics focus on the doll’s role as a surrogate for Esther’s feelings (eventually Esther buries Dolly in the garden), the other point is that from childhood Esther is a natural narrator. She constitutes and secures her identity through story-telling. The adult Esther simply transfers her narrative from the silent doll to inert paper. And like any narrator, Esther has both a “noticing way” (17) and a desire to “understand things better” (17). The problem is that Esther has little confidence in her own understanding. This, generated in her childhood repression, has complex effects on her narrative position.

A sense of predetermined guilt, of inherited unworthiness, colours Esther’s attitude to her narrative. Her illegitimacy means that she (like Jo) is not authorised to witness the events she does. Her narrative expresses the stresses of this struggle. There is a tendency to deflect attention, a characteristic gesture of self-effacement. Weeping over a page, she wipes the tears away (20). Marking the text, with words or tears, she moves to

erase them. For the reader, her attitude resembles that with which she confronts the hapless William Guppy: ““You could make no discovery in reference to me that would do me the least service, or give me the least pleasure”” (479). Her method becomes one of reticence, evasion, obliquity, of the sentence initiated and broken off, of hints and confusions. Thus, of Mrs Woodcourt and her discomfort: “I don’t know what it was. Or at least if I do, now, I thought I did not then. Or at least — but it don’t matter” (365). Yet Esther is also compelled to narrate because of her sense of a primal crime, a sin in which she is both profoundly implicated and an innocent party.

Despite this, Esther is not an entirely unreliable or unobservant narrator. Her sphere is that of relationships and domestic detail, and here she is a close observer. It is Esther who sights the “extraordinary creatures in rags, secretly groping among the swept-out rubbish for pins and other refuse” (47), a moment before encountering Miss Flite, foreshadowing the old woman’s status as a scavenger among the discarded fragments of the law. Esther also has a touch for comic detail as she notes the deficiencies in the Jellyby household, including the curtain “fastened with a fork” (39), or the souvenir mug, ““A Present from Tunbridge Wells”” (40), lighting the staircase window. Cautious as her judgements are — ““We rather thought... that perhaps she was a little unmindful of her home”” (60) — it is the accumulation of detail that she uncovers, such as Peepy creeping out of his crib, his teeth chattering (45), that makes her reading of the situation incontestable. Esther presents this only as opinion, unwilling to legitimise it as fact, yet at a sympathetic level we more or less agree. In her skill at assembling telling details, however Esther demures we are still apt to accept her readings as accurate, almost unconsciously aligning ourselves with her attitudes.

Retrospective, strictly linear, Esther’s narrative obliges us to follow her. Esther works in the past tense, but she adheres, almost consistently, to the absolute temporal sequence of her narrative. Even though she is writing from a point in time well after what she narrates has occurred, she rarely violates the

process of her narrative to look forward, always confining herself to what she can immediately observe. Esther has a talent for orderly domestic arrangements, but this is no mere neurotic habit, for if a linear narrative implies a structure, it also implies an attempt at making meaning within a temporal process, developing a sequence of cause and effect rather than mere contiguity. As such, she must arrange events, withholding selected facts, delaying premature revelations. Her method assumes a certain authority over the text: the right to treat things strictly as they happen. And, as Esther works from beginning to end, she develops her talents as a narrator, demonstrating a growing maturity in her handling of the material.

While overtly Esther binds herself to the practical, her narrative is not without flashes of symbolism or imagery. There is a developing sophistication in the images Esther chooses, reflecting her own improving command over the text. The early image of Ada and Rick at the piano as Ada sings — “their shadows blended together, surrounded by strange forms” (68) — is both commonplace and sentimental.⁸ Later, however, Esther’s presentation of Rick being driven on a hearse into the gathering darkness of a sunset by the vampiric lawyer Vholes (471), deftly anticipates Rick’s eventual wasting and death in Chancery. Esther displays a growing consciousness of the temporality of her narrative, a surer presentation of the telling detail, as when she captures Hortense walking “shoeless, in the wet grass” (231). The last words of the chapter, drawing attention to this gesture with its strange blend of masochism, anger and defiance, show how acute Esther’s presentiments can be.

