

# The Epistemology of Trust and Realist Effect in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*

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THE atypical narrative strategy of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853), which alternates between limited omniscience and first-person narration, represents one of the novel's most distinctive formal features. This formal feature has not lacked in critical attention. Since the time of its publication, readers have debated Dickens's narrative procedure and the relationship between the two narrators, as well as their contrastive personalities. In particular, critics have sought to comprehend the self-conscious naïveté expressed in Esther Summerson's first-person account, to reconcile her repeated assertions of unknowingness with the skeptical, yet knowing, stance adopted by the omniscient, and presumably male, narrator.<sup>1</sup> While numerous scholars

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the review of *Bleak House* in the *Spectator*, 24 September 1853, pp. xxvi, 923–25 (reprinted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Philip Collins [New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971], pp. 283–86). Novelists such as Charlotte Brontë and Margaret Oliphant found Esther to be yet another Dickensian example of a flat female character (see Brontë, letter to George Smith, 11 March 1852, quoted in *Dickens: The*

have framed Esther's avowals and disavowals of knowledge through a psychoanalytic argument regarding her traumatic childhood and illegitimacy,<sup>2</sup> in this essay I suggest that we can instead understand Esther's relationship to knowledge as exemplifying an epistemology of trust. My approach runs counter to recent criticism on the novel, which has interpreted *Bleak House* as encouraging a "paranoid," suspicious reading inimical to notions of trust.<sup>3</sup> Such readings clearly find purchase in the attitude adopted by the omniscient narrator and characters such as Bucket, but they only paint a partial portrait. The skeptical and suspicious attitude that appears to saturate the novel, I contend, operates against the background of an even more fundamental cognitive and affective attitude of trust.

If the relationship that I have proposed between skepticism and trust seems counterintuitive, this is largely due to prejudices that we have inherited from modern philosophy.

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*Critical Heritage*, pp. 273; and Oliphant, "Charles Dickens," *Blackwood's Magazine*, April 1855, quoted in *Dickens: The Critical Heritage*, p. 334). Twentieth-century criticism continued to question Esther's sincerity as overly self-conscious and thus potentially duplicitous. For an overview of these negative responses, see Alex Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," *PMLA*, 88 (1973), 429-39; and William Axton, "The Trouble with Esther," *MLQ*, 26 (1965), 545-57.

<sup>2</sup> D. A. Miller claims that "the origin of Esther's self-doubt" arises from "her illegitimacy" (Miller, *The Novel and the Police* [Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1988], p. 102). Carolyn Dever argues that maternal loss shadows Esther's control over her autobiographical narrative and her subjectivity (see Dever, *Death and the Mother from Dickens to Freud: Victorian Fiction and the Anxiety of Origins* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998], p. 81). Zwerdling and John O. Jordan approach the issue more specifically as the expression of trauma, which creates unsayable gaps and displacements (see Zwerdling, "Esther Summerson Rehabilitated," pp. 430-32; and Jordan, *Supposing Bleak House* [Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2011], pp. 44-48). Hilary M. Schor reads the question of Esther's identity as resulting in the double narration, where the third-person narrator is an aspect of Esther's personhood (see Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999], p. 117). Schor draws on Robert Newsom, who reads the two narrators as "alter egos" that express Esther's unconscious repressions and are linked to the Freudian uncanny (see Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: "Bleak House" and the Novel Tradition* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1977], p. 87).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to D. A. Miller's account in *The Novel and the Police*, see James Buzard's discussion of paranoid reading in his *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2005), p. 117n. I also disagree with J. Hillis Miller's contention that Dickens utilizes the omniscient narrator to ironize Esther's moral sincerity and present it "as a limited ideal" (see Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958], p. 222).

We have become accustomed, since René Descartes, to link epistemological skepticism with an ontology in which our subjective mental experience stands in conflicted relation to the objective world of things.<sup>4</sup> According to this line of thinking, an ontology that posits no chasm between the mind and the external world would be impervious to epistemological skepticism and doubt. It characterizes a world still based on trust—one in which what the mind perceives and believes is indistinguishable from the objective world. In opposition to this post-Cartesian framework, I claim here that epistemological skepticism, whether in *Bleak House* or the everyday world that we inhabit, operates alongside an ontology that presumes no dissonant relation between mind and external world, subjectivity and objectivity. Skepticism remains underpinned by an attitude of trust. Trust here constitutes a nonskeptical, nonepistemic foundational certitude regarding the mind's relationship to the world that is beyond demonstrable proof.<sup>5</sup> It is this tacit certitude that supplies the ultimate ground for the epistemological knowledge claims that we make and subtends any distrust and doubt that we might experience.

We live in a world ruled, at base, by trust. Trust not only underwrites our epistemic encounter with the external world, but it is also the enabling presupposition of theoretical and practical knowledge. Trust carries ethical and sociological valences as well. The “second-hand” knowledge that we acquire from others regarding both moral and nonmoral issues, as well as our intersubjective relations with others (ethical, political, contractual), depend on an attitude of trust.<sup>6</sup> In *Bleak House*, Esther, and those closely associated with her, represent a model of knowing that is grounded in the affective attitude of trust, which functions in the novel as an intersubjective, social epistemology that relies on others to acquire knowledge about the

<sup>4</sup> See John Greco, “Modern Ontology and the Problems of Epistemology,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1995), 241–51.

<sup>5</sup> My understanding of trust as a form of certitude is indebted to Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's “On Certainty”* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of how reliance on others for ethical judgments is akin to second-hand knowledge from experts on scientific/nonmoral issues, see Karen Jones, “Second-Hand Moral Knowledge,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, 96, no. 2 (1999), 55–78.

world and persons. This model of trust is contrasted to the atomized individualism implicated by the omniscient narrator's point of view and his attitude of skepticism, suspicion, and distrust.

These contrastive world-views, however, do not simply represent an oversimplified and moralizing polarity, but articulate two differing approaches to the adjudication of evidence. The omniscient narrator references a traditional model of "epistemic autonomy" wherein an individual engages in rigorous processes of self-questioning doubt in order to assess what she knows and what she has grounds to believe.<sup>7</sup> Rather than begin from a skeptical position that suspends judgment until the testing of evidence persuades us toward either belief or disbelief, the affective attitude of trust exemplifies a social epistemology of shared "normative judgments" in which knowledge is always knowledge by "proxy."<sup>8</sup>

In the pages that follow I not only provide a detailed account of the important role that trust plays in epistemology and ethics, but I also link my argument to the aesthetic mode of realism. The relationship I trace between trust and skepticism is integral, I contend, to *Bleak House's* realist effect and presents a potential model for understanding the epistemology of realism in relation to the British novel.<sup>9</sup> My account here departs from a specific strand of criticism regarding the epistemology of nineteenth-century realist novels, which has emphasized its

<sup>7</sup> See Sanford C. Goldberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010), p. vii.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), p. 174.

