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Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family, and *Bleak House*

I

CHANCERY COURT in *Bleak House* (1852–53) makes a certain difference in Dickens's representation of social discipline. This representation had hitherto been restricted to places of confinement which, as much as they referred to a disciplinary society committed to the manufacture and diffusion of such enclosures, also carried an even more emphatic allusion to the space between them: a space of freedom or domestic tranquillity that was their "other." The often ferocious architecture that immured the inmates of a carceral institution seemed to immure the operations practiced on them there as well, and if the thick, spiked walls, the multiple gateways, the attendants and the administrators assured the confinement of those within, they seemed equally to provide for the protectedness of those without, including most pertinently the novelist and his readers. Embodied in the prison, the workhouse, the factory, the school, discipline became, quite precisely, a *topic* of Dickensian representation: a site whose redoubtable but all the more easily identified boundaries allowed it to be the target of criticism to the same extent that they isolated it from other, better sites. The topic of the carceral in Dickens—better, the carceral as topic—thus worked to secure the effect of difference between, on the one hand, a confined, institutional space in which power is violently exercised on collectivized subjects, and on the other, a space of "liberal society," generally determined as a free, private, and individual domain and practically specified as the family. Yet clear though the lines of demarcation were, it was alarmingly easy to cross them. After all, what brought carceral institutions into being in the first place were lapses in the proper management of the family: in its failure to constitute itself (the problem of illegitimate or orphaned children and the institutional solution of foundling hospitals and baby farms) or in its failure to sustain itself by means of a self-sufficient domestic economy (the problem of poverty and debt and the institutional responses of workhouses and debtor's prisons). And in the portrayal of its hero in the workhouse, *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) dramatized the shameful facility with which such institutions might mistakenly seize upon what were middle-class subjects to begin with. Still, if to witness the horror of the carceral was always to incur a debt of

gratitude for the immunities of middle-class life, then to sense the danger from the carceral was already to learn how this debt had to be acquitted. When Oliver Twist, enchanted by the difference from his previous experience he found in his life at Mr. Brownlow's, begged the latter not to send him back to "the wretched place I came from," Brownlow declared: "You need not be afraid of my deserting you, unless you give me cause." Earlier he had promised Oliver access to the culture represented by the books in his library on similar conditions: "You shall read them, if you behave well."¹ The price of Oliver's deliverance from the carceral (either as the workhouse or as Fagin's gang) would be his absolute submission to the norms, protocols, and regulations of the middle-class family, in which he receives tuition not just from Brownlow but from the Maylies as well. Liberal society and the family were kept free from the carceral institutions that were set up to remedy their failures only by assuming the burden of an immense internal regulation. If discipline was confined to the carceral, then, this was so in order that it might ultimately be extended—in the mode of what was experientially its opposite—to the space outside it.

Chancery Court in *Bleak House* forces upon this representation the necessity of a certain readjustment. In the first place, an essential characteristic of the court is that its operations far exceed the architecture in which it is apparently circumscribed. The distinctive gesture of the carceral—that of locking up—makes little sense here when, at the end of the day, what is locked up is only "the empty court" and not "all the misery it has caused."² Though the court is affirmed to be situated "at the very heart of the fog" (2), this literally nebulous information only restates the difficulty of locating it substantially, since there is "fog everywhere" (1). The ultimate unlocalizability of its operations permits them to be in all places at once. "How many people out of the suit, Jarndyce and Jarndyce has stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt, would be a very wide question" (5), but it would perhaps also be a moot one, since nearly all the characters we meet in the novel are in the cause, either as parties to it or administrators of it, even those like Esther who seem to have nothing to do with it. And the suit is as long as it is wide, the immense spatial extension of its filiations being matched by the long temporal duration that unfolds under its "eternal heading" (5). Dickens's satire on the inefficiency of the court begins to seem a feeble, even desperate act of whistling in the dark, for the power organized under the name of Chancery is repeatedly demonstrated to be all too effective. Like the fog and dirt that are its first symbols, this power insinuates itself by virtue of its quasi-alchemical subtlety. To violent acts of penetration it prefers the milder modes of permeation, and instead of being densely consolidated into a force prepared to encounter a certain resistance, it is so finely vaporized—sublimated, we should say, thinking of alchemy and psychoanalysis together—that every surface it needs to attack is already porously welcoming it. Unlike, say, the power that keeps order in Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), this power does not impose itself by physical coercion (though, as the case of Gridley reminds us, it does dispose of carceral sanctions for those who hold it in contempt). Rather, it relies

on being voluntarily assumed by its subjects, who, seduced by it, addicted to it, internalize the requirements for maintaining its hold. “Fog everywhere.” What Chancery produces, or threatens to do, is an organization of power which, ceasing entirely to be a *topic*, has become topography itself: a system of control which can be all-encompassing because it cannot be compassed in turn. Writing in the nineteenth century, John Forster would not be the last critic of *Bleak House* to notice how “the great Chancery suit, on which the plot hinges, on incidents connected with which, important or trivial, all the passion and suffering turns, is worked into every part of the book.”³ Yet though we see nothing but the effects of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, everywhere present, affecting everyone, everything, we never come close to seeing what the suit is all about, as though this were merely the pretext that allowed for the disposition and deployment of the elaborate channels, targets, and techniques of a state bureaucracy. The interminable process of interpretation to which the original will gives rise, literally maddening to those who bring to it the demand that it issue in final truths and last judgments, is abandoned rather than adjudicated. If Chancery thus names an organization of power that is total but not totalizable, total *because* it is not totalizable, then what is most radically the matter with being “in Chancery” is not that there may be no way out of it (a dilemma belonging to the problematic of the carceral), but, more seriously, that the binarisms of inside/outside, here/elsewhere become meaningless and the ideological effects they ground impossible.

Furthermore, the nature of Chancery necessarily affects the nature of the resistance to it. Whereas the topic of the carceral, localizing disciplinary practices that thereby seemed to require only local remedies, always implied a feasible politics of reformism, the total social reticulation of Chancery finds its corresponding oppositional practice in the equally total social negation of anarchism. Repeatedly, the court induces in the narration a wish for its wholesale destruction by fire: “If all the injustice it has committed, and all the misery it has caused, could only be locked up with it, and the whole burnt away in a great funeral pyre—why, so much the better for other parties than the parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce!”(7). Even the elision of agency managed by the passive voice (who, exactly, would burn the court?), stopping short of any subjective assumption of the action, mirrors perfectly the court whose operations are in no one’s control. The wish, moreover, may be considered fulfilled (albeit also displaced) when Mr. Krook, who has personified the Chancellor and Chancery from the first, dies of spontaneous combustion. It is as though apocalyptic suddenness were the only conceivable way to put an end to Chancery’s meanings, violent spontaneity the only means to abridge its elaborate procedures, and mere combustion the only response to its accumulation of paperwork. One of the least welcome implications of an all-inclusive system, such as Chancery is implied to be, is that even opposition to it, limited to the specular forms of reflection and inversion, merely intensifies our attachment to the perceptual grid constructed by its practices.

To say so much, of course, is to treat Chancery, if not more radically, then certainly more single-mindedly, than Dickens is ever willing to do. For while a major effort of *Bleak House* is to establish Chancery as an all-pervasive system of domination, another is to refute the fact of this system and recontain the court within a larger spatial organization that would once again permit an elsewhere along with all the ideological effects attaching to it. If Krook's death, for instance, illustrates the apocalyptically anti-social kinds of retribution that are the only adequate responses to Chancery remaining, it can also be seen to reinstate precisely those social and political possibilities that Chancery, as a total order, ought to have made impossible. For insofar as Krook dies, as in certain modern aetiologies of cancer, of his own internal repressions, then Chancery can be safely trusted to collapse from its own refusal to release what is unhealthily accumulating in its system. Alternatively, insofar as Krook's violent end is meant to foreshadow what is in store for the institution he figures, then his death carries a warning to the court to amend its ways or else. In either case, we are reinstalled within the reformist perspectives that Chancery had, we thought, in principle annulled.

Even the omnipresence of the Chancery suit that Forster rightly noted is frequently neutralized by a certain inconsequentiality. John Jarndyce, Ada Clare, and Esther Summerson are all in the suit without being spoiled or corrupted by it—indeed, they constitute the domestic retreat to which the institutional, social space of the court can then be contrasted. Richard Carstone, whose aimlessness internalizes the procedural protractions of the court, makes a better example of Chancery's power to spoil and corrupt. Yet it is also possible to argue, as did an early critic of the novel, under the impression that he was exposing its deficiency, that Richard “is not made reckless and unsteady by his interest in the great suit, but simply expends his recklessness and unsteadiness on it, as he would on something else if it were non-existent.”⁴ It is, of course, Dickens's own text that opens up the possibility of this moral explanation in its reluctance to commit itself to social determination:

‘How much of this indecision of character,’ Mr. Jarndyce said to me, ‘is chargeable on that incomprehensible heap of uncertainty and procrastination on which he has been thrown from his birth, I don't pretend to say; but that Chancery, among its other sins, is responsible for some of it, I can plainly see. It has engendered or confirmed in him a habit of putting off—and trusting to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance—and dismissing everything as unsettled, uncertain, and confused. The character of much older and steadier people may be even changed by the circumstances surrounding them. It would be too much to expect that a boy's, in its formation, should be the subject of such influences, and escape them.’ (167)

Jarndyce kind-heartedly proposes the sociological key to Richard's character in the same breath as he admits its insufficiency. And what is at stake in his hesitation between “engendered” and “confirmed,” between the court as cause and the court as occasion, goes beyond the double view of Richard. Ultimately, the text oscillates between two seemingly incompatible sets of assumptions about the nature of Chanc-

ery's power—one deriving from the perception of total domination, the other still attached to the topic of the carceral. Thus, just as the satire on the inefficiency of the court contradicts the demonstrated power of such inefficiency, so too the anachronism of Chancery, upheld as “a slow, expensive, British, constitutional sort of thing” (13) by such fossils as Sir Leicester, counters the newness of the phenomenon that Dickens is describing under that name: the expanded development of the Victorian state bureaucracy that is at least as current as the novel's official exhibit of modernity in the Detective Police.⁵

All the evidence of Chancery's totalizing effects—of its productivity as an all-englobing system of power—is equivocal in such ways, as the text at once claims that this system is and isn't efficient, is and isn't everywhere, can and cannot be reformed. In the literal sense of giving utterance to a double discourse, *Bleak House* is a contradictory text. Yet as we continue to consider the operation of such “contradiction” in the text, we should be wary of prejudging it, in a certain Marxist manner, as the “symptom” of an ideological bind, obligingly betrayed to our notice in the text's taken-for-granted “distanciation” from its own program.⁶ We need rather to be prepared to find in the source of “incoherence,” the very resource on which the text draws for its consistency; in the ideological “conflict,” a precise means of addressing and solving it; in the “failure” of intention on the part of the text, a positively advantageous *strategy*.