Despite this, Esther remains prone to lapses and diversions. Her relationship with Alan Woodcourt is particularly given to these evasions:

I have forgotten to mention — at least I have not mentioned — that Mr Woodcourt was the same dark young surgeon whom we had met at Mr Badger’s. Or that Mr Jarndyce invited him to dinner that day. Or that he came. Or,

that when they were all gone, and I said to Ada, 'Now, my darling, let us have a little talk about Richard!' Ada laughed and said —

But I don't think it matters what my darling said. She was always merry (182).

As I suggested earlier, this springs from Esther's sense of insecurity, but it is also connected to the fundamental processes of the novel, not simply psychological but structural. *Bleak House* is a mystery novel. I use this term not to indicate a work of formal detection, though, as J. Hillis Miller pointed out, *Bleak House* is full of detectives,⁹ but to place it in the category of the Victorian novel of mysteries, as a text structured by its relationship with the enigma, the concealed and the illicit.¹⁰ One of the mysteries of *Bleak House* is that of Lady Dedlock. The narrative is driven towards the exposure of her hidden shame, through the discovery, coordinated through various writings, including court documents and letters, of her relationship with Captain Hawdon. And the cases in *Bleak House* are the same. Whether it is Lady Dedlock's crime or the cause in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the charge is always abandonment, child-endangerment, be it discarding Esther or the neglect of the wards in Chancery, an abrogation of responsibility in an indifferent universe. This mystery narrative intimately concerns Esther (she is its absolute material sign: the abandoned child), but it is one which she is both desperate to conceal and compelled to excavate.

Esther's problem as a narrator is her lack of self-worth, her failure to assume her judgements and observations are reliable. Hence, her pose of inarticulacy. However, Esther's narrative, over which she sustains her conflicted authorship, works towards her origins, her illegitimacy, unravelling the strands of implication that bind her to her parentage, making her a party in the case of *Bleak House*. Esther is superficially closed to enquiry, letting others, such as John Jarndyce, dictate for her what she will or will not know about her heritage. Yet, as Esther reveals, she almost always dreams of her godmother's house (172), a place connected in her thoughts with "shadowy

speculations” of her “earliest history” (131). Beneath her reluctance there is an intense psychological need to know. The mystery that surrounds Esther’s birth, the mystery that becomes for her a problem of self-knowledge, sustains the difficulty we have in interpreting her account. At the same time the mystery narrative necessitates sequence, enabling Esther’s writing. There can be no “giving away” of the culprit or the cause before the right time, and thus we have Esther’s strict attention to detail, her linear approach, as it is joined with the larger text to work towards the explication of her parentage. In tracing Lady Dedlock, however, Esther is also forced to examine the very secret, the transgression, that profoundly shapes her sense of identity and characterises her evasive method.

As Esther closes with the Chancery suit by recovering the identity of Miss Barbary (her mother’s maiden name), her orphan’s inheritance, she comes closer to her originating sense of disgrace and difference. Her narrative develops along this faultline. As the narrative expands, so to does Esther’s command as a narrator, yet she is also threatened, as much as her mother, by the truth she reveals. The consequence is division from herself, which is also a potential loss of identity and authorship. Her illness results in scarring that obscures the resemblance to her mother, even as it also leads to their meeting, yet her hallucinations, with their confusion in times and memory, prestage an even more disturbing loss of control over her own experiences. Inevitably, there is an encounter with her mother, the moment the connection between them is recognised. For Esther this activates her crisis of alienation on the Ghost’s Walk:

when my echoing footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost’s Walk; that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house; and that my warning feet were haunting it even then. Seized with an augmented terror of myself that turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything... (454).

Near to discovering herself, Esther rediscovers how profoundly she is set apart by fear and guilt. Her only option is to attempt

to flee from herself. Before it can be concluded the text will revert once more to the iteration of Esther's search for and location of her mother, and it is here that Esther's developing narrative seeks resolution in merging with that of the recorder and the detection that she has, up until then, avoided.