<sup>9</sup> I am concerned in this essay with the circumscribed problem of realist epistemology. My goal is thus not to offer a definitive account of British realism or of the novel's rise that supplants extant critical literature on this vast and multifarious subject. The emergence of realism in the English novel has been linked to philosophical empiricism (Ian Watt, Michael McKeon); the rise of capitalism and the middle-class (Watt, McKeon, Patrick Brantlinger, Mary Poovey, James Thompson); secularization (McKeon); ideology (Fredric Jameson); the unfolding forces of history (Georg Lukács, Eric Auerbach, Harry Shaw); the oriental tale (Srinivas Aravamudan); the failures of theater (David Kurnick); scientific experiment (George Levine); developments in sibling arts such as music, photography, and painting (Alison Byerly, Nancy Armstrong); and its genealogical relation with other genres (e.g., epic, romance, melodrama) (McKeon, Northrop Frye, Jameson).

affiliation with models of skepticism. In opposition to this critical tendency, I argue that realist epistemology makes apparent how our everyday encounter with the world is grounded in an attitude of trust, and how our unreflective experience of trust supplies the conditions for the possibility of any doubt or skepticism we might experience. In *Bleak House* this epistemic encounter is staged via narrative structure. The reader is situated between the two narrative points of view and their differing epistemological approach to the problem of evidence, reliability, judgment, and trust. The novel gives us mediated, second-hand knowledge whose credibility and accuracy we question in the absence of direct experience of the world that is reported. This experience of suspense and doubt, however, is only a *prima facie* experience of the novel's realist effect. Dickens's novel demonstrates through the double-narrative structure that doubt is something that we experience in everyday life against a structure that cannot be doubted, that we unreflectively take on trust much like Esther's "too conscious unconsciousness."<sup>10</sup> Hence if, as Walter Scott stated, the realist novel focuses on "the ordinary train of human events,"<sup>11</sup> then realism reveals something essential about our everyday ontological and epistemic orientation toward the world: it makes an affective and cognitive claim on readers in which we become aware that any skepticism we experience in day-to-day life is ultimately grounded in a nonskeptical attitude of trust.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>10</sup> See John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, 3 vols. (New York: Baker and Taylor Co., 1911), II, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Scott, "Essay on Romance" (1824), in his *Essays on Chivalry, Romance, and the Drama* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1884), p. 226.

<sup>12</sup> In focusing on the cognitive and affective response of readers, I join other critics who have approached realism according to its effect on readers rather than as a formal feature within the text. See, for example, Marshall Brown, "The Logic of Realism: A Hegelian Approach," *PMLA*, 96 (1981), 232–33; Harry E. Shaw, *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1999), pp. 106–7; Jane F. Thrailkill, *Affecting Fictions: Mind, Body, and Emotion in American Literary Realism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007); Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2012); and *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature*, ed. Rachel Ablow (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2010).

When we speak of trust, we usually mean “confidence in” or “reliance on” some feature or characteristic of something/someone, as well as the truthfulness of statements (*OED*). In philosophical circles, trust occupies a nebulous territory because, as a mental phenomenon, it carries cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions.<sup>13</sup> In relation to cognition, we can understand trust as a disposition whose propensities manifest themselves in the mental attitude or posture that we adopt toward something or an existing state of affairs (i.e., a belief).<sup>14</sup> As both a disposition and attitude expressing belief (a *doxastic* attitude), trust can either take the form of a *propositional attitude* where the agent expresses her mental state toward something in a manner that grammatically expresses belief in a “that” clause (e.g., I believe *that* the sun will rise tomorrow), or it can take the form of an *attitudinal belief* or *faith* in which we express not just the belief *that* something existentially exists but also our “positive attitude” through an “in” clause (I believe *in* her).<sup>15</sup>

H. H. Price made the paradigmatic argument on the difference between belief-that and belief-in statements when he argued that whereas belief-that statements constitute a proposition that something exists, belief-in statements entail evaluation in which we “esteem” and “trust” in someone, something, or a state of affairs.<sup>16</sup> Such attitudinal faith may, of course, rely on propositional attitudes. Only if I believe that my friend exists can I believe in her. Alternatively, attitudinal belief may result in a propositional attitude: because I believe (trust) *in* my friend,

<sup>13</sup> See Annette C. Baier, *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), p. 132.

<sup>14</sup> For this “standard” account of belief as an attitude that expresses “brain states,” see Lynne Rudder Baker, *Explaining Attitudes: A Practical Approach to the Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), pp. 5–6, 12, 20. On belief in relation to dispositions, see D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 7–21.

<sup>15</sup> I borrow the term “attitudinal belief” and “attitudinal faith” from Robert Audi, who uses it to distinguish between belief-that and belief-in statements, the latter of which often apply to cases of theological belief. See Robert Audi, “Belief, Faith, and Acceptance,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 63 (2008), 88, 90, 92; and Audi, “Faith, Belief, and Rationality,” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (1991), 215, 218.

<sup>16</sup> See H. H. Price, “Belief ‘In’ and Belief ‘That,’” *Religious Studies*, 1 (1965), 10 and *passim*.

I believe (trust) *that* she will pick me up, and so I wait for her at the agreed-upon place. The latter progression points to trust's conative dimension: as a form of endeavoring, it can lead to intentions and impel persons to undertake actions on the basis of shared expectations (Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 132). In addition to displaying the preceding cognitive and conative dimensions, trust (and distrust) can also be interpreted as affects or feelings. Price writes: "Trusting is an affective attitude. We might even say that it is in some degree an affectionate one" ("Belief 'In' and Belief 'That,'" p. 25). Similarly, Annette Baier categorizes both trust and distrust as "feelings" because they involve either pleasure or displeasure. Trust and distrust are "what Hume called 'impressions of reflexion,' feeling responses to how we take our situation to be" (Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 131).

These myriad classifications aside, trust is typically interpreted as a form of reliance or assurance in which we believe in the trustworthiness of others or of evidence, whether that evidence be our immediate experience or that reported by others. Such trust is essential to ethical relations, social cooperation, the acquisition of information, and the exercise of our everyday, practical knowledge. Trust as a form of moral, social, and epistemic reliance is thus in many ways the very air we breathe (Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 98). We routinely trust the advice and knowledge put forth by experts, and, as children, we trust our guardians both for factual knowledge of the world and for moral guidance.<sup>17</sup> Such trust is, of course, retractable: we can discover faulty knowledge among experts or, as adults, reject many things we were taught by our guardians. Yet while we may eventually depart from our early, primal experience of trust, our disposition to trust nevertheless enables us to navigate the world on a daily basis.<sup>18</sup>

As the above examples make clear, the understanding of trust as a form of reliance poses significant consequences in

<sup>17</sup> See Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, pp. 110–14. See also Jones, "Second-Hand Moral Knowledge."

<sup>18</sup> For an account of trust as a disposition, see Danièle Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* p. 192. This is akin to Audi's argument regarding "dispositions to believe" as "a readiness to form a belief" (Robert Audi, "Dispositional Beliefs and Dispositions to Believe," *Nóús*, 28 [1994], 424).

ethical, social, and epistemological contexts. Theorizations of trust as an epistemological problem traditionally focus on cases wherein we rely on (and trust) the testimony of others. The classic account of testimonial knowledge is David Hume's chapter "Of Miracles" from *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748). Hume argues that "there is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators."<sup>19</sup> Yet precisely because we are prone to regarding others' testimony with caution, we test their testimony "from experience and observation" in order to establish agreement "between testimony and reality" (Hume, *Enquiry*, p. 85). Since our reasoning of causes and effects is grounded, as Hume states in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40), in the evidence of our immediate perceptions or in a chain of testimony that leads back to eyewitnesses, the absence of such a chain would mean that our ideas and reasoning were based on "supposition" and have no "real" impressions as their foundation.<sup>20</sup>

Hume's statements on miracles have become foundational to discussions of testimonial knowledge more generally because they present "the epistemic status of testimony" as equivalent to any other type of report where we address problems of evidence and reliability.<sup>21</sup> This is so because in all such cases of testimony we are asked to believe in the truth and credibility of something *a posteriori* and can only do so by comparing testimony with available facts (Moran, "Getting Told and Being Believed," p. 2). Hume's skeptical empiricism is now referred to as a reductive theory of testimony in which we do not believe or trust something simply because we received a testimony to X or Y; instead, we must adopt a position of incredulousness such that we would only be justified in believing and trusting the testimony if and only if other things that the person

<sup>19</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding: A Critical Edition*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p. 84.

<sup>20</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 131.