II

Of all the mysteries that will crop up in *Bleak House*, not the least instructive concerns the curious formal torsion whereby a novel dealing with a civil suit becomes a murder mystery, and whereby the themes of power and social control are passed accordingly from the abyssal filiations of the law into the capable hands of the detective police. By what kinds of logic or necessity is the law thus turned over to the police, and the civil suit turned into the criminal case? For if Jarndyce and Jarndyce provides the ground from which mysteries and the consequent detections originate, it is certainly not because the suit is itself a mystery. In one sense, it is so illegible that we don't even have a sense, as we should with a mystery, of what needs to be explained or, more importantly, of what might constitute either the clues or the cruxes of such an explanation. In another, the suit may be read fully and at leisure: in the reams of dusty warrants, in the tens of thousands of Chancery-folio pages, in the battery of blue bags with their heavy charges of paper—in all the archival litter that has accumulated over the dead letter of the original will. Dickens's presentation offers either too little or else too much to amount to mystery. Besides, nothing about the suit is secret or hidden, unless we count the second will found late in the novel, and this hardly brings us closer to a judgment. All that is even unavailable are the dead legator's intentions.

It would be seriously misleading, however, on the basis of this exception, to deconstruct the suit into an allegory of interpretation as that which, confronting the absence of an immediate meaning effected by the very nature of the sign or text, must unfold as an interminable proliferation of readings.⁷ For one thing, if the suit can be thought to give expression to such difficulties of interpretation, this is because, more than merely finding them acceptable, it goes out of its way to manufacture them; and no response would serve Chancery or the logic of its law better than to see this manufacture as inhering in the nature of “textuality” rather than belonging to an institutional practice that seeks to implant and sanction its own technical procedures. For another, it seems willful to see the work of interpretation occurring in what is far more obviously and actually the profitable business of deferring it indefinitely. With its endless referrals, relays, remands, its ecologically terrifying production of papers, minutes, memoranda, Dickens’s bureaucracy works positively to elude the project of interpretation that nominally guides it. (And by the time that the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit* [1855–57] avows the principle “HOW NOT TO DO IT,” even the nominal commitment seems abandoned.⁸) Esther properly recognizes how “ridiculous” it is to speak of a Chancery suit as “in progress,” since the term implies a linear directedness which, while fully suitable to the project that subtends Esther’s own narration (indicatively begun under the title of “A Progress”), must be wholly absent from a case which, typically, “seemed to die out of its own vapidity, without coming, or being by anybody expected to come, to any result” (345). Moreover, to see that, in Chancery, the process of decision and interpretation is diverted is also to see that it is diverted *into* Chancery, as an apparatus. It is diverted, in other words, into the work of establishing the very channels for its diversion: channels by means of which a legal establishment is ramified, its points of contact multiplied, and routes of circulation organized for the subjects who are thus recruited under its power.⁹

Yet Chancery can never dispense with the judgments that it also never dispenses. Though the project of interpretation is virtually annulled in the workings of its formalism (“the lantern that has no light in it”), the *promise* of interpretation, as that which initiates and facilitates this formalism, remains absolutely necessary. At the theoretical level of ideology, the promise functions to confer legitimacy on Chancery proceedings: as even poor crazed Miss Flyte, in her confusion of the Last Judgment with the long-delayed judgment in her own case, is capable of revealing, the legal system must appeal for its authority to transcendent concepts of truth, justice, meaning, and ending, even when its actual work will be to hold these concepts in profitable abeyance or to redefine and contain them as functions of its own operations. And at the practical and technical level of such operations, the promise of judgment becomes the lure of advertising, extended by venalities such as Vholes to promote the purchase and exercise of their services.

Perhaps the most interesting effect of all produced by the promise, however, considerably exceeds these theoretical and practical functions. If Chancery exploits

the logic of a promise by perpetually maintaining it as *no more than such*, then the suit must obviously produce as much frustration as hopefulness. Accordingly, one consequence of a system that, as it engenders an interpretative project, simultaneously deprives it of all the requirements for its accomplishment is the desire for an interpretative project that would *not* be so balked. This desire is called into being from within the ground of a system that, it bears repeating, resists interpretation on two counts: because it cannot be localized as an object of interpretation, and because it is never willing to become the agency or subject of interpretation. What such a desire effectively seeks, therefore, is a reduced model of the untotizable system and a legible version of the undecidable suit. What such a desire calls for, in short, both as a concept and as a fact, is the detective story.

The detective story gives obscurity a name and a local habitation: in that highly specific “mystery” whose ultimate uncovering motivates an equally specific program of detection. If the Chancery system includes everything but settles nothing, then one way in which it differs from the detective story is that the latter is, precisely, a *story*: sufficiently selective to allow for the emergence of a narrative and properly committed, once one has emerged, to bringing it to completion. In relation to an organization so complex that it often tempts its subjects to misunderstand it as chaos, the detective story realizes the possibility of an easily comprehensible version of order. And in the face—or facelessness—of a system where it is generally impossible to assign responsibility for its workings to any single person or group of persons, where even the process of victimization seems capricious, the detective story performs a drastic simplification of power as well. For unlike Chancery, the detective story is fully prepared to affirm the efficacy and priority of personal agency, be it that of the criminal figures who do the work of concealment or that of the detective figures who undo it. It is not at all surprising, therefore, that the desire for the detective story first emerges from within the legal community itself, in Tulkinghorn and Guppy, since lawyers, having charge of the system, are most likely to be aware of the extent to which they merely convey a power which is theirs only to hold and not to have. It is entirely suitable that those who continually *exercise* this power—in the root sense, that is, of driving it on—should be the first to dream of *possessing* it, so that the calling of Mr. Tulkinghorn, for instance, “eke solicitor of the High Court of Chancery” (11), becomes “the acquisition of secrets and the holding possession of such power as they give him, with no sharer or opponent in it” (511). At the other end of the legal hierarchy (though not, one may be sure, for long), Mr. Guppy prepares for a similar vocation:

Mr. Guppy suspects everybody who enters on the occupation of a stool in Kenge and Carboy’s office, of entertaining, as a matter of course, sinister designs upon him. He is clear that every such person wants to depose him. If he be ever asked how, why, when, or wherefore, he shuts up one eye and shakes his head. On the strength of these profound views, he in the most ingenious manner takes infinite pains to counter-plot, when there is no plot; and plays the deepest games of chess without any adversary. (272)

Guppy's counter-plotting "when there is no plot" may be seen as the usefully paranoid attempt of an ambitious clerk to grasp the power of the legal system over him by turning everybody in it into his personal enemy. It may also be seen as the desperately fanciful effort of an otherwise bored office worker to overwrite the impersonal and inconsequential tedium of his tasks with lively dramas centered on himself. In either case, it suggests precisely the sense in which the non-narrative system of Chancery generates narratives both to grasp its evasiveness and equally to evade its grasp.

Yet within this perspective, one must register the general failure of the amateur detectives in *Bleak House* to impose a will to truth and power. Anecdotally, their stories all reach a final point of checkmate. Guppy's chance to lay his hands on the decisive evidence goes up in smoke with Krook; Tulkinghorn is murdered before he has quite decided how to make use of his discovery; and even Mrs. Snagsby is still "on the great high road that is to terminate in Mr. Snagsby's full exposure" (734) when Mr. Bucket is obliged to set her straight. These abortive endings, which effectively place the stories under the paradigm of the interminable Chancery suit, also carry "political" rebukes, as the detectives are denied the power to which their knowledge seemed to entitle them. Tulkinghorn's violent death at the hands of a woman over whom he had flaunted his control is the most dramatic example of such chastisement; but another is Guppy's rejection by Esther, the woman who initially inspired his detective work and who he hoped might reward it with her hand; and still another is the gentle but public reprimand that Mrs. Snagsby receives from Mr. Bucket. The profound reason for the anecdotal failure of these stories is that they are undertaken as individual projects. That individuality not only must debilitate the power of the will-to-power, but also qualifies the general validity of the production of truth. Even when the stories have more to go on than Mrs. Snagsby's—exemplary in its forced, false, but flawless coherence—, they are marred by an egocentricity that confers on them the epistemologically suspect tautology of wish-fulfillments. Just as Guppy's detection is part and parcel of his *arrivisme*, an ambitious attempt to enoble the woman of his choice and to win her gratitude for doing so, similarly, Tulkinghorn, who holds that women "are at the bottom of all that goes wrong in [the world]" (222), finds his sexual resentment justified in a story of female error and deceit. Even Mrs. Snagsby's fantasy that Jo has been illegitimately sired by her husband likewise satisfies her need to see herself as wronged, and so consolidates the basis of her domestic tyranny. It is not enough to say that, if the detective story is meant to be an individual rendition of an order and a power that are social and institutional in nature, then a great deal must be lost in the translation. For that loss to be registered as *its* loss, in its formal incompleteness, its cognitive inadequacy, and its political failure, what must also be asserted is the priority assumed by social and institutional categories over the individual projects that they will ultimately reabsorb.