Much of the detective narrative lies outside of Esther's account in the domain of the recorder, whose power over space constrained within the present-tense makes him an exemplary field of observation who presents clues for decoding by the reader. From the opening, in which events and persons seem so dissociated that there is no difference between "a little mad old woman in a squeezed bonnet" — Miss Flite, of course — and "another ruined suitor, who periodically appears from Shropshire" — Gridley — and "a sallow prisoner" (7) who will never reappear, the recorder gradually sifts, focuses and develops the evidentiary structure of the novel. Initially all information is presented as being of equal value; the signs are indistinguishable, like the creatures and objects in the mud. Everything that seems dislocated here gradually comes to assume significance, but it is clear from the outset that we are dealing with a mode of apprehension that is different, perhaps fundamentally, from Esther's. For though Esther is bound to temporal sequence and chooses to narrate what she observes from her fixed location in space (with few exceptions), the recorder is free, within limits, in both dimensions.

The present-tense position of the recorder allows him to manipulate time within certain bounds; thus, in the first pages of the second chapter the recorder is able to present Lady Dedlock in Paris, her place in town and Chesney Wold almost simultaneously. Yet because the recorder's simultaneity means that no instant in time can be shown as distinct from any other instant (they are all aspects of *Now*), the recorder is strangely limited in time, able to illustrate the present in all its detail but only vaguely conscious of sequence, and unable to know the future in the way that Esther, who does have knowledge of forthcoming events, can.¹¹ The recorder can apprehend events only as a conglomerate. Whereas Esther aims to assemble the

progress to which her opening refers, to unfold a process, the recorder generates only occurrences, isolated fragments of action in which causality is generally obscured, awaiting an act of interpretation by the reader. And thus the recorder is obsessed with details and surfaces, with reiterated “maybes” and “seems”. These descriptive tics themselves suggest a sort of uncertainty, an inability to fully comprehend interior states. Describing Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock, for instance, the narrator can only speculate:

They appear to take as little note of one another, as any two people, enclosed within the same walls, could. But whether each evermore watches and suspects the other... whether each is evermore prepared at all points for the other... all this is hidden, for the time, in their own hearts (150).

Since the recorder can never escape the momentary, what is reserved “for the time” cannot be determined within the absolute present of his narrative.

Instead, the recorder emphasises his command over dimensions in space, literally able to follow as the crow flies:

Mr Snagsby standing at his shop-door looking up at the clouds, sees a crow, who is out late, skim westward over the leaden slice of sky belonging to Cook’s Court. The crow flies straight across Chancery Lane and Lincoln’s Inn Garden, into Lincoln’s Inn Fields (119).

This enables the recorder’s radical comprehensiveness, his power to speculate on connections, to navigate gulfs in space and parallel conjunctions in the social structure. But this spatial gesture, like the fixation on present details, can also be discursive, diffusing rather than focusing attention. In the paragraph before Tulkinghorn is shot the recorder ranges over woods, roads, gardens, rivers, wharves, the sea, the whole city of London itself (584), everywhere, that is, except where the murder occurs. Of course, we have no wish to know who the murderer is, yet the passage illustrates the flaws in the recorder’s omniscience. The recorder operates freely within physical space, but with such dexterity that points of view

proliferate until it becomes difficult to assume a clear perspective.

Omniscient in space yet constrained in time, the recorder at first resembles the fashionable intelligence that locates Lady Dedlock: “the fashionable intelligence — which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future” (12). This aside suggests the recorder’s freedom from spatial limitation and his inability to be properly conscious of the future. Indeed, the fashionable intelligence “knows all fashionable things” (11), reminding us of the recorder’s pose of omniscience and his persona as the urbane observer of upper-class society. Yet the world of fashion is a small one, and the fashionable intelligence is, some way into the novel, confronted with its own limitations: “The astonished fashionable intelligence hardly knows where to have [Lady Dedlock]. Today, she is at Chesney Wold; yesterday, she was at her house in town; tomorrow, she may be abroad, for anything the fashionable intelligence can with confidence predict” (195). Consequently, the fashionable intelligence is displaced by Mr Tulkinghorn.