<sup>21</sup> See Richard Moran, "Getting Told and Being Believed," *Philosophers' Imprint*, 5, no. 5 (2005), 2.

believes provide us with adequate reasons to believe.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, the nonreductive approach to testimony associated with Thomas Reid takes a credulous position with respect to justification for belief in testimony: just as perception of something's appearance in the world is justification for belief, so too testimony itself provides the warrant for belief in the content of the testimony.<sup>23</sup>

While the examples above cast the problem of trust through the instance of testimony, they demonstrate an underlying tension in accounts of trust: when is it rationally justified to trust either a person or evidence? This question of rational justification for belief is particularly vexing since trust can run counter to evidence and may entail either overlooking relevant evidence because we trust someone or can be formed with little or no evidence at all.<sup>24</sup> In such cases, trust is not only "blinkered vision" (Jones, "Trust as an Affective Attitude," p. 12), it is blind. In this regard, Karen Jones argues that we can understand trust as comprised of both cognitive and affective dimensions: the affective attitude of trust entails "optimism" that the person who is trusted will be positively motivated by our dependence on them and will respond to our expectations with "goodwill" ("Trust as an Affective Attitude," pp. 4–8). When we trust, our trust creates certain obligations and may compel someone to behave in ways that will honor our trust. In this context, the affective attitude of trust is "*reflexive*" (Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust*, p. 149, emphasis in original): our expectations that the trusted will prove trustworthy grounds our trust.

It is because trust has both cognitive and affective dimensions that we respond to failures in trust with feelings of betrayal, resentment, or anger.<sup>25</sup> As Paul Faulkner claims, trust is "rationally *self-supporting*" in that our affective experience of trust presupposes "that the trusted is trustworthy," and it is this belief that justifies our trust in them (*Knowledge on Trust*, p. 151,

<sup>22</sup> See Paul Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> Such credulity does not necessarily mean, however, that the audience is not attuned to falsehood. See Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust*, pp. 8–9.

<sup>24</sup> See Karen Jones, "Trust as an Affective Attitude," *Ethics*, 107 (1996), 16.

<sup>25</sup> For reactions to failures in trust, see Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust*, pp. 147–48.

emphasis in original).<sup>26</sup> This claim may seem tautological, but the reflexive dimension of trust is crucial to its value. Trust, as Annette Baier remarks, “is accepted vulnerability to another’s power to harm one, a power inseparable from the power to look after some aspect of one’s good” (*Moral Prejudices*, p. 133). Trust here functions as an unconditional belief in the other’s good will and is an alternative to instrumental assessments of self-interest, to a suspicious stance that surveys “costs and benefits” (Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 133). A skeptical approach to trust where we thoroughly test testimony and the grounds of trust contradicts the intrinsic value of trust—namely, that we view the person as trustworthy (Faulkner, *Knowledge on Trust*, p. 165). Just as the person who trusted may feel betrayed when things go wrong, so too the person entrusted may feel betrayed if trust in them is only conditional.<sup>27</sup>

Both our trust in others and their trustworthiness thus conform to normative expectations, and these expectations, we understand, are not held as false expectations. In this context, trust operates in ways similar to promising, and it relies, as Richard Moran states, on “principles of charity” (“Getting Told and Being Believed,” p. 5). Moran contends that trust in the testimonial case of “telling someone something” entails a speaker who voluntarily undertakes responsibility for her “sincerity” and provides an “assurance” (much as with promises) that attests to the truth of what has been told (“Getting Told and Being Believed,” pp. 4, 11, 21–22, emphasis in original). Moreover, our trust in the character of the person—their trustworthiness—impacts our relation to whatever evidence they bring before us since it is their trustworthiness that undergirds our “intersubjective dependence” on them for knowledge (“Getting Told and Being Believed,” pp. 12–13). Yet as Baier points out, trust reaches even further than speech-acts of telling to be believed or promising since it is not a specific set of obligations but a more generalized confidence that the trusted party will take into account our “well-being” and act with good intentions toward us (*Moral Prejudices*,

<sup>26</sup> See also Annette Baier, “Trust and Antitrust,” *Ethics*, 96 (1986), 256–57.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Anscombe notes that it is an “insult” not to be believed. See Moran, “Getting Told and Being Believed,” p. 27.

pp. 136–37). Trust thus has not only a pragmatic value when seeking cooperation or contractual agreements, but also a moral value in our interpersonal relations.<sup>28</sup>

Lurking in the background of my discussion of trust is the age-old problem of skepticism. We can see this tension in the opposing accounts of testimony referenced earlier in Hume and Reid. Either we subject trust and testimonial knowledge to the skeptical scrutiny of our empirical observation like any other belief, or the self-reflexive nature of trust makes such doubt self-canceling. This poses a problem both for the interpersonal examples cited above and for our empirical experience of the world. Reid's counterargument to Hume regarding testimonial knowledge, for example, suggests that even the empirical knowledge of our immediate perceptions is grounded on a reflexive trust. There is a significant way in which we can understand my certainty in my immediate perceptions (e.g., that when I lean against the wall it will not suddenly disappear) as a "blind trust."<sup>29</sup> In this context, the nonreductive approach to testimony challenges skepticism with the very kind of questions that Ludwig Wittgenstein would pose many years later in *On Certainty* (1969):

How do I know that this colour is blue? If I don't trust *myself* here, why should I trust anyone else's judgment? . . . Must I not begin to trust somewhere? . . . somewhere I must begin with not-doubting . . . it is part of judging.<sup>30</sup>

To frame the problem of certainty in these terms is not to suggest that we do not ever experience doubt or test our knowledge of the world and persons, but rather that there are certain

<sup>28</sup> For discussions of trust in relation to cooperative games and contract, see Bernard Williams, "Formal Structures and Social Reality," in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. Diego Gambetta (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 3–13; and Diego Gambetta, "Can We Trust Trust?," in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, pp. 213–37.

<sup>29</sup> My line of thinking in this and the subsequent paragraph is indebted to Moyal-Sharrock and Olli Lagerspetz. On blind trust, see Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* pp. 54–66.

<sup>30</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 22e, §150, emphasis in original. See also p. 89e, §672.

propositions that are fundamentally “exempt from doubt” because nobody can truly know them (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 44e, §341)—that is, provide “compelling reasons” for how I know them to be true (e.g., I once lived in Boston, a city in Massachusetts. I am writing this sentence on my computer).<sup>31</sup> We accept these propositions as “assumption[s],” and these assumptions are “like hinges on which [our doubts] turn” and enable us to acquire practical and theoretical knowledge (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 44e, §343, §341). For Wittgenstein, these “hinge propositions” are not evaluative, propositional attitudes wherein we express our belief about someone or something, nor are they (even if they convey first-person experience) empirical propositions that we arrive at through justification via evidence.<sup>32</sup> Hence when Descartes discusses the indubitable sensation of feeling his hand in the *Meditations* (1641), his certainty could not have been adduced from sensory evidence, as he erroneously infers, since this evidence would render his statement open to the very doubt and tests of truth/falsity that he deems inconceivable (Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 8, 121–24). Descartes does not *know* that he feels his hand through reasoned justification; he is simply certain: “I stretch out and feel my hand . . . , and I know what I am doing.”<sup>33</sup> Hinge propositions are thus *nonepistemic* and constitute a groundless, “objective certainty” that is *atemporal* and not derived from sensory experience; rather, they operate like the logical rules of math or grammar and cannot be capriciously chosen or altered by individuals.<sup>34</sup> In this way, hinge propositions function as a kind of *a priori* foundation that structures the world, a foundation that is “*necessary*” and “*objective*” without being transcendental since it is

<sup>31</sup> See Duncan Pritchard, “Wittgenstein on Scepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed. Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), p. 525. For a taxonomic range of hinge propositions, see Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 101–2.

<sup>32</sup> See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 28e, §204; and Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 16, 123–24, 189–90.

<sup>33</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies, Revised Edition*, trans. and ed. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 13.