Even as a failure, however, the project of detection enjoys a certain dangerous efficacy. For it fails in every respect except that of catching on. Its weakness as an individual enterprise becomes a demonstrable strength as the number of individuals undertaking it increases and it thereby acquires a certain social distribution and consistency. As a *common* individual project, detection poses a threat to the social and institutional orders that continue to doom it to failure as a single undertaking. From beginning to end, the project sanctions the unwholesomely deviate erotic desire that inspires it and that it releases into action. The unsavory sexual secrets in which this desire, having been liberated, is ultimately gratified, are themselves subversive of socially given arrangements. Regularly involving a double transgression, of class as well as conjugal boundaries, they give scandal to the twin unities that Dickens puts at the basis of a decent social order, family and station. To disclose these secrets, moreover, exacerbates their scandalous effects, as when what Mrs. Snagsby thinks she knows leads her to seek a marital separation, and what Tulkinghorn tells Lady Dedlock prompts her public flight. In a context where home and family are the chief bulwarks against drifting into the interminable circulations of Chancery Court, the kind of individuality implied and exfoliating in the project of detection must seem ultimately anarchic. Born, as Tulkinghorn's case makes particularly clear, when the law is taken into one's own hands, it gives birth to the familiar rivalrous, *sauve-qui-peut* world of which the tension between Tulkinghorn and Guppy is an early symptom, and in which the murderous personal arrogations of Mademoiselle Hortense are, though shocking, perfectly proper.

We begin to see why the detective narratives require to come under the management of a master-agency charged with the task both of suppressing their successes (in fostering extreme threats to social order) and also of supplying their failures (to provide a widely available, consoling simplification of this order). We begin to understand, in other words, the profound necessity of the police in *Bleak House*. Though Chancery Court, to make itself tolerable, produces a desire for the detective story, as for that which will confer on it the legibility of a traditionally patterned meaning, this desire, far from issuing in an order that can be comfortably proffered and consumed as the essence of the chaos that is Chancery's appearance, threatens to reduplicate such chaos in the yet more explicit form of social disaggregation. What keeps the production of this desire from being dangerously excessive—what in fact turns the dangerous excess back into profit—is that the detective story, following the same logic whereby it was produced among the effects of Chancery, produces among *its* effects the desire for its own authoritative version and regulatory agency. Out of control to the point that, at Tulkinghorn's murder, the very principle of sense-making appears to have gone “stark mad” (665), the detective story eventually asks to be arrested by the Detective Police.

Such regulation should not be seen purely as a repressive practice, involving, for instance, the capture of a murderer like Mademoiselle Hortense or a runaway like

Lady Dedlock. The police not only repress but also, profoundly, satisfy the desire to which Chancery gives rise. For in addition to doing the negative work of correcting for the socially undesirable consequences of amateur projects of detection, it performs the positive work of discharging for society as a whole the function that these amateur projects had assumed unsuccessfully: that of providing, within the elusive organization of Chancery, a simplified representation of order and power. The novel's shift in focus from Chancery Court to the Detective Police encompasses a number of concomitant shifts, which all operate in the direction of this simplification: from civil law and questions of liability to criminal law and less merely legal questions of guilt; from trivial legal hair-splitting to the urgency of the fact, beyond such disputing, of murder; from a cause with countless parties represented by countless attorneys in an anonymous system, to a case essentially reduced to two personal duels, between the criminal and his victim and between the criminal and the detective; from long, slow, to all appearances utterly inefficient procedures to swift and productive ones; and finally, from an institution which cannot justify its power to one which, for all the above reasons, quite persuasively can. It is as though every complaint that could be made about the one institution had been redressed in the organization of the other, so that one might even argue, on the basis of Dickens's notorious willingness to serve as a propagandist for the New Police, that the excruciating *longueurs* of Chancery existed mainly to create the market for Mr. Bucket's expeditious *coups*.¹⁰ Along these lines, one might even want to read, in the police activity that develops over the dead body of the law ("or Mr Tulkinghorn, one of its trustiest representatives" [305]), Dickens's exhilarated announcement of the agencies and practices of social discipline that, claiming to be merely supplementing the law, will come in large part to supplant it.¹¹ Yet to the extent that we stress, in the evident archaism of Chancery, the emergence of a new kind of bureaucratic organization, and in the blatantly modern Detective Police (instituted only ten years before the novel began to appear), a harkening back to a traditional and familiar model of power, then we need to retain the possibility that Dickens's New Police still polices, substantively as well as nominally, *for* the law, for the Chancery system, and that, as a representation, it serves a particular ideological function within this system, and not against it. Made so desirable as a sort of institutional "alternative" to Chancery, the police derive their ideological efficacy from providing, within a total system of power, *a representation of the containment of power*. The shift from Chancery to the police dramatically localizes the field, exercise, and agents of power, as well as, of course, justifies such power, which, confined to a case of murder and contained in a Mr. Bucket, occupies what we can now think of as the right side. And when the novel passes from adulatory wonder at the efficiency of the police to sad, resigned acknowledgment of its limits (such as emerges in Hortense's last exchange with Bucket), the circumscription of power, reaching the end to which it always tended, has merely come full circle.

III

The police thus allow for the existence of a field outside the dynamic of power and free from its effects. Once installed in this realmless realm, one could cease to internalize—as the desperate, hopeful psychology of compulsion—the lures of the Chancery system; from within it, one could bear witness to the possibility of a genuine criticism of that system, one that would no longer be merely the sign of the impossibility of withdrawing from it. Shifting focus from Chancery Court to the Detective Police, the novel works toward the recovery of this place elsewhere, in a two-pronged strategy whose other line of attack lies in Esther's absolute refusal to be touched by the suit and in the constitution of Bleak House that her refusal enables. For in point of fact the "outside" of power is specified as a domestic space, occupied by an ideal of the family. Not the least evil of the Chancery system in this respect was that, in it, police and family blurred into one another. As an apparatus of power concerned to impose, protect, and extend itself, Chancery naturally included a policing function, but it had the aspect of a family as well, not only because the suits that came before it arose from family disputes, but also because (as when it put its wards Ada and Richard under the guardianship of John Jarndyce) it sanctioned families of its own. In effect, the emergence of Bleak House on the one hand and Mr. Bucket (who, though Mrs. Bucket is as fond of children as himself, has none) on the other achieves the extrication of the family from the police, a disarticulation into separate domains of what it was a trick of Chancery's domination to have knitted seamlessly together.

We mustn't be surprised, however, if there is a trick to this new arrangement too—and perhaps a far better one. When Mr. Bucket escorts Mr. Snagsby through Tom-all-Alone's (much as Inspector Field took Dickens with him on his tours of duty), the detective's thoroughgoing knowledge of the place as well as the extreme deference shown to him by its inhabitants (who call him "master") indicate the degree to which the police have saturated the delinquent milieu. If the saturation doesn't appear to have much curtailed delinquency, or even, strangely, to have prevented Tom-all-Alone's from continuing to serve as a refuge for those wanted by the police, these perhaps were never the ends of police penetration. What such penetration indubitably does secure is an apparent containment of crime and power together, which both become visible mainly in a peripheral place, "avoided by all decent people" (220).¹² The *raison d'être* of Tom-all-Alone's is that it *be* all alone, as the text is prepared to admit when it speculates "whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company" (220). Yet the marginal localization of the police thus achieved is subjected to a dramatic ambiguity as soon as, beyond ensuring the circulation of vagrants like Jo or the apprehension of murderers who, doubly exotic, come from foreign parts and the servant class both, the police pass into the fashionable upper-class world of Chesney Wold or even the

just barely respectable shooting gallery of Mr. George. Though disturbed by Bucket's nighttime visit, heralded only by the glare of his bull's-eye, the denizens of Tom-all-Alone's are neither surprised nor shamed by what is evidently a very familiar occurrence. Compare their dull acceptance to Sir Leicester's appalled imagination:

Heaven knows what he sees. The green, green woods of Chesney Wold, the noble house, the pictures of his forefathers, strangers defacing them, officers of police coarsely handling his most precious heirlooms, thousands of fingers pointing at him, thousands of faces sneering at him. (743-44)

Compare it even to Mr. George's sharp mortification:

'You see . . . I have been handcuffed and taken into custody, and brought here. I am a marked and disgraced man, and here I am. My shooting-gallery is rummaged, high and low, by Bucket; such property as I have—'tis small—is turned this way and that, till it don't know itself . . .' (705)

The sense of scandal that informs both passages, even as it acknowledges that the police can break out of their limits to become a total, all-pervasive institution like Chancery, reinforces our perception of the boundaries that ordinarily keep them in their place. It qualifies the police intervention in either case as an exceptional state of affairs, warranted only by the exceptional circumstances that call it into being.

The representation of the police, then, is not just organized by a comforting principle of localization; it is also organized within the fear-inspiring prospect of *the possible suspension of this principle*. One may read the resulting ambiguity in the very character of Mr. Bucket. The fact that the representation of the police is virtually entirely confined to the portrayal of this one character is already revealing of the strategy of containment whereby the topic of the police is constituted. Chancery Court required dozens of lawyers in the attempt to represent it, and even then the attempt had always to remain unequal to a system whose essential anonymity resisted being seized as character. The police, however, can be adequately rendered in the character of a single one of its agents, and this fact, among others, makes it a superior institution. Whereas the law is impersonal and anonymous, the law enforcement is capable of showing a human face—if that is the word for the mechanically recurring tics and character-traits that caused Inspector Bucket to be received at the time of the novel's publication as one of Dickens's most "delightful" creations.¹³ Yet if police power is contained in Bucket, Bucket himself is *not* contained in the way that characters ordinarily are. A master of disguise, who makes himself appear in as "ghostly" a manner as, with a touch of his stick, he makes others "instantly evaporate" (308, 310), Bucket seems superhuman and his powers magical. To Mr. Snagsby, confused and impressed, he appears "to possess an unlimited number of eyes" (315); and Jo, in his ignorance and delirium, believes him "to be everywhere, and cognizant of everything" (639). With ironic reservations that only

refine the ambiguity, the narration even offers its own language in support of these baffled perceptions: “Time and place cannot bind Mr Bucket” (712), it tells us, and “nothing escapes him” (713).

