English Faculty Publications   English

Spring 1990

"'Flight' and 'Pursuit': Fugitive Identity in Bleak House,"

Cynthia N. Malone
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, cmalone@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/english_pubs

Part of the Literature in English, British Isles Commons

Recommended Citation

"Flight" and "Pursuit":
Fugitive Identity in *Bleak House*

Cynthia Northcutt Malone

Prowling the streets of *Bleak House*, Jo is confronted with an unfathomable mystery. The veiled lady whom he once led to the "berryin ground" returns like a recurrent nightmare, each manifestation almost—not quite—identical with the last (485). First Jo, then Inspector Bucket attempts to puzzle out the mystery: who *is* this elusive figure? As we make our way through this diffuse and densely populated novel, we wait expectantly for the revelation of a name; we depend upon proper names and personal pronouns to designate identity, to distinguish one figure from another. But the flight of the veiled lady through *Bleak House* challenges the designating power of the name, for the novel represents a substitutive chain of veiled ladies whose track through the dual narrative involves movements of conflation, division, and dissolu- tion. Beginning with the fugitive lady, I want to show that proper names and pronouns designate identity in the novel only as they reveal its flight.

After Jo guides the mysterious lady to the "berryin ground," each appearance of a veiled figure provokes an unanswerable question: is it that lady or another one?[1] The figure that appears in Tulkinghorn's chambers, "the forenner," seems to be both: "It is her and it an't her. It an't her hand, nor yet her rings, nor yet her voice. But that there's the wale, the bonnet, and the gownd, and they're wore the same way wot she wore 'em, and it's her height wot she was, and she giv me a sov'ring and hooked it" (369).

Surfacing and vanishing with terrifying stealth, the veiled lady glides in and out of the plot. The watchful "eye" of the present-tense narration tracks her steps through the pursuing figure of Inspector Bucket, but the lady slips out

of sight only to turn up in the first-person narration, in the guise of the "I."
Hearing of illness at the brickmaker's cottage, Esther puts on her bonnet and
veil and goes to visit Jenny. It is Jo who is ill, of course, and he is deeply
shaken by this reappearance of the veiled lady.[2] "The boy staggered up
instantly, and stared at me with a remarkable expression of surprise and
terror," Esther reports (485). "Ain't the lady the t'other lady?" Jo asks (486).
But no; this lady is neither the one nor the other: "If she ain't the t'other one,
she ain't the forenner. Is there *three* of 'em then?" (488).

That Jo should be perplexed by misleading appearances is hardly surpris-
ing, since he "don't know nothink" (274). It is the institutions of law and
police, Chancery Court and the Detective Police, that penetrate veils and
establish names; the representatives of these institutions are confident that the
mystery of identity will be solved when the veiled figures are correctly
named.[3] Back in Tulkinghorn's chambers, Inspector Bucket's tidy mind sorts
out the problem of the veiled lady into the two logical possibilities. Logic
dictates that Hortense must be either the same lady Jo has seen before, or
another lady. Inspector Bucket settles the confusion; he dismisses Hortense
and informs Tulkinghorn that "[t]here an't a doubt that it was the other one
with this one's dress on" (370)—that it was Lady Dedlock, wearing
Hortense's clothes—who followed Jo to the burying ground.

Inspector Bucket unravels the plot by lifting the veils, uncovering con-
cealed identities. Working from the traces left behind by this vanished figure,
Bucket ingeniously sorts out "appearance" from "reality," this veiled lady
from that one. Beneath the surface of the plot, however, the text surrepti-
tiously erodes his distinctions. Appearing now as Esther, now as Hortense,
now as Lady Dedlock, the veiled lady figuratively dissolves the boundaries
that appear to contain the self. Indeed, it is the illiterate Jo who most aptly
formulates the logic of the text: in *Bleak House*, one figure always "is and
an't" another.

Thus, while the detective plot of *Bleak House* suggests that the mystery of
identity can be solved, and identity can be established, the plot itself functions
as a concealing surface. The plot indicates that the truth about identity is to be
discovered beneath the veil, but in fact it is the veiled surface itself that
metaphorically figures the condition of identity in this novel; identity is
slippery, multiple, and impenetrable. It is in her veiled condition, as an
unnamed, three-faced figure in flight, and not as an uncovered face, that the
lady signals the status of the self. In *Bleak House*, the self is always
anonymous, multiple, and fugitive; and both narratives, in their different
registers, bear the tracks of fugitive identity.

"SOME ONE ELSE"

When the veiled lady penetrates into Esther's narration, she seems to peer out of the "I" at the bewildered Jo. A moment later, Charley assures Jo that Esther is not the veiled lady he remembers, but someone else. This confusion of figures is telling, for the difference between self and other is deeply problematic in *Bleak House*. As I will show, the distinction between the "I" and "other" figures in the first-person narration is always unstable. Esther always seems to be someone else, even when she is apparently alone, for the "I" of this narration is intractably plural.