<sup>34</sup> See Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 39–40, 90–91, 153–54.

rooted in collective human practices that are “conditional” (Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 153–55, emphasis in original). Because objective certainty is foundational to knowledge claims and yet impervious to evidentiary proofs or tests of truth and falsity, it remains distinct from the category of knowledge.<sup>35</sup> Instead, as Danièle Moyal-Sharrock argues, it constitutes a kind of tacit knowledge, a “primitive” and dispositional “ur-trust” (*Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* p. 193, emphasis in original). Whereas we typically speak of dispositions as a mental state or moral propensity that may or may not manifest itself,<sup>36</sup> the dispositional model of “ur-trust” that Moyal-Sharrock theorizes is something we must continuously enact.<sup>37</sup>

To conceive of trust as the unreflective ground of knowledge and interpersonal relations is to see it as something that is and is not a form of reliance: we rely on trust continually, but we do not rely on it in the sense that we consciously think about our attitude by providing reasons and assessments.<sup>38</sup> Such claims about trust run counter to the position taken by Baier, who regards trust as an intentional mental state in which we are aware that we trust (“Trust and Anti-trust,” p. 235). Yet as Baier herself claims, trust is something we only fully come to grips with “retrospectively” and “posthumously” after it has been lost (“Trust and Anti-trust,” p. 235). Given the retrospective nature of trust, trust seems to precede the kind of intentional mental awareness that Baier ascribes to it. For this reason, Olli Lagerspetz differentiates second-order trust, in which we are aware that we are trusting someone, from first-order trust: “trust as

<sup>35</sup> See Avrum Stroll, *Moore and Wittgenstein on Certainty* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 145–46.

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 2d ed., trans. and ed. Terence Irwin (Bloomington: Hackett, 1999), pp. 1103a15–1103b25; 1205b20–1206a14.

<sup>37</sup> In this context, hinge beliefs differ from belief-in and belief-that propositions because the latter two can be asserted about a range of things (e.g., persons, institutions, theories, etc.), whereas hinge beliefs concern “states of affairs” and are “non-evaluative” attitudes. They express a “blind faith” that we perform and not something that we assert propositionally. See Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 190, 194, 198–200, emphasis in original.

<sup>38</sup> See Olli Lagerspetz, “The Notion of Trust in Philosophical Psychology,” in *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, ed. Lilli Alanen, Sara Heinämaa, and Thomas Wallgren (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 99–100; and Lars Hertzberg, “On the Attitude of Trust,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 31 (1988), 307–22.

a conscious undertaking is logically secondary to unreflective trust. The meaning of ‘trust’ for us is essentially connected to the fact that we *typically* do not articulate, reflect upon, or plan our trust.”<sup>39</sup> Lagerspetz’s account of first-order trust closely matches, according to Moyal-Sharrock, Wittgenstein’s notion of “objective certainty” as an “ur-trust”—a “groundless, unreasoned, unreflective . . . foundational *trust*” (*Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* p. 195, emphasis in original). Like trust, such certainty constitutes “a doxastic *attitude* (both as a disposition and as an occurrence), . . . a *certainty* or *sureness*; . . . a *trust*; a *relying on*; a *belief*; an *attitude*; a (*direct*) *taking-hold*; a *holding fast*; . . . a *way of acting and speaking*. . . Our doxastic attitude here is not a belief *that*; . . . it is depicted as a kind of animal trust, or belief-*in*” (*Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* pp. 54–55, emphasis in original). Such ur-trust or first-order trust, like certainty, is thus a type of attitudinal belief or faith, a belief-*in* by which we comprehend and grasp the phenomenal world through enacted performance.

The philosophical account of trust is multifaceted and wide-ranging in its implications: trust as disposition, as first- and second-order doxastic attitude, as a belief *in* that may also entail a belief *that*, as a form of promising that mediates intersubjective ethical relations, as testimonial knowledge, and, finally, as an affective attitude that agents enact against a background of shared practices, expectations, and norms. In the discussion of *Bleak House* and realism that follows, I draw on the full range of these implications, but rather than interpreting the varied definitions of trust as potentially conflicted or mutually exclusive, I see them as functioning on a continuum. I thus understand trust as a disposition and affective attitude that expresses itself as an unreflective belief-*in* or faith in the phenomenal world and others. This first-order, atemporal trust operates alongside the second-order intentional mental states wherein we adopt propositional or evaluative attitudes toward persons, things, and states of affairs and articulate justifiable knowledge claims.

The model of trust that I have posited applies not only to our encounter with the external world, but also to ethical

<sup>39</sup> Olli Lagerspetz, *Trust: The Tacit Demand* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998), p. 31, emphasis in original.

relations and testimonial knowledge. In this context, my account of trust brings together the epistemological and ethical valences of trust in order to highlight their mutual implication within a philosophic discourse whose division of labors tends to examine epistemic questions in isolation from ethical ones. In treating trust in the epistemological and ethical/social context as commensurate (if not intertwined) forms of knowledge, I consider the presence or absence of trust in an epistemological context as impacting ethical relations, and vice versa. In so doing, I am resisting a post-Cartesian construal of epistemic certainty as grounded in an isolated, individual consciousness that ascertains what he or she knows without doubt by subjecting, as in Descartes's *Meditations*, all beliefs to a "general demolition" (*Meditations*, p. 12). The knowledge-claims that one arrives at in the latter epistemic model would seem in no way intersubjective and thus altogether distinct from the trust that one experiences in ethical and social relations, which necessarily includes others.

The Cartesianism that sanctioned an individualist model of epistemology also participated in the segregation of metaphysical and epistemological questions from the ethical. The seventeenth-century rise of mechanist philosophy from Descartes to Thomas Hobbes has largely been credited with separating empirical facts of nature from the realm of normative judgments.<sup>40</sup> Yet, as Steven Shapin argues, all our knowledge—scientific, moral, empirical—and even skeptical inquiry into the foundations of knowledge proceeds through an "intersubjective" reliance upon a body of knowledge that is produced and maintained by others whom we trust and without whom we could not conduct our inquiries or even apprehend our experiences.<sup>41</sup> "Insofar as experience is obliged to transit a nexus of trust in order to become a part of our knowledge, then there is no aspect of our knowledge we can speak about which can be set apart from our moral order" (Shapin, *A Social History of*

<sup>40</sup> On this segregation, see Charles Larmore, *The Autonomy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), pp. 1, 7, 111.

<sup>41</sup> See Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 21–23. Shapin's argument, like my own, is indebted to Wittgenstein.

*Truth*, p. 21). Any rupture in the trust that orders the everyday world that we “[hold] in common” is not *either* moral or cognitive but, Shapin maintains, “*both at once*” (*A Social History of Truth*, pp. 30, 35, emphasis in original). Thus, on the one hand, Descartes’s purported distrust in the evidence of his senses relies on an unstated body of inherited knowledge (e.g., grammar, logic, categories of experience, etc.), yet, on the other hand, his skepticism (were it maintained) would introduce a fissure in both the cognitive and moral order since the everyday phenomenal world in which human relations and knowledge unfold would be rendered incoherent. The mutual dependence of the cognitive and moral orders on trust articulates a theoretical insight that is crucial to the critique that Dickens advances in *Bleak House*. A world wherein intersubjective relations proceed without trust and sincerity is also a world in which none can acquire reliable perceptual knowledge: it is a bleak world where we are left, cognitively and ethically, without shelter and “exposed.”<sup>42</sup>



I begin my discussion of *Bleak House* with a “posthumous” account of trust, that is, by describing its loss. *Bleak House* depicts a world in which the shared norms on which trust depend have largely eroded or are balefully manipulated toward self-interested ends. The “endless cause” of Chancery exemplifies a world in which trust (*Bleak House*, p. 6), both in the predictive and normative senses, remains in perpetual suspension and delay.<sup>43</sup> The curse of Chancery consists precisely in this misplaced trust as Miss Flite and Richard lay their expectations and “trust” in a judgment that will never come (*Bleak House*, pp. 34, 164). Dickens’s novel presents Chancery not only as an institution that fails to perform its trusted offices,

<sup>42</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1977), p. 64. All further citations refer to this edition and appear in the text with parenthetical page numbers.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Hollis differentiates between “predictive” instances of trust as when we conform to habitual actions from “normative” trust as when we comply with expectations of, for example, honesty (see Hollis, *Trust within Reason* [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998], pp. 11–14).

but also as an untrustworthy one that raises false expectations among those who trust.