Another way to bring out the ambiguity that invests the established limits of the police is to ask: on behalf of whom or what does the Detective Police do its policing? Answers in the text, accurately reflecting an historical ambiguity, are various. Bucket works now in the capacity of a private detective employed by individuals such as Tulkinghorn; now as the public official of a state apparatus that enjoins him, for instance, to secure Gridley for contempt of court; and now in some obscure combination of the two functions, as when, at the end, he seems to police simultaneously on behalf of society at large and at the behest of Sir Leicester Dedlock. In a sense, the progress toward the legitimacy of power that we read in the focal shift from Chancery to the Detective Police occurs within the representation of the police itself, which, at the beginning acting as the agent of an arbitrary system or an equally arbitrary individual will, acquires in the end—via murder and a missing person—the means of legitimizing the exercise of its power, even though this is still nominally in the hire of Sir Leicester. Yet this effort of the narrative sequence to legitimize the power of the police leaves looking all the more unresolved the question of their whereabouts, which are established in so many places, as so many indistinct, overlapping, competing jurisdictions, that they cease to seem established at all.

All the ambiguities about the police, of course, serve to establish a radical uncertainty in the nature of private, familial space. “As [Mr. Bucket] says himself, what is public life without private ties? He is in his humble way a public man, but it is not in that sphere that he finds happiness. No, it must be sought within the confines of domestic bliss” (675–76). But as we know, Bucket here maintains the difference between public (institutional) and private (domestic) spheres as part of a successful attempt to neutralize it. The difference on which he affably insists allows him to be welcomed into the Bagnet household, where at the proper moment—no longer as a new friend of the family, but now a public official—he can arrest their friend and guest Mr. George. Is the private sphere autonomous or not? The representation of the police in *Bleak House* permits us to answer the question either way: to insist, when this is necessary, on the elsewhere opened up by the localization of the police (who considerably police, among other things, their own limits); or to suggest, when this is desirable, the extent to which this elsewhere is constantly liable to being transgressed by the police. The police simultaneously produce and permeate (produce as permeable) the space they leave to be “free.”

If, therefore, we need to say that, in its representation of bureaucracy and the police, *Bleak House* regularly produces a difference between these institutions and the domestic space outside them, we must also recognize that it no less regularly produces this difference *as a question*, in the mode of the “problematic.” The bar of separation and even opposition that it draws between the two terms is now but-

tressed, now breached, firm and fragile by turns. On one hand, Chancery is a total system of domination, engendering resistances whose mere inversions or duplications of its injunctions only entrench its power more deeply. On the other hand, Chancery's domination seems to cease precisely at the points where one elects to erect bulwarks against it such as Esther's Bleak House. Or again: if the police represent a reduction of the domination of Chancery, and thus permit a domestic autonomy, it is also suggested that the police, as all-encompassing as Chancery, can at any moment abolish that autonomy. Or still again: the police are other, better than Chancery, but they are also the organ that polices on its behalf and thus works to preserve it. We cannot too strongly insist that these "paradoxes" are not merely confusions or historical contradictions that tug and pull at a text helpless to regulate them, but rather productive ambiguities that facilitate the disposition, functioning, and promotion of certain ideological effects, some of which we have already suggested. Neither, however, should "*Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens" be denounced—or congratulated—as the ultimate strategist of these effects, as though one could allow such effects their broad cultural resonance without also recognizing their broad cultural production and distribution. Yet if the novel no more "manipulates" the equivocations we have traced than "succumbs" to them, perhaps the most pertinent reason is that it lacks the distance from them required to do either. We shall see how, in the first place, these equivocations *are its own*, always already borne in the novel as a form; and also how, in the last instance, these equivocations *come to be its own*, as the novel reproduces in the relationship between form and content the dialectic that occurs within each of its terms.

IV

It would certainly appear as though the existence of that sheltered space which the novelistic representation labors to produce—but with, we have seen, such dubious results—is unconditionally taken for granted in the novel form, whose unfolding or consumption has never ceased to occur in such a space all along. Since the novel counts among the conditions for this consumption the consumer's leisured withdrawal to the private, domestic sphere, then every novel-reading subject is constituted—willy-nilly and almost before he has read a word—within the categories of the individual, the inward, the domestic. There is no doubt that the shift in the dominant literary form from the drama to the novel at the end of the seventeenth century had to do with the latter's superior efficacy in producing and providing for privatized subjects. The only significant attempt to transcend the individualism projected by the novel took place precisely in Victorian England as the practice of the *family reading*, which may be understood as an effort to mitigate the possible excesses of the novel written for individuals by changing the locus of reading from the study—or worse, the boudoir—to the hearth, enlivened but also consolidated as a *foyer d'intrigue*. A Victorian novel such as *Bleak House* speaks not merely for the

hearth, in its prudent care to avoid materials or levels of explicitness about them unsuitable for family entertainment, but from the hearth as well, implicitly grounding its critical perspective on the world within a domesticity that is more or less protected against mundane contamination.

Yet if only by virtue of the characteristic length that prevents it from being read in a single sitting, the novel inevitably enjoins not one, but several withdrawals to the private sphere. Poe, who first raised the issue of the effects of this length, considered the discontinuousness of novel-reading one of the liabilities of the form, which thereby had to forego “the immense benefit of *totality*.” In the novel state, Poe thought, the autonomy of “literary concerns” was always being frustrated by the foreign intervention of “worldly interests.”¹⁴ If, however, novel-reading presupposes so many disparate withdrawals to the private sphere, by the same token it equally presupposes so many matching returns to the public, institutional one. An important dimension of what reading a novel entails, then, would lie—outside the moment and situation of actual perusal—in the times and places that interrupt this perusal and render it in the plural, as a series. Just as we read the novel in the awareness that we must put it down before finishing it, so even when we are not reading it, we continue to “live” the form in the mode of *having to get back to it*. Phenomenologically, the novel form includes the interruptions that fracture the process of reading it. And the technical equivalent of this phenomenological interpenetration of literary and worldly interests would be the practice of various realisms, which, despite their manifold differences, all ensure that the novel is always centrally about the world one has left behind to read it and that the world to which one will be recalled has been reduced to attesting the truth (or falsehood) of the novel. It is not quite true, therefore, that the novel is simply concerned to attach us to individuality and domesticity, to privacy and leisure. What the form really secures is a close *imbrication* of individual and social, domestic and institutional, private and public, leisure and work. A drill in the rhythms of bourgeois industrial culture, the novel generates a nostalgic desire to get home (where the novel can be resumed) in the same degree as it inures its readers to the necessity of periodically renouncing home (for the world where the novel finds its justification and its truth). In reading the novel, one is made to rehearse how to live a problematic—always surrendered, but then again always recovered—privacy.

V

The same opposition—or at least the question of one—between private-domestic and social-institutional domains that is produced in the representation and consumed as the form occurs again in the relationship between the representation and the form. For though the form projects itself as a kind of home, what is housed in this home, as its contents, are not merely or even mainly comfortable domestic quarters, but also the social-institutional world at large. If the novel is substantially

to allege its otherness in relation to this world, and thus to vouch for its competence to survey, judge, and understand it, then far from seeking to be adequate or isomorphic to its contents (when these are carceral, disciplinary, institutional), it is instead obliged to defend itself against them by differentiating the practices of the world from the practices of representing it. The current critical fondness for assimilating form and content (via homologies, thematizations, *mises-en-abyme*) becomes no more than a facile sleight-of-hand if it does not face the complication it in fact encounters in the question of the difference between the two that the novel regularly raises.¹⁵ Specifically, as I hope to show in a moment, *Bleak House* is involved in an effort to distinguish its own enormous length from the protractedness of the Chancery suit, and also its own closure from the closed case of the Detective Police. But even remaining at a general and fundamental level, we can see the difference imposing itself in the fact that, for instance, while the world of *Bleak House* is dreary enough, yet were the novel itself ever to become as dreary, were it ever to cease *making itself desirable*, it would also be the same token cease to be read. Pleasurably, at our leisure and in our homes, we read the novel of suffering, the serious business of life, and the world out-of-doors. Moreover, the critical and often indignant attitude that *Bleak House*, by no means untypically, takes toward its social world reinforces this “erotic” difference with a cognitive one: the novel views the world in better, more clear-sighted and disinterested ways than the world views itself.

The suit in *Bleak House* has only to be mentioned for its monstrous length to be observed and censured. “Jarndyce and Jarndyce still drags its dreary length before the Court, perennially hopeless” (4). The suit is not merely long, but—here lies the affront—excessively so, longer than it is felt it ought to be. Yet what Dickens calls the “protracted misery” of the suit (54)—by which he means the misery of its protractedness as well as vice versa—cannot be explained merely as the consequence of gratuitous *additions* to a necessary and proper length, left intact, which they simply inordinately “pad.” One of the ill effects of the length of the suit has been precisely to render unavailable the reality of a proper measure, of which the suit could be seen as an unwarranted expansion and to which it would be theoretically possible to restore it by some judicious abridgment. The further the length of the suit is elaborated, the more it abandons any responsibility to the *telos* or finality that originally called it forth, nominally continues to guide it even now, and would ultimately reabsorb it as the pathway leading to its own achievement. And along with the *formality* of an ending—the juridical act of decision—, what would constitute the *substance* of one is concomitantly put in jeopardy: namely, the establishment of the meaning of the original will. So nearly intertwined are ending and meaning that to adjourn the one seems to be to abjure the other: “This scarecrow of a suit has, in course of time, become so complicated that no man alive knows what it means” (4).