Tulkinghorn makes his appearance “in fashion,” in Lady Dedlock’s presence. His powers, as much as those of the fashionable intelligence, are based on his knowledge of society and in particular his possession of family secrets, his “mysterious halo of family confidences” (13). Thus, Tulkinghorn temporarily establishes his authority and is empowered to extend it. Tulkinghorn is a persistent and assiduous detective, eventually retrieving the evidence he needs to incriminate Lady Dedlock by finding the letters and examples of handwriting that allow him to reconstruct her story. This permits him a brief period of ascendancy over the narrative: “there is a rather increased sense of power in him” (507). Yet the paradox of Tulkinghorn’s knowledge is that it enforces stasis. Like Chancery itself, the power of determination leads only to delay and inertia. Tulkinghorn is caught in a peculiar double-bind. Like the recorder, he can see and know everything, yet he is incapable of acting on his

knowledge, since action would compromise the secrecy on which his power is predicated. Even in threatening Lady Dedlock his demand is that she do nothing to jeopardise her secret. Consequently, he exhibits no desire, and no power, outside of the power of knowledge. And thus, eventually his narrative authority, his hold over the strands of narrative (Lady Dedlock's story) is compromised, terminated in the most violent manner when he is shot dead by Hortense.

It is as Tulkinghorn's agent that we first encounter Inspector Bucket, materialising like the fiend of the fashionable intelligence itself: "Mr Snagsby is dismayed to see, standing with an attentive face between himself and the lawyer... a person... who was not there when he himself came in, and has not entered by the door or by either of the windows" (275). This fantastic mobility characterises the recorder, the fashionable intelligence, Bucket, and even Mr Tulkinghorn:

From... the Dedlock property, Mr Tulkinghorn transfers himself to... London. His manner of coming and going between the two places, is one of his impenetrabilities. He walks into Chesney Wold as if it were next door to his chambers, and returns to his chambers as if he had never been out of Lincoln's Inn Fields (514).

Following this appearance, then, Bucket is always marked by his association with Tulkinghorn and, by extension, Chancery. All four figures, the recorder, the fashionable intelligence, Bucket and Tulkinghorn, represent to some degree Dickens's Asmodean fantasy,¹² a legitimized fictional power to observe directly the inner workings of society, and the household in particular. In the case of Bucket and Tulkinghorn, this fantasy generates a particular tension, the fear that narrative authority will express itself as authoritarianism, as surveillance and, ultimately, discipline. This problem is particularly evident in the portrayal of Bucket and his policemen. For the presentation of the police force in action is bound up in the expression of unease, a conflict between the invasive but necessary processes of detection and urban control, and the integrity of the individual. We can never be entirely comfortable with Bucket

as he relentlessly orders Jo to “move on” partly to obscure the tracks of the investigation that Tulkinghorn pursues, or arrests Gridley, or charms the Bagnet family in order to quietly detain Mr George. Just as the chaos of an urban enclosure such as Tom-all-Alone’s demands the intercession of Bucket and his police officers, the mastery that they assert and the facts that they command stir unease in the middle-class subject. This is evident in Snagsby’s dilemma. After his encounter with Mr Bucket and his descent into Tom-all-Alone’s, Snagsby feels he is guilty of something; just what, he cannot say. His guilt is sufficient, because no one bothers to spy on Snagsby except Mrs Snagsby (whose efforts are cultivated by Tulkinghorn). Thus, both the effects and the techniques of discipline are internalised. Yet it is Bucket who finally dismisses Mrs Snagsby to her confusion, as if her methods were not an extension of his methodology; and so for the middle-class: they are both drawn to and repelled by the agents of discipline, immersed in their structures yet alienated from their authority. The presentation of Bucket must always carry the residue of this anxiety. Yet despite Bucket’s implication in Tulkinghorn’s system of secrets and repression, the two steadily move apart, for where Tulkinghorn ends up entirely silenced, Bucket assumes a wider and wider control over the text. As Bucket is detached from Tulkinghorn, so the voice of the recorder gradually moves from identification with Tulkinghorn and Chancery to Inspector Bucket.