Chancery's perversion of our normative expectations of trust is endemic to the broader economic culture of speculation and self-interested individualism.<sup>44</sup> Richard does not trust to Providence and work, as Jarndyce recommends, but "trust[s] to this, that, and the other chance, without knowing what chance" (*Bleak House*, p. 151). Dickens's use of "chance" echoes his descriptions elsewhere of Chancery as a "gaming system" that exploits what Esther describes as the "long-deferred hopes" of claimants (*Bleak House*, pp. 205, 210). Just as Vholes presumes to be Richard's "rock of trust" even as his self-interested exploitation reaches vampiric proportions, Tulkinghorn translates the "trust and confidence" that Sir Leicester placed in him into economic terms as "the family credit," which he draws on and circulates for his own power-seeking purposes (*Bleak House*, pp. 487, 511). Dickens's portrait of a legal profession ruled by self-interest, as Phoebe Poon observes, demonstrates the complete failure of trusteeship as it is traditionally understood in Equity, where the relationship between trustee and beneficiary is codified not by contract but by an ethical relation in which the trustee promises not to use property for self-interested ends. The trustees in *Bleak House* never appear, and although Chancery intercedes as trustee by proxy, it neither enforces the obligations of trust nor proves reliable in its procedures.<sup>45</sup>

*Bleak House* links the untrustworthy legal procedures and representatives of Chancery to a complementary ethos of suspicion and skepticism. This tendency to regard everyone and everything with suspicion emerges in a context in which it is assumed that we cannot take our immediate perceptions of things and persons on trust but instead, through suspending our judgment and testing evidence via the detective work of

<sup>44</sup> Mary Poovey argues that the emergence of credit culture in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries rendered the ultimate ground of economic value uncertain and destabilized "the conventions that facilitate trust" (see Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2008], p. 6).

<sup>45</sup> See Phoebe Poon, "Trust and Conscience in *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*," *Dickens Quarterly*, 28 (2011), 3–9.

induction, must unearth what immediate apperceptions do not reveal. With the exception of Esther, Jarndyce, and Ada, the “fog” of distrust that sows “trickery, evasion, procrastination, spoliation, botheration” infects all, including the omniscient narrator (*Bleak House*, p. 8). The comprehensive gaze of the omniscient narrator, famously interpreted by D. A. Miller as the panoptic eye of disciplinary surveillance, extends to other characters in the novel, such as the all-knowing Bucket.<sup>46</sup> Bucket’s profession transforms the general climate of distrust into a heightened skepticism: not only does he detect clues and test their causal relation, but he does so in order to show that the very evidence and testimony that points to Lady Dedlock’s guilt in fact conceals a duplicitous intent aimed to encourage such belief. The framing of Lady Dedlock thus represents a broader epistemological predicament in which it is difficult to ascertain the difference between conclusions derived from the causal relations in the world and conclusions derived from our intersubjective dependence on others.<sup>47</sup>

The all-enveloping fog of distrust results in an atomized individualism that connects individuals solely through an expectation of harm. The isolation that accompanies doubt and suspicion is particularly apparent in Richard, who exists in a state of “suspense, distrust, and doubt” and suspects the very person who bears him goodwill (*Bleak House*, p. 489): Jarndyce. Having given his “trust in that rotten reed” of the Jarndyce suit (*Bleak House*, p. 435), Richard trades the confiding and trustful nature he initially shared with Ada and Esther for distrust and doubt. The reference to “reed” is particularly telling with respect to Richard’s skepticism since reed figuratively denotes something “unreliable” (*OED*). Doubt and skepticism do not lead one to reliable evidence, but distort interpersonal relations and skew evidence to fit our distrustful outlook. Suspicion, in this regard, cannot indemnify itself from “blinkered vision” any more than trust since suspicions can be entertained—as Richard and Mrs. Snagsby make evident—independent of proof.

<sup>46</sup> See Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, pp. 58–106.

<sup>47</sup> Moran discusses this issue of framing evidence (“Getting Told and Being Believed,” p. 13).

I have characterized the double narrative structure of *Bleak House* as opposing the skepticism that pervades the omniscient narrator's portion of the novel to Esther's trusting disposition. Yet it is the omniscient narrator's voice—at turns indignant, satiric, sentimental, moralizing, and paternalistic—that advances the novel's polemics against nineteenth-century British society and governmental failures. In describing Chancery as a “well” in which one “might look in vain for Truth at the bottom of it” or the Dedlock family as inhabiting an isolated, “deadened world” that only pays heed to “fashionable intelligence,” the omniscient narrator cultivates a skeptical attitude in the reader toward various characters and social institutions that is nevertheless predicated upon the narrator's moral and epistemic certitude as to what constitutes the real (not sham) “Truth” and the morally upright behavior that ought to prevail (*Bleak House*, pp. 6, 11).<sup>48</sup> We, as readers, may adopt the narrator's skepticism toward the procedures of Chancery or the motives of Tulkinghorn, but we are not encouraged to be equally skeptical when he condemns British society for forsaking Jo “in a ruinous place” like Tom-all-Alone's (*Bleak House*, p. 197). Nor are we skeptical when the narrator asks the reader what “connexion” binds someone like Jo to Lady Dedlock and the rest of the world, for it is precisely an interconnected ethical and social whole that the narrator's bird's-eye perspective in the novel constructs for readers (*Bleak House*, p. 197).<sup>49</sup>

One could chalk up the moralizing and sentimental aspect of the omniscient narrator's voice as typically Dickensian, but this does not clarify its relationship to either the dynamic of skepticism nor the broader narrative structure in the novel. The certitude that underpins the omniscient narrator's skepticism and his portrayal of a world that is cognitively and morally interconnected becomes comprehensible, however, once we see that it relies upon, and is ultimately grounded in, the disposition of trust that Esther and her narrative embody. The novel alludes to this narratorial framework toward the story's close through an

<sup>48</sup> I owe this point to John McGowan.

<sup>49</sup> See Buzard's discussion and critique of such totalizing interpretations of social life in *Bleak House* (*Disorienting Fiction*, p. 113 and p. 113, n. 27).

exchange between Esther and Bucket—a character whose omniscience extends, and often functions as a “stand-in” for, the third-person narrator.<sup>50</sup> During their search for Lady Dedlock, Bucket describes Esther as a “pattern” girl since she represents, much like Jarndyce, the “pattern of truth, sincerity and goodness” that the omniscient narrator tacitly endorses (*Bleak House*, p. 466). Because Esther expresses an unquestioning trust in Bucket’s judgment with “little thought” as to his “motive” (*Bleak House*, p. 703), she paradoxically establishes greater affective and cognitive authority over the detective’s omnipotent, and skeptically pointed, finger.<sup>51</sup> Esther becomes for him a “Queen,” and he only asks of her that she “repose half as much confidence in [him]” as he does in her (*Bleak House*, p. 704). The novel here suggests that Bucket’s confidence in Esther (i.e., her trusting disposition) is what underwrites his ethos of skepticism and the detective work that they are presently conducting. The dynamic that I have sketched between Esther and the omniscient narrator (or his surrogates) may appear gendered insofar as the narrator is prone to skepticism while Esther, much like Ruskin’s queens, represents a passive, affective femininity that is naturally inclined to trust. But Dickens does not restrict the disposition of trust to female characters (e.g., Jarndyce and Woodcourt), and, more importantly, the disposition of trust plays a broader role with respect to narrative structure and the novel’s engagement with questions of epistemic and moral reliance that does not resolve itself into the polarities of gender. Rather, Esther’s “pattern” disposition is both original and originary—a mark of her distinctive character and the expression of a foundational certitude that is collective rather than individual.