Of course, the dual narrative structure of *Bleak House* seems to establish the boundaries of the "I", for the shifts in pronoun and verb tense seem to assert a firm distinction between the "I" and the "other," unnamed narrator. The "I" seems safely contained within the first-person narration, while the other narration seems to be the voice of an anonymous, third-person narrator.[4] However, as the movement of the veiled lady across this boundary suggests, this apparently stable formal distinction is untenable. Indeed, careful scrutiny of the relationship between these narratives demonstrates that the dual narrative structure of *Bleak House* recapitulates, at the level of narrative form, the division that always operates within the "I."

The illness that scars Esther's face creates a visible sign of this division within the "I"; the new, scarred Esther, the fictive narrator, begins her story looking back at the old, beautiful Esther. This event in the plot metaphorically represents the distinction that is always implied in the stance of retrospection, the distinction between an old self and a new self, a narrated "I" and a narrating "I."[5] From her illness until the closing page of the novel, Esther wears a new face. At the close, the plot pretends to merge the two figures into one by lifting the veil of that new face and finding the old beauty concealed beneath it—finding a stable, unified identity concealed under difference. But the unfolding of the narrative reveals the impossibility of a final unity.

For there is also a more widespread, more intractable division within the "I" that is repeatedly marked in the narrative. This division is often read in psychological terms. Zwerdling argues, for example, that Esther's discovery of her illegitimacy is the "childhood trauma" whose "long-range effects" are traced in her narrative; and he suggests that her disfigurement symbolically marks her sense of guilt.[6] I would like to recast the problem in narratological terms, however. Esther's scarred face may represent the difference within the "I," but it is crucial to notice that this difference is registered in the narrative

discourse even before Esther's illness. Just before the encounter with Jo, Esther signals her self-division in an enigmatic remark: "I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was" (484–485). Already, before the disfiguring illness, Esther's face both is and is not her own: "She looks to me the t'other one," Jo insists (486). As the encounter with Jo makes clear, Esther's face seems not to be her own even before she is disfigured by her illness. This sense intensifies when Esther first sees her mother's face. Esther is startled when she sees Lady Dedlock at church, for Lady Dedlock's face seems to her "in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (304). Those "old remembrances" recall a painful past:

> . . . *I——I*, little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing—seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady, whom I not only entertained no fancy that I had ever seen, but whom I perfectly well knew I had never seen until that hour.
>
> (305)

The sight of Lady Dedlock's face prompts Esther to remember not only her past self, but also her now-dead godmother, so that the revelation of blood ties among these three figures is all but announced. In terms of the plot, then, the function of this passage is to prepare us for the revelation of Esther's identity, to rationalize that discovery.

But it is important to notice what arises before Esther's "own eyes" in this scene: an absent face, the face of Esther's past self. The narrated Esther takes the fictive posture of the narrating Esther. Sitting in church, the narrated Esther becomes for a moment the "author," recalling her past self, "little Esther Summerson." This scene figures the restrospective stance of the narrator, for it represents an older Esther looking back at a younger version of Esther. But the posture of retrospection which the narrated Esther assumes here does not point toward an eventual unification of the "I" that would represent achievement of identity. The "author" names the face that arises before "my own eyes" as "*I*," as "Esther Summerson," but this act of naming also calls attention to temporal difference: the other face of the "I," the face of "little Esther Summerson," is "evoked out of the past." Thus, the mirror-like moment offers no steadily reflected image of the self that might confirm a coherent and unified identity; instead, this moment splinters the "I," exposing its division and multiplicity, refracting it in "a broken glass." By establishing a reflexive relationship between different faces of the "I,"

this scene graphically illustrates the specular structure of Esther's narrative.[7] And the structure of specularity involves still other faces of the "I," faces that wear different names. The first-person narrative locks together the faces of mother and daughter in a reflexive relationship: "I had a fancy, on more than one of these Sundays," Esther says, "that what this lady so curiously was to me, I was to her—I mean that I disturbed her thoughts as she influenced mine, though in some different way" (372). Esther's "unaccountable agitation" grows still more acute with the addition of the third face—that other face of the veiled lady, the face of Hortense—whose "observation" leaves Esther "distressed" (305). The rhetoric of disturbance, agitation, and distress aptly describes the vertiginous structure of specularity.