The suit’s effective suspension of teleology is, of course, scandalously exemplary of a whole social sphere that seems to run on the principle of a purposiveness without purpose. The principle is enunciated and enforced not only by the bureaucratic

officials who, when Jo is sick, “must have been appointed for their skill in evading their duties, instead of performing them” (432), but even by the various policemen in the novel who enjoin Jo to “move on” in his perpetually maintained, displaced itinerary to nowhere. Internalized, it emerges as character defects: the long-windedness of Chadband, the aestheticism of Skimpole (who begins sketches “he never finished”), the flightiness of Richard. Such instances, however, in which the sense of an ending seems entirely given up are no more symptomatic of the general social suspension of finality than the abstract impatience and hopeful voluntarism with which the sense of an ending is merely imposed on a state of affairs which must thereby be misunderstood. Miss Flyte is mad to expect a judgment “shortly,” and Richard is certainly on the way to madness when, choplogically, he argues that “the longer [the suit] goes on, . . . the nearer it must be to a settlement one way or other” (182). In the progress of Hegelian Spirit, “the length of this path has to be endured because, for one thing, each moment is necessary” to the emergence of the result;¹⁶ whereas, in the mere ongoingness of the un-Hegelian suit, any attempt to make sense of this length as a necessity, or in terms of the end-orientation which it formally retains but from which it has substantially removed itself, brings those who make it to madness. Finally, however, to recognize that the length of the suit is devoid of necessity is true only in terms of an eventual judgment. Just as the inefficiency of power in Chancery showed up from another standpoint as the power of inefficiency, so too what are on one perspective the superfluous, self-subversive elongations of procedure become on another the necessary developments of a power that—call it the English law—has for its one great principle “to make business for itself” (548). Accordingly, the delays and remands that amount to an effective suspension of its declared end should not be seen to debilitate Chancery, but rather to allow one to take it seriously as—in Dickens’s facetious phrase from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41)—“the long and strong arm of the law.”¹⁷

In light of the fact that the novel about this long arm itself exercises a considerable reach—that the representation of length goes on *at* length too—, we are invited to consider the extent to which the novel runs the risk of resembling the Chancery suit that it holds in despite. Certainly, the unfolding of the novel could be thought to parallel the elaboration of the suit insofar as it threatens an analogous failure to bring its ever more abundant materials to a proper or conceivably adequate summation. We already noted how the long novel foregoes “the immense benefit of *totality*” because it cannot be read at a single sitting; but even if we were to export to the nineteenth century the anachronism of a “speed-reader,” Victorian practices of distributing the novel-product would still render the interruptedness of reading all but inevitable. Serial publication necessarily barred the reader from ever having full physical possession of the text he was reading until he was almost done with it; and even once the novel was published in volume form as a “three-decker,” the ordinary subscription to the circulating libraries (which provided the majority of readers with their access to it) allowed to a borrower only one volume at a time. These determina-

tions are of course merely external, but they are fully matched by the compositional principles of discontinuity and delay that organize the form from within its own structure: not only in the formal breaks of chapters, installments, volumes, but also in the substantive shifts from this plot-line to that, or from one point of view or narration to another; and generally in the shrewd administration of suspense that keeps the novel always tending toward a denouement that is continually being withheld. In Dickens, of course, the fissured and diffused character of novel form is far more marked than in the work of any of his contemporaries, extending from the extraordinary multitude of memorably disjunct characters, each psychologically sealed off from understanding another, to the series of equally disparate and isolated spaces across which they collide. And, like the larger structure of suspense, even individual sentences will frequently derive their effects from the lengths to which they will go in withholding predication.¹⁸ No doubt, both as a system of distribution and as a text, the Victorian novel establishes a little bureaucracy of its own, generating an immense amount of paperwork and both physically and mentally sending its readers here, there, backward and forward, like the circumlocutory agencies that Dickens satirizes. On this basis, it could be argued that, despite or by means of its superficially hostile attitude toward bureaucracy, a novel like *Bleak House* is profoundly concerned to train us—as, at least since the eighteenth century, play usually trains us for work—in the sensibility for inhabiting the new bureaucratic, administrative structures.

This of course would be to neglect what Roland Barthes has identified as the “readerly” orientation of the traditional novel: the tendency of its organization to knit its discontinuities together by means of codes such as those ordering our perception of plot and suspense.¹⁹ If *Bleak House* baffles us in the first few hundred pages by featuring a profusion of characters who seem to have nothing to do with one another, a miscellany of events whose bearing on a possible plot is undecidable, and even two separate systems of narration that are unequal and unrelated, it simultaneously encourages us to anticipate the end of bafflement and the acquisition of various structures of coherence: in the revelation or development of relationships among characters; in the emergence of a plot whereby the mysteries of the text will be enlightened and its meanings fully named; and in the tendency of the two narrations to converge, as Esther’s account comes to include characters and information that at first appeared exclusively in the anonymous one. In other words, the novel dramatizes the liabilities of fragmentation and postponement within the hopeful prospect that they will eventually be overcome. We consume the enormous length of a novel like *Bleak House* in the belief that it is eminently digestible—capable, that is, of being ultimately rendered in a readerly *digest*: a final abridgment of plot and character which stands for—and so dispenses with—all that came before it. From the standpoint of this promised end, the massive bulk of the novel will always have concealed the perfectly manageable and unmonstrous proportions of a much shorter, tauter form.

Yet however sustained, the mere promise of an ending, far from being sufficient to differentiate the novel from Chancery, would positively enlarge on the analogy between the novel's practices and those of the Court, which also entices its subjects by means of promises, promises. We read the novel under the same assumption as Richard makes about the suit, that "the longer it goes on, . . . the nearer it must be to a settlement"; and if the assumption is to be validated in the one case as it is discredited in the other, the novel is under obligation to make good its promise by issuing in judgments and resolutions. For even if we always know about the novel (as we do not about the suit) that its length is finite, involving only so many pages or installments, the vulgar evidence of an endpoint can never amount to the assurance of an *ending*: that is, the presence of a complex of narrative summations that would match or motivate the external termination of discourse with its internal closure. The suit, which attains an endpoint but no ending, embodies the distinction that the novel, to be different, will have to obliterate. Though the suit reaches a point at which it is correctly declared "over for good" (865), this point is determined extrinsically by the lack of funds that prevents the protracted, complex cause from being pursued to a proper conclusion of its own. "Thus the suit lapses and melts away" (867), instead of coming to the judgment that would have constituted a proper internal resolution. It is never known, for instance, whether the new will is a genuine document, and the project of finding out has been "checked—brought up suddenly" upon what Conversation Kenge retains sufficient professional finesse to term the "threshold" (866).

In a pointed and self-serving contrast, the novel brings its characters to judgment, its mysteries to solution and its plots to issues that would make further narrative superfluous. Immediately following the end of the suit, as a sort of consequence and reversal of it, Richard's death illustrates the contrast. Insofar as this death is premature, of course, it may look as though Richard will merely reenact the abrupt check of the suit. Juridical discourse has ceased not because it has said what it wanted to say, but only for lack of funds to say it; and similarly, Richard's utterance is simply "stopped by his mouth being full of blood" (868). But what is staged on the scene of Richard's deathbed is in fact his full recovery. In the paradoxical logic of nineteenth-century novelistic closure, whereby one sums up by subtracting, Richard is purged of unsteadiness and suspicion and so made whole. Whereas the suit ends as up in the air as ever it was, Richard's end achieves a fundamental clarification: "the clouds have cleared away, and it is bright now" (869). His tearful recognition that John Jarndyce, whom he mistrusted, is "a good man" renders him once more a good man himself. And his desire to be removed to the new Bleak House ("I feel as if I should get well there, sooner than anywhere") announces the redemptive turn from public institutional involvements to the domestic haven. As a result, even his death—no longer premature, but occurring only *after* the resolution of his character has been attained—bears witness to the seriousness of his conversion by making it permanent, the last word possible about him.

Unlike Chancery, then, the novel is willing to reward the patience that, like Chancery, it has required. The destiny of the long-suffering Esther is only the most obvious figure for the link the novel everywhere secures between the practice of patience and its pay-off. In the reader's case, the link is affirmed each time he gets an answer to one of the questions or riddles he has endured; each time he enjoys the jubilation of recognizing a character who has appeared earlier; each time a new installment comes out to reward his month-long wait for it. It isn't Esther alone in *Bleak House* who is extraordinarily self-deprecating and diffident in the face of authority, be it the heavenly Father in whom "it was so gracious . . . to have made my orphan way so smooth and easy," or simply John Jarndyce, to whom she declares: "I am quite sure that if there were anything I ought to know, or had any need to know, I should not have to ask you to tell it to me. If my whole reliance and confidence were not placed in you, I must have a hard heart indeed" (27, 99). The novel puts every reader in an equally subservient position of reliance upon the author, who, if one waits long enough (as, given the nature of the readerly text, one cannot but do), will delight us with the full revelation of his design, offering the supreme example of those happy surprises that Dickens's benevolent father-figures are fond of providing for those they patronize. Still less obviously, the novel develops our trust in the machinery of distribution itself, which can, for instance, be counted upon to provide the next installment at exactly the interval promised. In short, the novel encourages a series of deferential cathexes—all the more fundamental for being unconscious—onto various instances of authority. What is promoted in the process is a paternalism that, despite the dim view the novel takes of the power-structures of the British state, can only be useful in maintaining such structures. To submit to the novel's duration is already to be installed within an upbeat ethic of endurance. If, as we speculated above, the novel trains us to abide in Chancery-like structures—by getting us to wait, as it were, in its very long lines—, it does this only insofar as it is organized as a *reformed* Chancery, a Chancery that can moralize its procrastinations in a practice of delayed gratification. Recklessly, the Court demanded an attendance so futile that it inspired dangerously anarchistic fantasies of destruction. More prudently, the novel, urging us to wait, also promises (to use the very formula of prudence) that we shall wait *and see*.