Esther’s retrospective narrative presents an account of her disposition in chapter 3, “A Progress,” where she describes herself in the following way: “I have mentioned that, unless

<sup>50</sup> John McBratney sees Bucket as a “stand-in” for both the omniscient narrator and Dickens (see McBratney, “‘What Connexion Can There Be?’: Secrecy and Detection in Dickens’s *Bleak House*,” in *Victorian Secrecy: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment*, ed. Albert D. Pionke and Denise Tischler Millstein [New York: Routledge, 2010], p. 68).

<sup>51</sup> On Bucket’s “superhuman” and “magical” abilities, see D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, p. 79; and Audrey Jaffe, *Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1991), p. 129.

my vanity should deceive me (as I know it may, for I may be very vain, without suspecting it—though indeed I don't), my comprehension is quickened when my affection is. My disposition is very affectionate" (*Bleak House*, p. 18). This typical Esther-like sentence, with its parentheticals, interruptive syntax, and self-effacing negations, possibly suggests Esther's confusion over what she knows<sup>52</sup>—a paradigmatic instance of Esther's "too conscious unconsciousness." Yet when we situate Esther's confessions in relation to theories of trust, another interpretive possibility emerges. Much like Price, who characterizes belief-in as an affective (and affectionate) attitude of trust, Esther describes her "disposition" as one that is "affectionate." It is this affectionate disposition that then quickens her comprehension. If we synthesize the denotative meanings of quicken ("to come or bring to life") and comprehend ("to seize, grasp, lay hold of") (*OED*), Esther's description of her disposition occupies much the same territory as the earlier discussion of ur-trust as a form of belief-in that we tacitly enact in grasping the world. Esther holds fast to the world and persons around her through her affectionate disposition, and this doxastic attitude is something that she continuously performs "without suspecting it."

The "it" in the aforementioned phrase refers back grammatically to Esther's vanity, which denotes her esteemed value or worth, the belief in which is not subject to suspicion since it constitutes a groundless yet foundational self-perception—a belief (and thus trust) *in* her value. Her belief in persons and things external to her (her esteem or trust in them) is grounded in her belief in her own trusting disposition that she cannot distrust or know since her tacit trust *in* it is the "hinge" upon which she daily enacts her comprehension of the world and others. Yet, as I mentioned, the confession of her trusting disposition is grammatically preceded by negative clauses and parentheticals that seemingly qualify her subsequent claims and suggest that she, indeed, suspects to some degree. If we read Esther's qualifications in relation to the paradigmatic example of doubt regarding our most immediate impressions of ourselves

<sup>52</sup> See Judith Wilt, "Confusion and Consciousness in Dickens's Esther," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 32 (1977), 289.

(Descartes's fear that the evil demon is deceiving him that he is thinking), we could understand Esther's sentence as asserting her perception of her own trusting disposition as possibly subject to similar uncertainty. In contrast to the objective point of view represented by the omniscient narrator, Esther's subjectivity is grounded in her disposition to trust, and the reflexive nature of trust may or may not impact the veracity and reliability of the assertion that comprises the predicate of her fragmented sentence—that her affectionate and trusting disposition facilitates her comprehension of the world.

Yet Esther's locution only *seems* to call her trusting disposition into question because of the temporal structure of her narrative. If trust is something we become aware of after the fact, as Baier contends, then Esther's narrative presents her trusting disposition as something liable to doubt because her retrospective account is a second-order, reflective self-awareness: her first-order trust remains tacit and indubitable even as her retrospective narrative adopts a self-reflective distance toward her own disposition, a stance that develops as she matures through exercising her "noticing way" (*Bleak House*, p. 17). Thus whether her trust is liable to suspicion or not is ultimately irrelevant since she proceeds in the world without suspecting it (as she affirms emphatically "indeed I don't"). Esther's "conscious unconsciousness" thus names not a flaw in realistic portraiture, but trust's tacit enactment. Her narrative displays how a trusting disposition progresses from the blind trust of a child to a second-order trust that demonstrates on reflection that her initial supposition to be credulous without ground was justified.

The "progress" of Esther's trust in the opening chapter begins with what can be regarded as trust's potential starting point for all of us: the trust between a child and guardian. In contrast to the "gloomy medium" supplied by her godmother and the untrustworthy account that mediates Esther's initial self-knowledge (*Bleak House*, p. 213), Jarndyce presents the trustworthy medium by which Esther will begin truly to know herself and others. When Esther rides the coach after her godmother's death with a man that she will later learn is Jarndyce, he asks her why she is crying. Esther confusedly states, "I didn't

know I was crying, sir,” to which Jarndyce responds by brushing his coat cuff across her eyes to show her that they were wet. “There! Now you know you are. . . . Don’t you?” (*Bleak House*, p. 24). This coming to know through others something so fundamental a bodily response as crying may seem extreme, but it displays our reliance on others and the way both the self and the world are given to us first through others.

Realizing that she is crying through Jarndyce is pivotal since *Bleak House* presents him as the gold standard of trustworthiness in the novel. Ada, for example, trusts Jarndyce on the basis of her mother’s report of him as a noble and generous person, as well as for the honesty expressed in his letter, before she even sees him (*Bleak House*, p. 43). The trust placed in Jarndyce through the testimony of others is subsequently justified through his disinterested generosity and sincerity. As Jarndyce himself states, when Esther’s godmother surprisingly “put that trust in [him]” to be Esther’s guardian, it was “because it was [his] to justify it” (*Bleak House*, p. 213). The trust placed in Jarndyce has no warrant except that in trusting one creates the grounds for trust such that the trusted person will justify your trust by being trustworthy. Jarndyce takes this obligation so seriously that he avoids any hint of self-interest and refuses “to be thanked” (*Bleak House*, p. 213), seeing gratitude itself as a form of payment that could potentially taint him with the world of Chancery (*Bleak House*, p. 67). Trust thus emerges as a mutually reinforcing system. Esther gives to Jarndyce her “trusting, trusty face,” and Jarndyce replies to her trusting nature and character by also being trusting and trustworthy (*Bleak House*, p. 87). This takes the form of trusting Esther not only with the keys to the household, but also as a confidant for himself and his other wards, Ada and Richard (*Bleak House*, pp. 65, 91).

Jarndyce and Esther’s relationship serves as the moral exemplar in the novel—a relationship grounded in Esther’s attitude of optimism in the good will of others and a sincere belief that they will be moved by her trust to be trustworthy. It is precisely this optimistic faith in others that Esther diffuses in those around her and that is symbolized in one of her many aliases, Summerson (“wherever Dame Durden went, there was

sunshine and summer air" [*Bleak House*, p. 378]). If, as Moran claims, trust functions on the principle of charity, then Esther's charitable acts of trust enable her to develop ethical bonds with others and inhabit a world more substantively real than the duplicitous world of Chancery, which for her carries "no reality" (*Bleak House*, p. 308). Thus the chapter "In Trust," wherein Jarndyce and Esther become engaged, epitomizes an ethos of mutual trust, confidence, and togetherness that is immediately controverted by the subsequent chapter's description of "Tom All Alone's"—where poor Jo is hunted down amid filth, illness, suspicion, isolation, and poverty.