   Far from consolidating or affirming Esther's identity, then, the moment of retrospection dissociates the "I." Here, even before Esther loses her beauty, the text calls attention to an irremediable division within the "self." The scene points back to a part of the "I" that is irrecoverably lost, the face of "little Esther Summerson." Esther's illness only intensifies this sense of loss and absence of identity. After her recovery, Esther recalls "watching what was done for me, as if it were done for some one else whom I was quietly sorry for" (545). That "some one else" gazes back at Esther when she goes to the mirror:

> There was a little muslin curtain drawn across it. I drew it back: and stood for a moment looking through such a veil of my own hair, that I could see nothing else. Then I put my hair aside, and looked at the reflection in the mirror, encouraged by seeing how placidly it looked at me. I was very much changed—O very, very much. At first, my face was so strange to me, that I think I should have put my hands before it and started back, but for the encouragement I have mentioned.
>
> (559)

Here is a case to trouble Bucket's logic: the face that the "I" discovers behind the veils, the "muslin curtain" and "my own hair," is "strange to me"; it is not "I" in the glass, but "it." Probing beneath the veils, one does not uncover identity; instead, one uncovers another radical loss of identity.

   According to Lowry Pei, the mirror scenes in Esther's narrative figure her psychological condition; these scenes represent her "unknown self," the repressed "Other within Esther which her conscious mind cannot reach" (148, 151). While that reading might account for the self-division that Esther's narration so frequently registers, it fails to account for the circulation of identity between different figures—between the multiple figures of the veiled

lady. Conflation of the "I" with "another" figure is most clearly marked in the relationship between Esther and Ada Clare. When Esther becomes ill, the narrative discourse literally displaces the lost, beautiful face of the "I" onto "some one else," onto Ada Clare. Zwerdling has suggested that Ada is a kind of "second self" for Esther, "as the girl she might have become if she had not been born 'different from other children' and 'set apart' " (431). Zwerdling is right to point out the very close relationship between Esther and Ada, I think, but I would like to argue that he takes too literally the rhetoric of difference that he adopts from Miss Barbary. In the text, Esther is not "set apart"; that is, there are no clearly defined borders around the "self" to set her apart. Thus, Esther not only "might have been" Ada, but, more radically, the self and this other are all but indistinguishable.

The relationship between Esther and Ada replays the scene before Esther's mirror, exposing again the division and loss suffered by the "I." The reflexivity of "Ada" and the suggestion of light in "Clare" mark Ada's function as a reflection of the "I"; furthermore, both Ada and the mirror are banished from the sickroom until Esther's recovery. When Esther begins to recover, she thinks of Ada "[a] little in connexion with the absent mirrors, but not much; for I knew my loving girl would be changed by no change in my looks" (549). The scarred face promises to set Esther apart, to establish the boundary between the "I" and "she." But when Ada returns and "my beauty and I" walk together in the garden, that boundary disappears (670).[8] The possessive pronoun anchors "my beauty" to "me," so that the two faces are involved in a specular structure. It is as if Esther had been disfigured, yet her reflection had retained its beauty. Ada represents the face of the "I" that Esther has lost. Thus, when Esther begins to think that she has no right to keep the flowers that Allan gave "to one so different" (559), it is Ada's lips that bestow the farewell kiss on the faded flowers: "I took the withered flowers out, and put them for a moment to her lips" (669). Furthermore, when Ada leaves Bleak House to join Richard, the "I" seems to register Ada's absence. "I was so lonely, and so blank without her, and it was so desolate to be going home with no hope of seeing her there, that I could get no comfort for a little while," Esther says (755). As the distance increases between the "I" and "my beauty," Esther is literally dis-figured.[9]

Jarndyce's marriage proposal threatens to arrest the "I" in its condition of loss. According to Esther, his proposal is addressed specifically to the new, scarred face, the face that points to the loss of identity; "he did not hint to me," Esther says, "that when I had been better looking, he had had this same proceeding in his thoughts, and had refrained from it. . . . But *I* knew it, I

knew it well now." Esther reads the letter, weeping and feeling "as if something for which there was no name or distinct idea were indefinitely lost to me" (668). That nameless, lost something is nothing less than the self: "By and by I went to my old glass. My eyes were red and swollen, and I said, 'O Esther, Esther, can that be you!' I am afraid the face in the glass was going to cry again at this reproach, but I held up my finger at it, and it stopped" (668). The "I" may well ask if the dis-figured face, the some one else in the glass, can be Esther.[10] It is difficult to name a "self" as fragmented as this.