Jo’s terrified avowal of Mr Bucket that, “‘He’s in all manner of places, all at wunst’” (559), aligns Bucket with the recorder, since it identifies his control over space and his singularity in time. And thus there are Bucket’s demonic powers, his hypnotic finger, his near immanence: “Time and place cannot bind Mr Bucket. Like man in the abstract, he is here today and gone tomorrow — but, very unlike man indeed, he is here again the next day” (626). Steadily, Bucket approaches identification with the voice of the recorder as his command over the mystery extends to the point where his case, which is almost the denouement of the novel, is complete, and lesser detectives are unmasked and pushed aside: “I am damned if I am a-going to

have my case spoilt, or interfered with, or anticipated by so much as half a second of time, by any human being in creation” (643). At his triumph, Hortense calls him “a Devil” (795). And so he ascends:

There, 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 he seeks is not among them. Other solitaires 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 (637).

Here, Bucket’s breadth of vision, his mastery of the urban scene, the rivers, roads and bridges, his knowledge of all figures moving within them, equates him with the recorder. His perception is virtually limitless, simultaneous and comprehensive, an immediate imaginative closure with the subjects of the city that recreates narratorial omniscience. But his moment of triumph is also his failure. The emphasis on the solitariness of the figures Bucket sees compounds his inability to integrate these subjects within an empathic, social whole. The one object that he seeks, despite the comprehensiveness of his vision, is invisible to him. Bucket therefore turns to Esther, and the two modes of narrative achieve fusion.

Naturally it is Bucket who seeks out Esther, who exercises his superior knowledge to engage her in the crisis, but Bucket’s role has already altered. After the death of Tulkinghorn he is more and more an independent agent who asserts his authority in a manner that is profoundly different from the lawyer’s. As he assures Sir Leicester: “let me beg you not to trouble your mind, for a moment, as to anything having come to *my* knowledge. I know so much about so many characters, high and low, that a piece of information, more or less, don’t signify a straw” (638). Tulkinghorn deals only in the secrets of the upper-classes. To him, knowledge is both validated and acquired in strict relationship to the power it implies. Bucket

does not suggest that his knowledge is worthless but that any additional detail simply lies within the scope of his existing sympathies, his perspective as “a benignant philosopher not disposed to be severe upon the follies of mankind” (626). Thereafter Bucket solves the Tulkinghorn murder and arranges for the buying up and suppression of the incriminating papers. Observing Hortense’s letter-writing, taking back the letters, even matching the wadding from the pistol shot, Bucket takes control of the text and its scattered clues, collating them and presenting an intelligible whole. Despite his powers, he is not able to contain the crisis. Lady Dedlock is forewarned and flees. From this point Bucket’s goal is quite different, for rather than being charged with the task of investigation and arrest, his is a mission of compassion. His interpretative powers are turned to the text of Sir Leicester’s instructions: “Sir Leicester writes upon the slate, ‘Full forgiveness. Find —’” (669). In accepting this commission, Bucket has moved from the duties of the police towards a humane expression of forgiveness. For the first time it may be that the doctrine of mercy can offer a counterweight to the inert mass of the institution, a correction to the debilitating discourse of transgression, judgement and punishment. Bucket is still wielding his detective powers, however; his first step is to search Lady Dedlock’s chambers, where his clue is Esther’s handkerchief. Immediately, he is drawn to the personal. Once the detective has stepped outside of his institutional role, his authority is no longer equal to the task. In fact, his official status will impede him. He needs Esther because it is only her presence that will allow him to make an emotional contact with Lady Dedlock and complete his mission:

‘If I follow her alone, she, being in ignorance of what Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, has communicated to me, may be driven to desperation. But if I follow her in the company of a young lady that she has a tenderness for — I ask no questions, and I say no more than that — she will give me credit for being friendly.’ (673)

The detective voice can only deliver its message by appealing to a direct human relationship, and so the narrative is passed over to Esther.