In this context, Jarndyce's proposal in letter-form carefully distinguishes itself from the world of writing and documents allied with Chancery. Writing in *Bleak House*, particularly letter-writing, is associated with the world of secrets and the power wielded over others through written documents, as both Tulkinghorn and Bucket well know. By contrast, Dickens repeatedly figures trust through the promissory language of speech-acts and face-to-face interaction. Thus when Jarndyce in his letter presents the "full case" of his proposal to Esther, he does so with the unselfish honesty with which he would "have spoken to [her]" (*Bleak House*, pp. 538, 537). And Esther delivers her answer in person. Similarly, when Charley attends to Esther during her illness, Esther puts her "great trust, humanly speaking" in her (*Bleak House*, p. 390). The promissory language of trust as a speech-act that results in a mutually reinforcing bond between trustee and trusted takes its most significant form in the "sacred trust" that Esther vouchsafes in Woodcourt as Richard's only sincere friend (*Bleak House*, p. 607). "I trust implicitly to you . . . I know and deeply feel how sacredly you keep your promise," says Esther (*Bleak House*, p. 707). Esther's affective attitude of trust collapses here the difference between feeling and knowing since it is through trusting that she knows.

I have structured my discussion of Dickens's novel by contrasting the ethos of suspicion and distrust implied by the omniscient narrator's viewpoint to that of Esther's trusting disposition. *Bleak House*, of course, is not structured in neat halves, but slices back and forth to interrupt our readerly experience of suspicion and distrust with its opposite, where neither one, as James Buzard

states, is allowed to have “discursive momentum” (*Disorienting Fiction*, p. 122). In this interruptive structure, the reader begins with the skeptical stance of the omniscient narrator but concludes with Esther’s narrative and the particular disposition that informs her world-view. This conclusion, as commentators have noted, is purposely inconclusive, ending as it does with a dash and seemingly mid-sentence.<sup>53</sup> The indeterminate conclusion, moreover, suspends us between the two differing narrative points of view. Audrey Jaffe writes that the novel’s double-narration allows us “to do what omniscience cannot do: to stand in the space between what is constructed as the subject and the impersonal agency which seems to construct it” (*Vanishing Points*, p. 148). Our position between these two points of view, however, leads us not only to question the limited knowledge that either an objective or subjective account delivers, but also to question the grounds of that knowledge. Here the final words with which the novel suspends us are crucial:

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—. (*Bleak House*, p. 770)

The ending is not so much inconclusive as a reiteration of the initial supposition that grounded an epistemology and ethics rooted in trust. *Bleak House* frames this supposition, as I discussed earlier, in Esther’s opening chapter as her affectionate disposition—a trusting attitude that she enacts without suspicion, though she recognizes through a retrospective, second-order reflection that one could subject trust to query. This trusting disposition carried with it a caveat—that her vanity did not deceive her. In the conclusion of *Bleak House* it is precisely this vanity that is again in question since what she does not know is whether, as Woodcourt tells her, she is pretty, though

<sup>53</sup> D. A. Miller argues, for example, that *Bleak House* insists on the absence of closure and makes “suspension” of closure, which characterizes the Jarndyce case, the form of its conclusion (see *The Novel and the Police*, pp. 85–101).

she admits to looking in the mirror. Does the subjective reflexivity implied in looking at herself in the mirror distort the supposition on which her argument rests, that her affectionate and trusting disposition quickens her comprehension?

Esther's response to this question tellingly shifts from past to present tense in a manner that implicitly differentiates, I would argue, first- and second-order trust. She denies self-consciously knowing or reflecting on her beauty in the past because such deliberate contemplation would cancel the reflexive nature of ur-trust and its performance. Shifting to the present, Esther also denies being in possession of such knowledge of her beauty and trusting disposition. She then asserts what she does "know" or believe *in*—namely, all those whom she regards with an affective attitude of trust and as beautiful. Vanity—the perception of one's own value—here functions as a foundational premise that one cannot distrust: her esteem and trust in her value is also an esteem and trust in the value of others, a beauty beyond all proof. The reflexive, self-supporting rationale of trust delivers us a world that, Esther asserts, we can nevertheless assert our belief *in*, "even supposing" that such foundational premises are not subject to demonstrable knowledge.



The implicit argument that structures Esther's narrative, I argue, can also be read as a model of how British literary realism solicits the reader's trust. *Bleak House* foregrounds belief in the fictional world as a primal ur-trust—an unreflective belief-in or attitudinal faith that we are invited to reflect upon self-consciously and thus achieve a second-order awareness of first-order trust. Thus the substance of the novel's reality effect resides in the responses of its readers, who experience what it is like (both cognitively and affectively) to take the world on trust and come to an *a posteriori* awareness of their tacit belief *in* the "real world" that they practically perform in everyday life but about which they typically do not meditate. In this context, we can understand the discursive chasm that separates the omniscient narrator and Esther, whose narratives seem to progress independent of (and only obliquely aware of) the

other,<sup>54</sup> as an exemplary instance of the dynamic that I have sketched between first- and second-order trust: the omniscient narrator's account in present-tense references an epistemological stance that grapples with questions of truth and falsity as he shifts between rationally justified belief and skepticism, whereas Esther represents a nonepistemic ur-trust that is foundational to the omniscient narrator's epistemological inquiry yet about which he remains reflexively unaware.

This awareness, rather, is *Bleak House's* gift to its readers, who may consider the relationship between the two narrative points of view and thereby fully attain the retrospective knowledge of trust that is denied to the novel's principal narrators. Here, the reader's experience of the novel's temporal and narrative structure plays a crucial role. The reader's experience of novelistic fiction results in knowledge of the fictional world that, according to Irene Tucker, is inherently "temporalized" and "cumulative": on the one hand, the reader's interpretive relation to passages that she reads is bounded and informed by passages from the novel that she earlier read and yet, on the other hand, the reader's movement through the novel's temporality also leads her to dilate on an imaginative future in which she considers probabilistic outcomes given what has already transpired in the novel.<sup>55</sup> In *Bleak House*, the reader's accretion of knowledge over time is complicated by the temporal structure of the two interweaving narratives. The reader assesses a present-tense narrative in which the omniscient narrator does not disclose the future and a retrospective narrative in which Esther presents past events with knowledge of how they unfolded even as the narrative underscores her antecedent state of ignorance (or repression) and the absence of any probabilistic thinking regarding the future. Given the opposing temporal structures of the two narratives, the novel incites skepticism

<sup>54</sup> Esther seems to be aware of the omniscient narrator when she describes her narrative as her "portion of these pages" (*Bleak House*, p. 17), and the omniscient narrator makes a passing reference to Esther sleeping and waking (p. 76), which suggests he knows of her existence. On this point, see Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things*, p. 87; and Schor, *Dickens and the Daughter of the House*, p. 117.

<sup>55</sup> Irene Tucker, *A Probable State: The Novel, the Contract, and the Jews* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 88; see pp. 84, 139–41.

toward the narrators as readers, for example, compare their respective accounts of the same persons and events or consider how foreknowledge may influence Esther's retrospective account.<sup>56</sup> But as Tucker suggests, readers' temporalized experiences of the realist novel's fictional world is what enables them self-consciously to reflect upon, and thus segregate, whatever emotional or cognitive states they inhabit while reading from both the temporality of reading and the temporality embedded within the novel's narrative (Tucker, *A Probable State*, p. 84). In this context, while the temporal experience of reading *Bleak House* or the temporality that structures the novel's two narratives may lead readers to oscillate between belief and skepticism, the experience of reading novelistic fiction allows them to detach such oscillation from both the novel's temporality and their reading of it. Through this act of detachment, readers can then achieve another level of reflective awareness by contemplating how the alternating movement between belief and skepticism is founded upon a first-order trust that is altogether *atemporal*.