Of course, the formal structure of *Bleak House* seems to attribute a great deal of authority to names. The mystery form implies that the closure of the narrative will unravel the plot and resolve the confusion. In the case of *Bleak House*, that means penetrating disguises, bringing to light concealed identities, revealing the relations between figures—discovering names. Furthermore, the fiction of a retrospective stance positions the "I" "after" the story, so that Esther has "already" learned her name and her birth-story. Ostensibly, it is the knowledge of her identity that authorizes Esther to recount her story. If accurate naming is the key to identity, however, Esther's case demands close attention. The circumstances of Esther's birth preclude the possibility of a legitimate name; and her proper name, "Esther Summerson," is only a pseudonym—only one pseudonym among others. When Esther first comes to Bleak House, she accrues a wealth of nicknames. Jarndyce christens her "Little Old Woman" after the figure in the "Rhyme": "This was the beginning of my being called Old Woman, and Little Old Woman, and Cobweb, and Mrs. Shipton, and Mother Hubbard, and Dame Durden, and so many names of that sort, that my own name soon became quite lost among them" (148). Esther's "own name" is only one more nickname, "quite lost among" the countless other names. The point is made again when the text establishes the allegorical appropriateness of Esther's "own name," "Summerson"—a name that is inscribed and erased in the same act: "I must write it, even if I rub it out again, because it gives me so much pleasure. They said there could be no East wind where Somebody was; they said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air" (482). This playful remark may grant significance to Esther's name, but it also equates "Summerson" with another playful name, "Dame Durden." As Ragussis observes, the "symbolic names" attributed to Esther "seem finally to make more apparent that her proper name is unknown" (90).[11] The point is underscored when the passage clears all the nicknames out of the way for a moment, revealing what lies behind them: an indefinite "Somebody."

The text which Esther fictively authors, then, exposes "Esther" to be an

anonymous "Somebody," and it exposes the "I" as "some one else." The same confusion between the "I" and a nameless "some one else" is mirrored at the larger level of narrative form, in the dual narrative structure. Readers of *Bleak House* have generally assumed an absolute difference between the narratives and an internal coherence within each narrative—though Harvey argues that "Dickens" occasionally slips, and "his" voice intrudes into "Esther's" narrative.[12] But the internal coherence of the first-person narration is clearly under severe strain, and the dissociation of the "I" should make us question the assumption of an absolute boundary between the narrations.

Certainly, the shifts in verb tense and pronominal person between the narratives seem to suggest a marked difference in the positions of the narrators. The past-tense verbs in Esther's narration seem to position her at a point after the story, retrospectively recounting the events, while the unnamed narrator's present-tense account seems to follow events as they unfold. Each narrative also acknowledges the other, signalling both a sense of participation in a larger whole and a sense of the integrity of parts. Esther refers to "my portion of these pages," suggesting that there is at least one other "portion" (62); and the "other" narrator seems to distinguish himself or herself from Esther, taking up the story "while Esther sleeps, while Esther wakes" (131).

Given Esther's habit of self-address, however, reference to Esther by name hardly constitutes a firm distinction between the "I" and the "other." That is, the "I" of Esther's narration frequently adopts the stance of another toward herself. Not only does she address herself by "you" or by name; her narration also figures the "I" in the third person in its textual reflections: the face in the mirror, habitually referred to as "it"; and "my beauty," Ada Clare. Thus, the "other" narrator merely sustains a posture that the "I" occasionally takes. The distinction suggested by the shift in verb tenses is no more definite. The present-tense verbs evoke a sense of unfolding history:

> Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats.
>
> (49)

The events of the narrative seem to take place under the attentive eye of an unknown observer. Though reported in present tense, these events are contemporaneous with those that Esther recounts from a retrospective

position; thus, the effect of the present-tense verbs is to create a sense of a resurrected past. In fact, the present-tense narration recalls the encounter between Esther and her mother, when "little Esther Summerson . . . seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady." In the "other" narration, figures from the past seem to arise before the observer's eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this unknown narrator.[13] Here again, the present-tense narrative sustains a stance that Esther takes momentarily. Perhaps, after all, this "some one else" is a posture of the "I."

"NO ONE"

Even as names and pronouns destabilize the "I," the plot seems to move steadily toward the revelation of Esther's familial identity, as if the self might congeal around that core of revelation. Esther's parentage functions as the great secret of *Bleak House*, the discovery that effects narrative closure. The plot reaches its end when the mysteries have been solved and identities have been established in familial terms. But the text also militates against its own ending, for the narrative discourse affirms identity only by negating it. That is, to identify this "Somebody" with "so many names" is the great effort of the plot; but *Bleak House* defies any comprehensible notion of identification. "Somebody" turns out to be "no one."

Esther's dream at the Jellyby house traces the pursuit of identity, and it figures the end of the quest. At the beginning of the passage, the "I" is apparently intact. Esther is sitting before the fire, with the sleeping figure of Caddy resting against her. But the "I" that asserts self-recognition gives way to an indefinite "some one," and at last, to "no one":

> 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 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 curtsying and smiling; now, someone in authority at Bleak House. Lastly, it was no one, and I was no one.
>
> (94)

At the beginning of the passage, it is "the identity of the sleeper" that is in question. But as Esther grows drowsy, the "I" and "the sleeper" are no longer

distinguishable; the "I" is gradually absorbed into the procession of figures, for the "some one in authority at Bleak House," of course, is Esther herself. When the passage ends, the identity of the "I" is posited—but only by negation: "I was no one."