Esther is drawn into a final pursuit of the mother, a chance to reiterate and perhaps exorcise the burden of received parental guilt, and to confront the complex of fear and uncertainty that characterises her writing. Esther has an opportunity to complete the story, to assert her authority over Lady Dedlock's crime and to offer forgiveness. Bucket, like the recorder, can supply the means, but the end of this narrative must be experienced directly. It is as if the matrix of Bucket's policing is not entirely competent but must be interpreted through the individualised imagination of Esther. Significantly, however, Esther must also see Bucket's reality, making her own descent into the realm of urban mystery that the police command. She traverses those fearful enclosures, the docks, the "labyrinth of streets" (676), that are primarily represented in the novel by Tom-all-Alone's, but are ubiquitously the scene of the repressed and the unutterable. Esther and Bucket travel together, sharing the same carriage, suggestive of the way in which Esther's narrative and that of the recorder share the medium of the novel, *Bleak House*, and coincide at this point. The London that Esther sees, then, is the recorder's London of urban mystery: oppressive, dreamlike, secretive: "The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore: so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, both of substance and shadow: so death-like and mysterious" (678). Riding with Inspector Bucket, Esther is forced to engage in and reinterpret the mysteries with which the recorder is familiar but cannot bring to light without her intercession.

Esther's narrative is taut and powerful, stripped of her usual obliquity. She has matured as a writer, and this is not necessarily due to Dickens's intervention. Dickens does not simply ventriloquise Esther,¹³ but clearly shows how the crisis pushes her beyond the bounds of her usual performance. Cast, as she notes, outside of her "right mind" (674), Esther cannot resort to the evasions with which she is familiar. Esther

demonstrates her inner strength and persistence; she is patient and remarkably enduring. As Bucket observes: “I never see a young woman in any station of society... conduct herself like you have conducted yourself, since you was called out of your bed. You’re a pattern, you know” (684). And for the first time, Esther must take the initiative. She interrogates the brickmakers’ wives, pressing them with questions. Asking after her mother, she finally implicates herself, takes responsibility for the connection, even to the point of ordering Bucket: “You will not desert this lady we are in search of; you will not abandon her on such a night, and in such a state of mind as I know her to be in!” (689). Esther has acknowledged her own need as the narrative moves towards connection with the mother, and this act of discovery is her moment of maturity.

The narrative, after the delay of the false trail, gravitates towards its centre: the graveyard that is the final locus of dissolution, the true heart of the fog that envelops Chancery in the opening of the novel. For Esther, both the physical and the psychological seem to lose their definition, for this is the point of maximum crisis.

I have the most confused impressions of that walk. I recollect that it was neither night nor day; that morning was dawning, but the street-lamps were not yet put out; that the sleet was still falling, and that all the ways were deep with it... I recollect the wet house-tops, the clogged and bursting gutters and water-spouts... the narrowness of the courts by which we went. At the same time I remember... that the stained house-fronts put on human shapes and looked at me; that great water gates seemed to be opening and closing in my head, or in the air; and that unreal things were more substantial than the real (712-3).

Esther intuits in this confusion the same chaos of categories, the sense of everything “indistinguishable in the mire” (5) that the recorder confronts in the first passages of the novel. However, this image of the breaking and bursting of channels towards the end of *Bleak House* stands in contrast to the static waters lying in flood around Chesney Wold (11), and the thaw, the opening

of water gates in Esther's mind, contradicts the "freezing mood" (13) of Lady Dedlock, for this catastrophe is also potentially a transformation, a point where the tension in *Bleak House* and Esther's narrative can be discharged.

That transformation is never to be entirely realised. Bucket, for all his mastery, has come too late. Esther has come too late. As Esther sees Lady Dedlock lying in the mud — "drenched in a fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everything" (713) — which is kindred to law and equity, she sees, through a discontinuous yet analogous leap which is similar to every other connection which proliferates through the novel, "the mother of the dead child" (713). In this phrase Esther recognises the complex of the mother of the child, herself, who had been better not born, and at the same time allows the guilty mother to die in order to requite the sins of the guiltless child. Unable consciously to accept what she knows, even language becomes meaningless: "They changed clothes in the cottage. I could repeat the words in my mind, and I knew what they meant of themselves; but I attached no meaning to them in any other connexion" (713). Thus Esther moves to the woman she convinces herself is Jenny still searching for a clue, the means to complete the quest, a further point of intercession with the mystery: "She lay there, who had so lately spoken to my mother.... She who had brought my mother's letter, who could give me the only clue to where my mother was; she, who was to guide us to rescue and save her" (713). The mystery will not be solved; there will be no final confession from Lady Dedlock that will explain the crimes of an irremediable past. Bucket and Esther have located the mother on the edge of the gate, on the threshold of the irrecoverable loss of all meaning, but the solution is here circumscribed. Neither they, nor narrative, can pursue the mystery any further. Their authority is here terminated.