VI

Though it goes to great lengths, *Bleak House* also goes to extremities to save these lengths from lapsing into the mere unproductive extensions of the Chancery suit. Or rather, it saves them from such a fate *at* the extremities, or end-parts, in the production of a closure. Even so the novel cannot yet be considered to have won free of public, institutional attachments. For the very closure that secures a formal narrative difference between the novel and bureaucracy simultaneously implicates the novel in a formal narrative resemblance to the institution that has played a sort

of rival to the bureaucracy, the police. It is clear that the difference that obtains between Chancery and the novel applies equally in the relationship between Chancery and the police. In determining its own closure as revelation and fixed repose, the novel appears to have rejected the conception of termination proper to bureaucracy only to espouse that proper to the police. The closural specimen that takes place, for example, at Richard's death-bed, even if it begins as though it will merely reflect the bureaucratic logic of lapse, achieves a permanent clarification of his character that rather subsumes the scene under the police model of closure as a double (cognitive and practical) apprehension. It can be further argued that, as it arouses a desire for expeditious, conclusive solutions, but only represents a single agency capable of providing them, the novel subtly identifies the reader's demand for closure with a general social need for the police, thus continuing (with only a considerable increase of cunning) the apologetics for the new forces of order that Dickens began as an essayist in *Household Words*.

The novel, however, is just as little anxious to appear an agency of the police as it was to resemble a relay of the Chancery system. The relatively friendly treatment that *Bleak House* accords to the Detective Police is qualified by a number of reservations about the nature and effects of its power. Most of these, like the other aspects of the police, are carried in the characterization of Inspector Bucket. His black clothes, linking him sartorially with Tulkinghorn and Vholes, darken his character as well with an association to the Court; and like the undertaker to whose costume this dress also makes allusion, Bucket induces an ambivalence even in those he works for. Depending on the regularity of corruption, his profession has the doubly offensive aspect of a speculation on human weakness that happens also to be invariably justified. Yet the grief betokened by "the great mourning ring on his little finger" (310) might as well take Bucket himself for its object as any of his clients. His nature subdued to what it works in, Bucket too may be counted among the victims of crime. "Pour bien faire de la police," Napoleon is supposed to have said, "il faut être sans passion." The moral horror of crime, which Dickens preserves (among other things) in his sensationalistic treatment of it, must be irrelevant—might even be counterproductive—to the professional dispassion required for the task of apprehending the criminal. This task may no doubt be considered itself a moral one. But the game function of detection thoroughly dominates whatever ethical ends it presumably serves; and, as Bucket himself can assure Sir Leicester, his profession has placed him utterly beyond the possibility of being scandalized:

' . . . I know so much about so many characters, high and low, that a piece of information more or less, don't signify a straw. I don't suppose there's a move on the board that would surprise me; and as to this or that move having taken place, why my knowing it is no odds at all; any possible move whatever (provided it's in a wrong direction) being a probable move according to my experience. . . .' (726)

The ethical perspective survives only in the faint melancholy with which Bucket, truly the "modern prince" in this respect, appears to regret the necessity of his own

pessimism; or in the personal askesis that, when every consequence of desire proves criminal, is perhaps the only humane response remaining. Nonetheless, the melancholy is hardly sufficient to prevent him from eliciting the very weaknesses that are the object of its contemplation. The momentary collaboration between Skimpole and Bucket revealed at the end of the novel, an alliance of two species of moral indifference, throws no more discredit on the aesthete who delivers a dangerously ill child over to the police for no better reason than a bribe, than on the officer who extends the bribe for no better reason than to cover his client's prying. Even the askesis surrenders its moral truth to the extent that it is the very evidence of Bucket's amoral professionalization. As Tulkinghorn's fate exemplifies, amateur detectives run amok because they are motivated by personal desires for possession. Renunciation is thus for the professional detective a positive qualification, much as what Bucket appears to lament as his barren marriage shows a clear profit as an amicable and highly efficient business partnership.

These reservations are most tellingly inscribed in the novel as a narrative difference, once again centering on the question of ending, between the novel and the detective story that it includes. According to what will later be codified as the "classical" model, the detective story in *Bleak House* reaches its proper end when Bucket, having provided a complete and provable account of her guilt, arrests Mademoiselle Hortense for Tulkinghorn's murder. In the classical model, one may observe, though the security of its preferred decor, the locked room, is regularly breached, it is also invariably recovered in the detective's unassailable *reconstruction* of the crime. And similarly, in this not yet quite classical example, Bucket's ironclad case against Hortense may be understood as the reparation of Tulkinghorn's tragically vulnerable chambers. Yet if one tradition, the detective story, violates its closed rooms only to produce better defended versions of them in the detective's closed cases, another tradition, let us call it the Novel, violates even these cases. In this latter tradition, to which *Bleak House* ultimately bears allegiance, there is no police case so flawless that a loophole cannot be found through which its claims to closure may be challenged. Here our vision of the loophole is supplied by Mlle. Hortense:

'Listen then, my angel,' says she, after several sarcastic nods. 'You are very spiritual. But can you restore him back to life?'

Mr Bucket answers, 'Not exactly.'

'That is droll. Listen yet one time. You are very spiritual. Can you make an honourable lady of Her?'

'Don't be so malicious,' says Mr Bucket.

'Or a haughty gentleman of *Him*?'' cries Mademoiselle, referring to Sir Leicester with ineffable disdain. 'Eh! O then regard him! The poor infant! Ha! ha! ha!'

'Come, come, why this is worse Parlaying than the other,' says Mr Bucket. 'Come along.'

'You cannot do these things? Then you can do as you please with me. It is but the death, it is all the same. Let us go, my angel. Adieu you old man, grey. I pity you, and I des-pise you!' (743)

Hortense enumerates the various existential problems that, outlasting Bucket's solution, make it seem trivial and all but inconsequential. Her purely verbal qualification is soon worked into the actual plot when Bucket sets out in search of Lady Dedlock and finds her dead body instead. However skillfully prosecuted, the work of detection appears capable only of attaining to a shell from which the vital principal has departed. Other closural moments in *Bleak House* similarly 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. In its ostentatious awareness of this failure, the novel defines its relationship to the materials of police fiction that it has adopted. On one side of this relationship there would be a detective story whose shallow solution naively gratifies our appetite for closure; on the other, there would be a Novel which, insisting at the very moment of solution on the insoluble, abiding mysteriousness of human and literary experience, provides superior nourishment by keeping us hungry.²⁰ Not to be identified with Chancery, the novel contrasts the aimless suspension of the suit with the achievement of its own ending; but not to be confused with the police either, it counters the tidy conclusion of the case with a conspicuous recognition of all that must elude any such achievement. If in the first instance, the novel must affirm the possibility of closure, in the second it is driven to admit the *inadequacy* of this closure.

In the end, then,—precisely there—the novel's attempt to differentiate its own narrative procedures from those of the institutions it portrays falters, and the effort to disentangle itself from one institution only implicates it once again in another. So the seemingly perverse pattern continues wherein the novel is eager to produce a sheltered space whose integrity it is equally willing to endanger. We have seen how the novel establishes the opposition between the private-domestic and the social-institutional (1) within the representation, as the contrast between Esther's Bleak House and Chancery, and between the former and the police; (2) as a formal practice of consumption, in which the novel-reading subject shuttles to and fro between the home in which the novel is read and the world in which it is verified; and (3) at the intersection of the novel's own representational practice with the represented practice of institutions that it includes in its content. We have also seen how, in every instance, the opposition is accompanied by the possibility that it may be, or have been, nullified. At the same time as the existence of an "outside" to institutional power is affirmed, that very affirmation is undercut with doubt.

Yet to describe the novel's rhetorical operation in this way, as the work of de-structuration and subversion, is to identify it wholly with what is in fact only its negative moment.²¹ We need to envision the positivity of this operation too, for what is put in question has also by the same token been put in place, and can be put to use as well. The ideological dividends paid in the difference between the "inside" and the "outside" of power are clear. The "outside" gives the assurance of liberty that makes tolerable the increasingly total administration of the "inside" and helps avoid

a politicization of society as a whole. It also provides an authentically critical space from which amendments and reforms useful to this administration can be effectively broached and imposed. As we began by observing, however, *Bleak House* troubles the straightforwardness of this difference, which it transforms into the question of a difference. What, then, are the ideological dividends paid in *bringing the difference in question*? A full answer would have to inquire into a whole range of practices whereby our culture has become increasingly adept in taking benefit of doubt.²² But we can provide the synecdoche of an answer by turning in conclusion to the specific practice that, though we have seen it continually emerge both as an effect of various institutions and as the term of sundry oppositions, we have stopped short of considering in itself. Yet it is the practice that *Break House* is most concerned to promote: the practice of the family.

VII

Even in what otherwise would be her triumph, when the recognition of her merit has assumed public proportions, Esther Summerson retains her modest blindfold: “The people even praise Me as the doctor’s wife. The people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed. I owe it all to him, my love, my pride! They like me for his sake, as I do everything I do in life for his sake” (880). And to Allan’s affirmation that she is prettier than ever she was, she can only respond:

I did not know that; I am not certain that 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 ever was seen; and that they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—. (880)

Just as earlier Esther could barely speak of Allan, or her desire for him, so now, at the moment this desire is returned, she can only stammer. With her unfinished sentence, *Bleak House* “ends.” Though one easily supplies what Esther keeps from saying (“even supposing I have my beauty back”), the modesty that consigns this assertion to silence is, to the last, radically inconclusive. Like woman’s work, which is the external means to Esther’s social recognition, the labors of modesty, its inner correlative, are never done.