At one level, this moment in the text signals the discovery of Esther's identity, for Esther is indeed "no one": she is the child of Nemo. But this formulation of discovered identity repays reflection. Even as the narrative discourse foreshadows the revelation of Esther's father, the revelation that will solve the central mystery of the plot, it also points to a more deeply concealed secret: discovery of identity, in this novel, always constitutes its negation. The mystery of Esther's identity hinges not on the shameful secret of illegitimacy, but on the more troubling problem, absence of identity. The plot turns on the discovery that Nemo and Lady Dedlock bore a child, but beneath the plot the text reveals that Nemo has fathered "no one," a verbal echo of his own absence.

Nemo first appears in the text as a kind of track pointing to his own absence. He first appears in the text already dead, as a corpse. He has already assumed "that last shape which earthly lodgings take for No one—and for Every one": "And all that night, the coffin stands ready by the old portmanteau; and the lonely figure on the bed, whose path in life has lain through five-and-forty years, lies there, with no more track behind him, that any one can trace, than a deserted infant" (196). There need be "no more track . . . than a deserted infant," of course; the law and the police "can trace" the "track" that links Nemo to the "deserted infant," Esther. Esther is not only the evidence that points to an absent Nemo, however. The explicit translation of "Nemo" as "No one" conflates father and daughter, so that the two figures are linked in absence and in denial of identity.

The text establishes the "I" as a virtual absence from the opening of Esther's narration. The first-person narration corroborates the supposedly false account of Esther's birth-story, an account that negates the "I": "So strangely did I hold my place in this world, that, until within a short time back, I had never, to my own mother's knowledge, breathed—had been buried—had never been endowed with life—had never borne a name," Esther muses (569). The "I" holds its "place" very strangely indeed, for the text represents that place as a blank. The first appearance of the "I" is an act of self-erasure; Esther begins her narration by staging her own disappearance. The narrating "I" remembers confiding "every one of my secrets" to a doll, who "used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me—or not so much at me, I think, as at

nothing—" (62). At me, at nothing; Esther's formulation makes these terms grammatically equivalent, so that the "I" seems to vacate the very sentence that represents it. And this linguistic form of self-erasure is recapitulated in the plot when Esther buries herself by proxy, wrapping the doll in her own shawl and burying her in the garden. Thus, the "I" can be said to "hold my place" in the text only as a signal of its own absence. Although Esther suffers a deeply troubling sense "of filling a place" at Miss Barbary's "which ought to have been empty," that "place" operates in the text as an emptiness to be filled.

The "I" is literally absent from the "other" narration, of course; at least, an "I" recognizable as Esther is absent from this narration. A mysterious "I" does surface like the veiled lady, cloaked in anonymity and vanishing quickly. The first-person pronoun takes plural form, and takes flight, when Krook dies: "we run away" from the awful scene of his death (511). Later, the "I" passes more sedately, but just as mysteriously, from a Chesney Wold "with no inhabitants except the pictured forms upon the walls." The "I" identifies here with the ghost of a painted Dedlock, who might "find it, as I find it, difficult to believe that it could be, without them; so pass from my world, as I pass from theirs, now closing the reverberating door; so leave no blank to miss them, and so die" (620). The portraits of deceased Dedlocks fill the "blank" spaces at Chesney Wold, and the text fills the "blank" space of absence, in this passage, with a ghostly "I."

The present-tense narration also points to the absent "I" that we associate with Esther. Nemo and Lady Dedlock, for example, function in this narration as indices to Esther's "identity." Esther's name does appear in the present-tense narration—in a chapter that is significantly titled "The Ghost's Walk." This moment links Esther directly with the ghostly "I" that haunts Chesney Wold. Like that ghost, she appears only to pass from the world of the present-tense narration. But the ghost appears again, or is reflected, in the first-person narration; the "I" explicitly figures itself as the ghost of Chesney Wold:

> . . . 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 which turned me cold, I ran from myself and everything, retraced the way by which I had come, and never paused until I had gained the lodge-gate, and the park lay sullen and black behind me.
> (571)

This metonymic association of Esther with the ghost sets the "I" in desperate motion. The remarkable syntax of Esther's statement, "I ran from myself," sends the first-person pronouns in hot pursuit of a fugitive identity. Reading this remark as a "grammatically reflexive index to self-division," Garrett Stewart includes this passage in his discussion of the many moments of death and absence that surround "Esther's quest for herself." (445, 447). Yet *Bleak House* represents a trajectory that is at once a quest and a flight; the novel projects a self from the evidence of its flight, from its "echoing footsteps." In this narrative, the "self" is always an extrapolation, traceable from the signs of its departure.