Bucket and Esther, though briefly able to unify the novel's modes of perception, to bring the institutional and the personal into complementary rather than supplementary relationship, do not definitively succeed, but find that mystery dissipates even

as they approach closest to it. Thereafter, Bucket is able to retrieve the final will in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, and Esther is permitted, perilously, to imagine that the suit may eventually end well. But Jarndyce and Jarndyce will exhaust itself and the papers will be thrown into the street, finally equal with the mud, and Esther's new world can only begin in the aftermath of the death of Richard Carstone. Marianna Torgovnick, among others, finds a resurgence of the old Esther's voice in the last chapters of *Bleak House*, in what she calls Esther's "sentimental performance".¹⁴ It is true that Esther wins exculpation but is denied full self-realisation. She will always be fundamentally dependent on others for her own sense of self-worth. From the retrospective standpoint of Esther's narrative, however, this is still the same Esther with whom we began. Her writing remains an artifact of her experience. Esther has always presented her self obliquely, inviting us, like John Jarndyce, to know her better than she knows herself. Her last utterance hovers on this same coyness, this half-realised knowledge:

I did not know that; I am not certain I know it now.
But I know that my dearest little pets are very pretty, and that
my darling is very beautiful, and that my husband is very
handsome, and that my guardian has the brightest and most
benevolent face that was ever seen; and that they can very
well do without much beauty in me — even supposing —
(770).

Breaking off, Esther delays discovery, closing *Bleak House* in eternal supposition. This narrative gesture indicates Esther's command of another aspect of narration, the generation of meaningful pauses, of a suspense that cannot, in this case, be satisfied. The Esther revealed here is the Esther that we have been reading all along: the Esther who is mistress of a second, restored Bleak House.

While the recorder is emphatically mobile, unsettled, it is Esther who has the power to order homes, to create an internal domestic economy that offers stability and shelter. Only Esther has the sensibility immersed in the world of continuous human consequence to find a place fixed enough to write from with

consistency. The recorder's last words, like the unheard final ruling in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, fade in "dull repose" (767). The properties in Chancery, like Tom-All-Alone's, or Chesney Wold, or even the first Bleak House of Tom Jarndyce, fall to ruin. Esther asserts order within a chaotic universe tending to decay. The Bleak House for which Esther holds the keys, then, is exactly modelled on the first Bleak House of her description: "delightfully irregular" (62), spatially complex, labyrinthine in structure, cluttered with detail, a "quaint variety" (63) in "perfect neatness" (63). The plan of Bleak House suggests the structure of *Bleak House*: interconnected, various, unusual. But this is not the recorder's domain; it is Esther's. As she emphasises its irregularity, its strangeness, its sense of submerged order within a complex structure (in accordance to her "methods and inventions" (751)), we can imagine the novel as a whole. Thus, following this analogue, *Bleak House* ultimately falls within Esther's authority, the product of her capacity for conscious design within the chaos of experience.