What might be a matter for grief or grievance, however, as Esther’s “neurotic” inability to relinquish her self-doubt in the hour of success, also means that the energy that has gone into consolidating and sustaining one Bleak House after another will not be dissipated in the complacency of enjoyment or relaxation. The text has posed the origin of Esther’s self-doubt in the question of her proper place in a family structure (her illegitimacy), and this origin has shaped her tacit ambition to install herself securely within such a structure. Given a twist, however, by the psychology of modesty through which it is obliged to pass, the ambition attains to a

frustration that is exactly proportionate to its achievements. Esther never ceases to earn her place, as though, were she to do so, she might even at the end be displaced from it. Yet there is a twist to the frustration too, as Esther's endless modesty finds its non-neurotic social validation in the family that, no less precarious than her own sense of identity, requires precisely such anxious and unremitting devotion for its survival. Or, as these relations might be generally summarized: the insecurity of the family subject is indispensable to counter the instability of the family structure, of which it is an effect.

The instability of the family, therefore, is constitutive of its very maintenance. As Jacques Donzelot has shown, the nineteenth-century family develops within two registers, which he calls *contract* and *tutelage*. Contract indicates the free and easy family autonomy ensured through "the observance of norms that guarantee the social usefulness of [its] members"; whereas tutelage designates the system of "external penetration" of the family, transformed into an object of surveillance and discipline. The two registers are positive and negative dimensions of a single policy of incentive: if the family satisfactorily performs its social tasks, then it is granted the liberty and autonomy of contract; but should it fail to pay back the privileges thereby conferred upon it in the proper accomplishment of responsibilities, then it must fall back into the register of tutelage.²³

With these two registers, one can correlate the two causes that Dickens's novels regularly ascribe to the faultiness of the family: on one hand, the external interference of institutions that (like the workhouse in *Oliver Twist*) dislocate and disjoin the family; and on the other, the internal dynamic that (as exemplified in *Oliver Twist* by Monks's Oedipal and sibling rivalry) determines its own divisions and displacements. If the first cause amounts to a demand for contract, the second is a concession to the necessity of tutelage. The theme of outside interference bears a message to society at large to reform its institutions in the interest of preserving the only natural and naturally free space within it. (The argument is never free from the utilitarianism that Dickens's sentimentality about the family rationalizes rather than resists. The novels continually imply the family's advantages over other agencies in producing acceptable citizens of the liberal state both in quantitative terms—as its greater economy—and in qualitative ones—as the superiority of the bonds between its members.) The theme of internal disruption, on the other hand, addresses its message to the family itself, which had better do its utmost to stay together or else face the misery of being dispersed or colonized by remedial institutions. In the first instance, Dickens advises society to police for the family, which would thereby be safeguarded as the home of freedom; in the second, he counsels the family to police itself, that it might remain free by becoming its own house of correction. The two apparently incompatible themes, informing the representation of the family throughout Dickens's work, are in fact complementary. Likewise, the "practical" recommendations attached to each find their mutual coherence precisely in the way that they cancel one another out. For if society reformed itself so that state institu-

tions would, if not wither away, become minimal and humane, then there would no longer exist an outside threat to consolidate the family in the face of its internal dangers; and to the extent that the family could successfully repress these dangers itself, it would only reproduce such institutions in their worst aspects. With the disappearance of social discipline, the emancipated family would prove in greater need of it than ever; and in the enjoyment of its unobstructed independence, it would restore the discipline from which it was meant as an asylum, either in its own practice or in that of the institutions that would inevitably make their reappearance upon its breakdown.

Neither the social nor the familial “policing of the family,” therefore, can be carried very far without giving rise to the very regimentation it was supposed to curtail. In this respect at least, Dickens’s vigorous reformism makes better sense as an undeclared defense of the status quo: the social recommendations would merely be the weights (like most weights, not meant to be carried very far) to preserve the family in its present delicate balance. For the family’s freedom is founded in the possibility of its discipline, and thus to enjoy the former means to have consented to the latter. Esther’s insecurity, we said, works to oppose the instability of the family structure from which it results. It supplies the constant vigilance wanted to keep the contractual family from lapsing into the subjection of tutelage. It is equally true, however, that Esther’s insecurity *confirms* the family in its faultiness. In the same degree as it propagates the worry and anxiety needed to maintain the family, it keeps alive the ever-present danger of its fall. The novel everywhere publishes the same fear of falling and implies the same urgency about holding one’s place. The “outside” of power regularly incurs the risk that it may be annexed—or worse, may already have been annexed—by the “inside.” So, for instance, the family will sometimes be shown for only a slight modulation of Chancery bureaucracy (comfortably domesticated with the Jellybys), or of the police (one of whose different voices can be heard in Mrs. Pardiggle, the “moral Policeman” who regiments her own family in the same spirit she takes others “into custody” [107]). And the risk touches us more nearly than do these unadmirable characters, for even the excellent Bagnets rely on an explicitly military order, and Esther herself may be only better directed than Mrs. Jellyby when she sits at her desk “full of business, examining trademen’s books, adding up columns, paying money, filing receipts, and . . . making a great bustle about it” (122). Envisioning the family now as a firm counterweight to social institutions, now as a docile function of them, here as the insuperable refuge from the carceral, there as the insufferable replica of it, the novel poses the question of the family, which it thereby designates as the object of struggle. Rather as Esther takes up this question as the necessity of founding and keeping Bleak House, so the novel extends the question to its readers, both as a principle of hope and an exhortation, as it were, to work at home. Mr. Bagnet’s famous catchword formulates what is no less the objective than the condition of the family in Dickens’s representation of it: “Discipline”—within the domestic circle as well as outside it—“must be maintained.”

VIII

Queen Victoria confided to her diaries: “I never feel quite at ease or at home when reading a Novel.”²⁴ *Bleak House* makes itself as anxiogenic and incomplete as the home with which it identifies. For in an age in which productivity is valued at least as much as the product, the novel must claim no less the inadequacy than the necessity of closure. This inadequacy can now be understood—not in the old-fashioned way, as a failure of organic form, nor even in the new-fashioned way, as the success of a failure of organic form—but, in the broader context of institutional requirements and cultural needs, as the novel’s own “work ethic,” its imposing refusal of rest and enjoyment. Certainly, reading this novel, though in the reasons of the hearth it finds its own reason for being, one never feels quite at home; perhaps, having finished it, one knows why one never *can* feel at home. For what now is home—not securely possessed in perpetuity, but only leased from day to day on payment of continual exertions—but a House? And what is this House—neither wholly blackened by the institutions that make use of its cover, nor wholly bleached of their stain—but (in the full etymological ambiguity of the word) irresolvably Bleak? “Bleak House has an exposed sound” (68).

Notes

1. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 95 and 94. For a more ample account of the novel along the lines sketched out here, see D. A. Miller, “The Novel and the Police,” *Glyph 8* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 129–33.
2. Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 7. For all future citations from the novel, page references to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.
3. John Forster, in an unsigned review for the *Examiner* (October 8, 1853): 643–45; reprinted in Philip Collins, ed., *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), p. 291.
4. George Brimley, in an unsigned review, *Spectator* (September 24, 1853), 36: 923–25; reprinted in Collins, p. 283.
5. An euphoric account of the destiny of Victorian bureaucracy may be found in David Roberts, *The Victorian Origins of the Welfare State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961). For a detailed treatment of Dickens’s attitude toward the Detective Police, see the relevant chapter in Philip Collins’s invaluable study, *Dickens and Crime*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1964).
6. I have in mind the tradition founded in Louis Althusser, “A Letter on Art,” *Lenin and Philosophy*, translated by Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 221–27, and elaborated in Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, translated by Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978). Althusser’s claim that art performs an “internal distanciation” on ideology in the course of representing it

(“Letter,” p. 222) receives its working-through in the theory and practical criticism of Macherey, for whom “the finished literary work . . . reveals the gaps in ideology” by “specifically literary means” (*Literary Production*, pp. 60, 238). The best example of this tradition in English (and also the most relevant to the work in progress here) is Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: New Left Books, 1976). In the chapter called “Ideology and Literary Form,” which includes a discussion of Dickens and other nineteenth-century English novelists, “ideology” (*qua* “organicism”) once again provides the principle of coherence that “literary form” once again brings into disarray: “In English literary culture of the past century, the ideological basis of organic form is peculiarly visible, as a progressively impoverished bourgeois liberalism attempts to integrate more ambitious and affective ideological modes. In doing so, that ideology enters into grievous conflicts which its aesthetic forms betray in the very act of attempted resolution” (p. 161). In all cases, the category of artistic form remains where bourgeois aesthetics used to situate it: beyond social tensions or, what comes to the same, invariably on the right side of the struggle.