The narration of Krook's end offers a horribly graphic illustration. Seeking the evidence that will establish Esther's identity, Mr. Guppy arranges to receive papers from Krook. Krook misses the appointment, however, so Mr. Guppy and Tony descend to investigate:

> Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt papers; but not so light as usual, seeming to be steeped in something; and here is——is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or is it coal? O Horror, he *is* here! and this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another into the street, is all that represents him.
>
> (511)

Krook "*is* here"; that is, Krook's "presence" is established by the evidence of his combustion, the "foetid effluvia" that creeps down the walls (513), and the small pile of ashes on the "burnt patch of flooring." "Krook literalizes the death of the self, the idea of being no one," according to Ragussis; in Esther's writing, on the other hand, "anonymity" has a different value, for the representation of the "I" as "no one," "someone," or "everyone" joins the self with others, demonstrating that "one's life is never simply one's own"(106–7). Here again, I want to question the firm distinction between the narratives, to suggest that Esther's narrative replays Krook's combustion in another register: the Spontaneous Combustion of the self is linguistically represented in the textual moments that expose the "I" as "no one." Esther "*is* here," in the narrative, because smoldering figures offer evidence of her flight.

The flight of the self is thematized in the plot in the chapters called "Flight" and "Pursuit." The veiled lady turns fugitive, with Detective Bucket on her trail—or on their trails: all three faces of the veiled lady are caught up in flight, so that the fugitive lady seems to flee from herself. Hortense, through

her accusing letter, sets Lady Dedlock on the run, and Esther joins Bucket in the futile pursuit. The lady's flight is arrested at the grave of Nemo, but when Esther lifts the veil, putting "the long dank hair aside," she finds only emptiness and absence (869). The fugitive is apprehended—but only as a corpse.

The union of Esther's family is the climax of the plot, the moment that should establish both the identity of the "I" and the relations of the figures. As D. A. Miller points out, however, the "closural moments" in this novel repeatedly "end by producing a corpse, as though the novel wanted to attest, not just the finality, but also the failure of a closure that, even as it was achieved, missed the essence of what it aspired to grasp"(96–97). Instead of affirming identity, the scene reveals an absence or negation of identity. At the grave of Nemo lies "the mother of the dead child," and "the dead child" herself bears witness (868).[14] The apparent confirmation of identity is subverted, or perhaps inverted, in a moment of utter emptiness, as the dead father, the "mother, cold and dead," and "the dead child" meet at last (869). The plot arrests the fugitives and strips away their disguises, only to find "no one" at the end of the trail.

"THE MISTRESS OF BLEAK HOUSE"

The "dead child" who spent her early years conscious of "filling a place . . . which ought to have been empty" does find a place at Bleak House.[15] Jarndyce defines Esther's social identity, giving her a place as housekeeper, and then as mistress, of Bleak House.[16] As Esther takes up the housekeeping keys, she seems to identify herself fully with her new responsibilities: "Esther, Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!" (131). In this hortatory self-address, "Duty" seems to function as another of Esther's many names. But the narrative fragments the "I" once again, projecting the "I" into other places. Fantasies of higher social status are played out opposite Esther in her doll and in Ada Clare, in specular relation to the "I." In these reflexive moments, the face of the housekeeper is intent on duty; but that face is positioned opposite the reflected face of an idle beauty.

The opposition of beauty and duty is established in Esther's first narration, long before the illness that mars her beauty. The text figures the child busily sewing, determined "to be industrious, contented, and kind-hearted," (65) while her doll, her surrogate self, sits idly by, "with her beautiful complexion

and rosy lips" (62). This opposition is adumbrated in Esther's relationship with Ada Clare. On one page, Esther addresses her "own" face, reflected in the mirror, as "my plain dear," and she exhorts herself to cheerful industry. Two pages later, Esther walks in the garden with "my beauty" (668, 670). And after Esther relinquishes a youthful idea that she might hold the place of daughter, dismissing "the possibility of his being my father" as an "idle dream," that place is filled by Ada (131). "Dear cousin John," Ada tells Jarndyce, "my father's place can never be empty again. All the love and duty I could ever have rendered to him, is transferred to you" (232).

The closure of *Bleak House* enacts a substitutive exchange of these faces. Jarndyce directs the substitution of Ada for Esther at the old Bleak House after Richard Carstone's death, and he also directs Ada to take up Esther's customary title of address. Thus, in verbal acknowledgment of the exchange, Ada trades her customary "cousin John," for Esther's term, "guardian." "He was her guardian hence forth," Esther says, "and the boy's; and he had an old association with the name" (932). The exchange constitutes a sanitized, novelized Shakespearean bed-trick, as Esther finds herself the mistress of Bleak House, but the wife of Allan Woodcourt.[17]

This plot device has attracted critical outrage, for the substitution of husbands at the end of *Bleak House* seems both farfetched and disturbing.[18] But the exchange also forces us to acknowledge the impossibility of distinguishing between figures in this text. The apparent indifference with which figures are redistributed at the end of the novel is the effect of this indistinguishability. And it is worth pointing out that the plot breaks down and the boundaries between the "I" and the "other" dissolve completely just here, at the end of the novel—at the very moment when Esther supposedly achieves a unified and coherent identity.