In the Dickens canon, *Bleak House* is unique for its deployment of two narrative voices. For a long time the voice of the recorder has been the voice of the narrator: if not more authoritative then certainly more authorial. But the third-person recorder is not the only narrator in *Bleak House*. Even Esther's supporters have often overlooked her function as a narrator. The psychological realism of her presentation also determines aspects of her narrative, her habits of obliqueness and evasion, the stance of self-effacement. Nevertheless, Esther is both capable and observant as a narrator, exhibiting a developing control of her material, though she is circumscribed by her close attention to the present and the personal, and the stresses inherent in her relationship with the mystery of Lady Dedlock's crime. Naturally, the recorder has the appearance of greater facility, such mobility in space that he is commonly referred to as omniscient. The use of the present-tense tends to make this narrator's position unstable, limited to its very immediacy, as opposed to Esther's attempts to discover some sort of linear pattern in her experience. Furthermore, the recorder is reflected in several internal analogues, ranging from the fashionable

intelligence to Tulkinghorn to Inspector Bucket, all characterised by their perceptiveness, their virtual immanence, and also by their complicity in the structures of Chancery, policing and discipline. These are also unstable positions, and circumscribed in unexpected ways. Ultimately, not even Inspector Bucket can resolve (if not solve) Lady Dedlock's crime without Esther's assistance, suggesting that institutional authority is, in some important sense, limited by the personal, individual imagination that Esther represents. Thus, in the crucial chapters of *Bleak House*, the pursuit of Lady Dedlock, Esther and Bucket work together, effectively compounding their narrative positions. Their quest for Lady Dedlock is also a technical failure. Narrative can never close conclusively with mystery, but it is only in the synthesis of the narrative positions that Esther and the recorder assume that we can approach its limits. This is as much as the text of *Bleak House* authorises.

- ¹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, eds. George Ford & Sylvère Monod (1853; New York: Norton, 1977), 134. All subsequent references are to this edition and are incorporated parenthetically into the text.
- ² Recorder has other resonances. The recorder is an observer who reports without intervening. Courts have their recorders (though I do not refer to the recorder in the English court system, which is a kind of junior judge), and the journalist also records trials. Dickens himself was a reporter of court cases as well as parliamentary debates.
- ³ See, for example, Bert Hornback, "The Narrator of *Bleak House*", *Dickens Quarterly* 16.1 (March 1999), 3: "Esther's 'portion' of the novel would seem to be a part of the whole defined by the omniscient narrator" (emphasis added).
- ⁴ For a brief review of early reactions to Esther see Philip Collins, "Some Narrative Devices in *Bleak House*", *Dickens Studies Annual* 19 (1990), 125-146.
- ⁵ Alex Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated", *PMLA* 88 (1973), 429-39.
- ⁶ See Anny Sadrin, "Charlotte Dickens: The Female Narrator of *Bleak House*", *Dickens Quarterly* 9 (1992), 47-57; or Joan Winslow, "Esther Summerson: The Betrayal of the Imagination", *Journal of Narrative Technique* 6 (1970), 1-11.

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- ⁷ See D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988), or Jasmine Yong Hall, “What’s Troubling About Esther: Narrating, Policing and Resisting Arrest in *Bleak House*”, *Dickens Studies Annual* 22 (1993), 171-194.
- ⁸ Compare this image with the sinister rambling of the idiot in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997): “‘Her shadow’s always with him, and his with her. That’s sport I think, eh?’” (94).
- ⁹ “Unsuccessful detectives” (20) in fact. J. Hillis Miller, Introduction, *Bleak House* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
- ¹⁰ I have discussed the Victorian novel of mysteries more fully in my doctoral thesis, “Dickens and Mystery”, (University of Canterbury, 1997). This article is drawn in part from that thesis, heavily revised, and incorporating some more recent critical works that have come to my attention since then, and are referenced in these notes.
- ¹¹ The recorder takes up a semi-prophetic stance in his warnings of “Spontaneous Combustion” (403), or in preaching over the death-bed of Jo — “dying thus around us every day” (572) — but this has the force of a rhetorical gesture, not, properly speaking, foreknowledge.
- ¹² See Audrey Jaffe, “Omniscience in *Our Mutual Friend*”, *Journal of Narrative Technique* 17 (1987), 91-101, from which I borrow this term, a reference to the demon Asmodeus, who had the power to peer at will into homes.
- ¹³ I borrow this phrase from Jasmine Yong Hall, 191.
- ¹⁴ *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 1989), 53.

ANDREI BALTAKMENS completed a Ph.D in English Literature at the University of Canterbury in 1997, on Dickens and the Victorian mysteries novel. He now works as a professional writer.