7. A first, but decisive expression of this view is given in J. Hillis Miller’s introduction to *Bleak House*, by Charles Dickens (Penguin, 1971), pp. 11–34.
8. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 104.
9. Trollope, the only other major Victorian novelist to take up the subject of bureaucracy, offers us a similar perception in *The Three Clerks* (1858), where the new system of competitive examinations introduced by the Civil Service Reform inspires one of the examiners with the definitive dream of bureaucracy: to turn the end it serves into the means of its own expansion. “Every man should, he thought, be made to pass through some ‘go.’ The greengrocer’s boy should not carry out cabbages unless his fitness for cabbage-carrying had been ascertained, and till it had also been ascertained that no other boy, ambitious of the preferment, would carry them better.” Anthony Trollope, *The Three Clerks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 128.
10. Frequently drawn from the end of the eighteenth century to our own day, the contrast between the delay of the law and the dispatch of the police typically emerges (as here in Dickens) on the side of the police. A *locus classicus*: “Entourée de formes qu’elle ne trouve jamais assez multipliées, la justice n’a jamais pardonné à la police sa rapidité. La police, affranchie de presque toutes les entraves, n’a jamais excusé dans la justice, ses lenteurs; les reproches qu’elles se font mutuellement, la Société les fait souvent à l’une ou à l’autre. On reproche à la police d’inquiéter l’innocence, à la justice de ne savoir ni prévenir, ni saisir le crime . . .” Joseph Fouché, Minister of Police, in a circular addressed to the prefects of France, 30 Brumaire, Year VIII; quoted in Henry Buisson, *La Police, son histoire* (Vichy: Imprimerie Wallon, 1949), p. 167.
11. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), esp. pp. 222–23.
12. In installing criminals and police in the same seat—the conspicuous and closed world of delinquency—Dickens follows what was routine practice throughout the popular literature of the nineteenth century. To quote from a single, but highly influential example: “Le quartier du Palais de Justice, très circonscrit, très surveillé, sert pourtant d’asile ou de rendez-vous aux malfaiteurs de Paris. N’est-il pas étrange, ou plutôt fatal, qu’une irrésistible attraction fasse toujours graviter ces criminels autour du formidable tribunal qui les condamne à la prison, au bagne, à l’échafaud!” Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères de Paris* [1843], 4 vols. (Paris: Editions Hallier, 1977), vol. 1, p. 15.
13. See the editor’s summary of the Victorian reception of *Bleak House* in Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 273.

14. Edgar Allan Poe, "Tale-Writing—Nathaniel Hawthorne," in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allen Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols. (New York: George D. Sproul, 1902), vol. 13, p. 153.
15. Even critics who propose an immediate identification of form and content in *Bleak House* are in practice compelled to acknowledge that the novel itself resists their enterprise. J. Hillis Miller's claim that "*Bleak House* has exactly the same structure as the society it exposes" has frequent recourse to concessive clauses that make allowance for "Dickens's generous rage against injustice, selfishness and procrastination" or his "sympathy for Gridley's indignant outrage" against the Chancery system (Introduction, pp. 29, 27). And Terry Eagleton, for whom the novel is "obliged to use as aesthetically unifying images the very social contradictions . . . which are the object of [Dickens's] criticism," is quite happy to register the "contradictory" nature of the unity thus established (*Criticism and Ideology*, p. 129). Yet since both critics only recognize the difference between the novel and its world in the process of annulling it, they never permit themselves to consider seriously the *question* of the difference, and each is finally willing to pass off as a weakness of the text what is only a weakness in his account of it. In Miller's argument, in the absence of further treatment, evidence of the difference goes only to show that Dickens was curiously inconsistent. And in Eagleton, such evidence would merely point to a text that is, to use his own expressive phrase about *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), "self-divided and twisted by the very contradictions it vulnerably reproduces" (*Criticism and Ideology*, p. 127). Yet when, as it begins to appear, the difference between novel and world belongs to a series of analogous differences operating in the novel at several levels, then in dismissing the difference as an inconsequence or laying it to rest as a contradiction, we neglect a crucial aspect of the novel's own program, a central feature of its self-definition.
16. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 17.
17. Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 553.
18. For example: "Jostling against clerks going to post the day's letters, and against counsel and attorneys going home to dinner, and against plaintiffs and defendents, and suitors of all sorts, and against the general crowd, in whose way the forensic wisdom of ages has interposed a million of obstacles to the transaction of the commonest business of life—diving through law and equity, and through that kindred mystery, the street mud, which is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how: we only knowing in general that when there is too much of it, we find it necessary to shovel it away—the lawyer and the law-stationer come to a Rag and Bottle shop . . ." (135)
19. "To end, to fill, to join, to unify—one might say that this is the basic requirement of the *readerly*, as though it were prey to some obsessive fear: that of omitting a connection. Fear of forgetting engenders the appearance of a logic of actions; terms and the links between them are posited (invented) in such a way that they unite, duplicate each other, create an illusion of continuity. The plenum generates the drawing intended to 'express' it, and the drawing evokes the complement, coloring: as if the *readerly* abhors a vacuum. What would be the narrative of a journey in which it was said that one stays somewhere without having arrived, that one travels without having departed—in which it was never said that, having departed, one arrives or fails to arrive? Such a narrative would be a scandal, the extenuation, by hemorrhage, of readerliness." Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 105.
20. *Bleak House* is thus one of the first texts to adumbrate a position that with Modernism becomes commonplace: namely, that a literature worthy of the name will respect mystery

by keeping it inviolate. For a canonical allusion to the position, see Kafka's remarks on the detective story in Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka*, translated by Goronwy Rees, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 133; and among recent rehearsals, see David I. Grossvogel, *Mystery and its Fictions: From Oedipus to Agatha Christie* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

Yet insofar as the modernist cult of the irresolvable is perfectly consistent with the efficient workings of Chancery Court, *Bleak House* is also one of the first texts to indicate the difficulties with this position, which advancing beyond cheap consolations, may only bind us more profoundly to a society that thrives on delayed and ever-incomplete satisfactions.

21. The moment exclusively occupies those two modes of literary criticism which this essay may be thought to address itself: Marxism and Deconstructionism. Contemporary Marxist criticism would construe the ambiguities we have noticed as the contradictions that inscribe the text's inevitable failure to make its domestic ideology cohere. By virtue of "internal distanciation," the literary text finds itself compelled to betray this ideology, if only in its hesitations, silences, discrepancies. Not altogether dissimilarly, Deconstruction would take such ambiguities for the aporias in an allegory of the process and problems of signification itself. Intended meaning is always exceeded in the signifiers to which it commits its expression, since by their nature those signifiers defer meaning even as they differentiate it. The "trace" of such differentiation, furthermore, carrying over as a kind of residue from one signifier to another, undermines the integrity of each: so that, in the case of an opposition, one term will invariably prove to be contaminated with the term it is meant to oppose. Without insisting on the comparison, one might say that Marxist criticism, urgently putting under scrutiny the evidence of a text that thereby never fails to convict itself, proceeds rather like the Detective Police; whereas a Deconstructive criticism, patiently willing to remain on the threshold of interpretation in the wisdom that every reading it might offer would be a misreading, behaves somewhat like Chancery Court. If only from *Bleak House*, however, we know that a practice claiming to resemble neither the bureaucracy nor the police merely uses this pretension to camouflage its alliances with both. For us, therefore, it cannot exactly be a matter of repudiating these critical modes, but rather of writing against them, as against a background. "Against" Marxism, then, we stress the positivity of contradiction, which, far from always marking the fissure of a social formation, may rather be one of the joints whereby such a formation is articulated. Contradiction may function not to expose, but to construct the ideology that has foreseen and contained it. And "against" Deconstruction, we should urge (rather as did Hegel in confronting the nothingness of skepticism) that undecidability must always be the undecidability of *something in particular*. The trouble with the Deconstructionist allegory of signification is not that it is untrue, but that, despite the deceptive "closeness" of the readings, it is abstract. Two things, I think ought to remove the effects of undecidability and contradiction from the void in which Deconstruction places them. For one, they have a history or genealogy that determines them and whose traces must be registered. It may be ultimately true, for instance, as J. Hillis Miller has said, that "*Bleak House* is a document about the interpretation of documents" (Introduction, p. 11), but the formulation elides the rivalrous differentiations among institutional practices through which the concern with interpretation comes to emerge (and then, not as a theme so much as the stakes in a contest). As a result, one misses seeing the extent of the novel's assumption that it is *not* a document like those it is about. For a second, these effects, once formed, are never left at large and on the loose to wreak havoc on discursive and institutional operations. On the contrary, the latter have always already drafted them into a

service which takes its toll and whose toll, accordingly, needs to be assessed in turn. Thus, Miller's account keeps characteristic silence about what even *Bleak House* (for highly partisan reasons of its own, of course) is quite willing to publicize: that the hermeneutic problematic itself is an instrument in the legal establishment's will to power.

22. At the level of subjective practices, a central and quite literal example would be the continuity noted by Max Weber between the religious ethos of Protestantism and the mental disposition of capitalism. The Calvinist subject's doubt as to his salvation engages him in intense worldly activity as a means to attain self-confidence. Such self-confidence is thus made to ride on restless, continuous work in a calling—a process that may surpass the moment of possession or remain on this side of it, but in any case never coincides with it. The task of proving one's election becomes as endless as the increase of capital that is the sign of its being successfully accomplished. Dickens is far enough from—or close enough to—this psychological structure to make it a prime target of his criticism, either as the spiritual bookkeeping of a Mrs. Clennam or the entrepreneurial pieties of a Bounderby. Yet the end of such criticism is not to repudiate the nexus between personal doubt and worldly duty, but rather to free its terms from their limiting specifications. This means, in effect, re-encoding it within the organization of the family. Weber's Protestant ethic is replaced by Freud's Family Romance, as a structure linking self-doubt with worldly ambition. When the specific doctrinal source of doubt (predestination) has been familialized as a problematic of the “orphan,” uncertain both of his parents' identity and hence of his place in the world; when even the “calling” has been transferred from the primary capitalist sphere (where with the advent of industrialism its integrity had been seriously compromised) to the still undisparaged domain of domestic economy, then Robinson Crusoe returns as Esther Summerson: both the doubt-ridden, self-effacing orphan, always on the verge of being overwhelmed by the question of her origin and the consequent problem of her destiny, and at the same time, the “methodical” housekeeper (92) “with a fine administrative capacity” (597), who, admonishing herself “Duty, my dear!” shakes the keys of her kingdom to ring herself “hopefully” to bed (80).
23. Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1979). The discussion of contract and tutelage that is paraphrased and cited here occurs on pp. 82–95.
24. Viscount Esher, ed., *The Girlhood of Queen Victoria: A Selection from her Diaries 1832–40*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1912), vol. 2, p. 83, reprinted in Collins, *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 44. The citation comes from an entry for December 23, 1838.