The relationship between the "I" and the "other" in the narrative structure is suspended in the same "undecidability" in the final chapters of *Bleak House*. The forward movement of the present-tense voice is arrested at Chesney Wold, "[a] labyrinth of grandeur, less the property of an old family of human beings and their ghostly likenesses, than of an old family of echoings and thunderings which start out of their hundred graves at every sound":

Thus Chesney Wold. With so much of itself abandoned to darkness and vacancy; with so little change under the summer shining or the wintry lowering; so sombre and motionless always—no flag flying now by day, no rows of lights sparkling by night; with no family to come and go, no visitors to be the souls of pale cold shapes of rooms, no stir of life about it;—passion and pride, even

to the stranger's eye, have died away from the place in Lincolnshire, and yielded it to dull repose.

(931–932)

Here, in the graveyard of echoes—as in that other graveyard in London—arrested movement reveals a "vacancy," a blank place filled with a ghostly "family of echoings and thunderings," pointing to departed presence. With these "hundred graves" to mark the echoing footsteps of absent figures, the present-tense voice passes from their world, as they have passed from Chesney Wold.

But on the following page, the "I" picks up the narration in the present tense, abandoning the customary retrospective stance. The distinction between the two narrations becomes most pointedly blurred at this closing moment, when the "I" takes up the tense of the "other" narrator. And this tense shift, along with the suggestion of recovered beauty, signals the impossibility of distinguishing between the "narrating" Esther and the "narrated" Esther. The text ends with a virtual erasure of the boundaries between author and subject, the "I" and the "other." It also ends with another moment of vacancy, for the "I" leaves a family of visual "echoes," a ring of beautiful faces surrounding its absence. The narration comes to a halt as the "I" passes from their world, leaving no blank—or leaving precisely that, a blank that marks its place:

> . . . 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 ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—

(935)

NOTES

1. In his "Introduction" to *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Bleak House: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), Jacob Korg attributes the widespread doubling in *Bleak House* to a "restless indecision" that prompted Dickens to "embody each of his ideas in various forms, and to rehearse each of his ideas in a different key or with a second cast of characters" (p. 19). See also Taylor Stoehr, *Dickens: The Dreamer's Stance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965; rpt. in *Dickens Bleak House: A Casebook* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1969), p. 236. I want to argue that the doubled figures in *Bleak House* call into question the apparent distinction between "self" and "other."

2. Robert Newsom explores such "déjà vu" experiences in *Dickens on the Romantic*

Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 47–92. Newsom's treatment of characters as psychological subjects limits the mobility of his argument, however, for it reifies the boundaries between figures in the text.

3. According to Robert A. Donovan, in "Structure and Idea in *Bleak House, ELH* 29 (1962); rpt. in *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Bleak House*, p. 35, "the main mystery" of the novel is "the question of establishing the identity of all the characters involved, and in the world of *Bleak House* one's identity is defined according to his relations to other people" (p. 35). I want to explore the moments in the text that counter or subvert the movement of the plot toward establishing these identities.

4. The differences between the narratives have led some critics to argue that they are irreconcilable. In a recent article, "The Two Worlds of *Bleak House*," *ELH* 43 (Winter, 1976), Ellen Serlen argues that the "worlds" of the *Bleak House* narrators "are intended to be two totally separate entities rather than two halves of a whole fictional world" (p. 551). See also Jacob Korg, p. 18; John R. Reed, "Freedom, Fate, and the Future in *Bleak House*," *Clio* 8 (Winter, 1979), 175.

Among those who argue for a greater cohesiveness is J. Hillis Miller, who asserts in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958) that the "third-person anonymous spectator" discovers "that he must seek the help of an *involved* spectator" to solve the mysteries of the novel, so that Esther is enlisted as a kind of subordinate, assistant narrator. While I cannot help noticing Miller's tacit assumption that the directing narrator, the "anonymous spectator," is male, I will let it pass without comment. Donovan, pp. 31–44, generally shares Miller's view, arguing that the novel demands both a panoramic and a personal view. See also W. J. Harvey, in *"Bleak House*: The Double Narrative," *Character and the Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1965); rpt. in *Dickens Bleak House*, calls the two narrations the "systole" and "diastole" of the narrative system (p. 230). See also Leonard Deen, "Style and Unity in *Bleak House*," *Criticism* 3 (1961), 206–218; D. W. Jefferson, "The Artistry of *Bleak House*," *Essays and Studies*, NS 27 (1975), 40; and Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), p. 322. I would like to argue that the relationship between parts of the narrative structure is far more dynamic than either of these critical views would suggest.

5. As this terminology demonstrates, I am drawing on recent work in theory of autobiography in order to mark the division of the "I" in the first-person narration. On the implied temporal stance of retrospection in autobiographical narration, see James Olney's treatment of the "autobiography of memory" in "Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of *Bios*: The Ontology of Autobiography," in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 240–248. In the same collection of essays, Jean Starobinski offers a statement of the argument for the convergence of narrated and narrating "I"; see "The Style of Autobiography," pp. 78–79. While these models for understanding the difference "within" the "I" offer a helpful beginning point, I want to show that the elusive "I" of *Bleak House* demands a model that is more sensitive to mobility and plurality.

6. Alex Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," *PMLA* 88 (May, 1973), 430. "Her scarred face is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual sin," according to Zwerdling (p. 435). See also William Axton, who sees in

Esther "an objective study of a character divided against herself by contending forces clearly discernible in her personal history; and her portion of the narrative illustrates this inner conflict," in "The Trouble With Esther," *MLQ* 26 (1965), 546; and Judith Wilt, "Confusion and Consciousness in Dickens' Esther" *Nineteenth Century Fiction* 32 (1977), 285–309.

7. On the specular structure of self-cognition in autobiography, see Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," *MLN* 94 (1979), 919–923. The model of specular structure illuminates the relationships of reflexivity and reflection that I want to examine.

8. In his discussion of Esther's relationship with Ada, Zwerdling notes, "When, after her disfigurement, she calls Ada 'my beauty,' as she frequently does, the phrase is charged with meaning" (p. 431). It is precisely this phrase that suggests the instability of the boundary between these figures, and gives the lie to Miss Barbary's "you are set apart."

9. Examining the original illustrations of *Bleak House*, Michael Steig finds that Esther's face is frequently averted. He argues that "the averted face is clearly a symbol of disgrace," a symbol that connects Esther with the pervasive social corruption in the novel. See "The Iconography of the Hidden Face in *Bleak House*," *Dickens Studies* 4 (March, 1968), 22. But the averted face also figures this loss of identity Esther describes as a "blank."

10. On the marked difference between the "self" and the image in the glass, see Pei, pp. 144–156, and Lawrence Frank, in *Charles Dickens and the Romantic Self* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 97–123.

11. See also Axton, p. 550.

12. "Only rarely does [Esther's] style slip and allow us to glimpse Dickens guiding her pen," Harvey states (p. 226). Albert J. Guerard refutes this view in "*Bleak House*: Structure and Style," *Southern Review* NS 5 (April, 1969), 339, but Guerard does not examine fully the narrative interpenetration that I want to explore.

13. Wilt suggests the possibility that the voice of the present-tense narrator is the voice of the "I" "in another mode," p. 295. She also notes the similarity between the present-tense chapters in *Bleak House* and the present-tense retrospects in *David Copperfield*, a point that reinforces both her argument and mine.

14. Pei comments on the psychological appropriateness of the phrase "the dead child" as a description of Esther, arguing that this death is the consequence of her "childhood of unlimited guilt," p. 154. However, it is not Esther's condition of death, but the acknowledgment of familial identity, that is crucial here; when father, mother, and child are united in death, as throughout *Bleak House*, the discovery of identity occurs in a moment of negation.

15. The *OED* lists two meanings of "place" that are pertinent here: "Position or standing in the social scale, or in any order of estimation or merit; rank, station, whether high or low." (III.9) "An office, employment, situation; sometimes *spec.* a government appointment, an office in the service of the crown or state" (IV.14).

16. According to Axton, the "pet names" associated with Esther's function "obscure her given names," and "they tacitly deprive Esther of a measure of identity and reduce her to the relative anonymity of a housekeeper" (p. 550). But Esther's "given names" provide a slender hold on identity, since they do not signify familial identity; thus, her function as housekeeper seems to shore up identity. As Steig argues, "it is through her association with Mr. Jarndyce, and her role as

housekeeper of Bleak House that Esther gains her identity as a human being" (p. 20).

17. Serlen dismisses this exchange with a brief comment: "Ada is now Esther to Jarndyce, Esther is 'Dame Durden' to her husband . . . Roles have shifted, but that is all" (p. 565). That is all, indeed; this closing gesture of the plot fully exposes the specular relation of Esther and Ada throughout *Bleak House*.

18. For a survey of the vituperative commentary on the closure of *Bleak House*, see Marianna Torgovnick, *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 37–40.

WORKS CITED

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Norman Page, ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971.

Miller, D.A. "Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*," *Representations* 1 (1979); reprinted in *The Novel and the Police.*, Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.

Pei, Lowry. "Mirrors, the Dead Child, Snagsby's Secret, and Esther." *English Language Notes*, 16 (1978): 144–56.

Ragussis, Michael. *Acts of Naming*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.

Stewart, Garrett. "The New Mortality of *Bleak House*." *ELH* 45:3 (Fall 1978): 443–87.

Zwerdling, Alex. "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated." *PMLA* 88 (May, 1973): 429–39.