I consider realism as especially suited to generating such readerly contemplation due to its explicit fictionality, which not only reproduces the absorptive belief-states that accompany our everyday immersion in the phenomenal world, but also reproduces the attitude of critical distance regarding these belief-states were we to adopt a self-reflective stance toward our epistemic encounter with the world. Both fictionality and realism operate across genres but intersect with the genealogy of the British novel in specific ways. Catherine Gallagher has demonstrated that fictionality emerged as a distinct category in mid-eighteenth-century Britain and was "coterminous with the rise of the novel" because it was the novel, in contrast to other genres (e.g., romance, allegory, memoirs), that openly alluded to its fictional status.<sup>57</sup> Realism, Gallagher writes, was "fiction's formal sign," its "code" (*Nobody's Story*, pp. xvii, 174). The British novel's "overt fictionality" and representation of "fictional Nobodies"

<sup>56</sup> On the novel's presentation of "familiar" characters and events "as though for the first time," see Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things*, p. 56.

<sup>57</sup> Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1994), p. 163; see pp. xvi-xvii.

who bore no historical referent required the construction of highly particularized narratives that endowed the everyday lives of fictional characters with greater verisimilitude (Gallagher, *Nobody's Story*, pp. xix, 170–74). In this way, the realist novel encourages our belief in the fictional world represented and yet, through its patent fictionality, invites self-conscious reflection upon the beliefs and conventions that constitute our common world that we otherwise, in day-to-day life, simply enact. As Ian Duncan writes: “Absorbed in everyday life, we overlook the ‘motives and principles’ that regulate its practice—until the novel holds them up for our recognition.”<sup>58</sup>

The reader's dyadic experience of absorption in, and reflection on, the “motives and principles” that regulate everyday life has led some critics to posit a parallel between the novel reader's see-sawing experience of belief and skepticism and the skeptical stance of British empiricists.<sup>59</sup> In so doing, they follow a longstanding critical tradition that links the epistemology of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British realist fiction with modern philosophical skepticism. In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), for example, Ian Watt interprets realism as a partial response to the skepticism that undergirds Descartes's philosophical rationalism and British empiricism.<sup>60</sup> Watt credits Descartes's skeptical and materialist method in the *Discourse on Method* (1637) and *Meditations* with supplying a newly individualist approach to

<sup>58</sup> Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2007), p. 117.

<sup>59</sup> See my subsequent discussion of Duncan, Ding, Kareem, and Gallagher.

<sup>60</sup> See Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1962), pp. 12–18. At base, skepticism entails the experience of doubt and can either be “limited in scope” and address a particular issue (e.g., whether telepathy is possible) or be more sweeping (e.g., radical skepticism). See John Greco, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, ed. John Greco (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008), p. 4. Rather than a radical skepticism that considers all knowledge to be inherently impossible, the skepticism of Locke and Hume is limited and concerns knowledge from the senses. Yet even this sensible experience, as Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689) makes clear, delivers us “probable” but not “certain knowledge” (see Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, revised edition [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003], p. 260). Similarly Hume, while dismissive of radical skepticism, is an “unmitigated skeptic” if by skeptic we mean “a critique of the capacities of our intellectual faculties” (see Robert J. Fogelin, “Hume's Skepticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume, Second Edition*, ed. David Fate Norton and Jacqueline Taylor [Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009], p. 234).

questions of truth in which we take “nothing on trust” (*The Rise of the Novel*, p. 13). The novel, Watt claims, “is the form of literature which most fully reflects this individualist and innovating reorientation” (*The Rise of the Novel*, p. 13). Descartes’s *Discourse* and *Meditations* establish the methodological paradigm for British empiricists like John Locke and David Hume. And just as empiricists like Hume test the veracity of truth-claims via the particulars of immediate experience, Watt argues that the novel’s “formal realism” relies on the representation of lived particulars (*The Rise of the Novel*, p. 32). Watt’s formal realism here resembles the Humean model of testimonial knowledge: the realist novel gives readers an “authentic report of human experience,” whose reliability and trustworthiness readers must test much like a jury (*The Rise of the Novel*, p. 32).<sup>61</sup> Realist representation for Watt, as for other critics like George Levine, rests on a notion of referential correspondence between language and the objective world as writers attempt, as Levine phrases it, to “describ[e] directly not some other language but reality itself.”<sup>62</sup> Yet, Levine notes, the novel’s attempt to represent the objective world is continuously undercut by its debt to a skeptical empiricism (*The Realistic Imagination*, pp. 257–58), which registers our incapacity to know the objective world beyond our subjective experience of it through the senses.

The rise of modern epistemological skepticism and scientific method represents a facet of the broader transition into a secularized modernity that, as Michael McKeon demonstrates, contributed to the emergence of the English novel out of romance. McKeon attributes the progressive shift from “the falsifications of ‘romance’” to an emphasis on probability in the novel to “the early modern revolution in narrative epistemology.”<sup>63</sup> In this epistemological revolution, romance was countered by a “naive empiricism” that asserted “historicity” in its reports of

<sup>61</sup> We can trace realism’s reliance on testimonial knowledge not only to empiricist notions of testimony, but also to the legal discourse that shaped the novel’s generic developments. See Jonathan H. Grossman, *The Art of Alibi: English Law Courts and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2002), pp. 6, 21–24.

<sup>62</sup> George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600–1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1987), p. 48.

the “authentic truth”—an empiricism that was then critiqued by an “extreme skepticism” that regarded such empiricism itself as romance (McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*, p. 48). The skepticism that McKeon locates at the origins of the English novel is, for Gallagher, the “*disposition*” of novelistic realism more generally.<sup>64</sup> According to Gallagher, “modernity is fiction-friendly because it encourages disbelief,” and its themes call attention “to the habit of mind it discourages: faith” (“The Rise of Fictionality,” pp. 345–46). The novel’s plots and characters “[activate] our skepticism” and “ironic credulity” regarding the story’s “plausibility” (Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” p. 346).<sup>65</sup> Such disbelief saturates the experience of reading and yet also supplies the conditions of fictionality: the “disposition of ironic credulity [is] enabled by optimistic incredulity” (Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” p. 346).

As Gallagher’s argument illustrates, skepticism occupies a prominent position not only in epistemologies of British literary realism, but also in how we understand the reader’s experience of belief toward the novel’s fictional representations. Duncan writes, for example, that the “nothing” that Jane Austen’s realist fictions describe as the substance of our common, phenomenal world “emerge[s] from Humean empiricism,” where “nothing” references the metaphysical “abyss” concealed by the imaginative fiction made up of shared customs and associations: both our everyday “common life” and realist novels are a product of the imagination’s capacity to stitch together “fictive,” yet collectively endorsed, “intersubjective representation[s]” out of the disparate realm of appearances (*Scott’s Shadow*, pp. 119–20, 125). Hume’s writings suggest that everyday life is a fictional construction and, most significantly, that the belief-states that accompany our encounter with phenomenological “matters of fact” and imaginative fictions exist on a continuum and possibly overlap (*Enquiry*, pp. 24–25). Belief, Hume claims in the *Treatise*, “consists not in the nature and order of our ideas,” but “in their feeling to the mind,” and it is this “firm and vivid” feeling that

<sup>64</sup> Catherine Gallagher, “The Rise of Fictionality,” in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), I, 345, emphasis in original.

<sup>65</sup> Gallagher borrows the phrase “ironic credulity” from Felix Martinez-Bonati.

“distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination” (*Treatise*, pp. 146–47). As Katherine Ding notes, Hume’s emphasis on sensory impressions means that “fiction has the potential to produce not only a representation of experience but also the vivacity imparted by experience itself: the diacritical mark of Humean reality.”<sup>66</sup>

The point of convergence between Humean belief and realist fiction extends even further. Duncan contends that if the phenomenal world we hold in common, like realist fiction, is a product of the Humean imagination, both elicit from us a “double consciousness” in which we are aware of their fictive nature and yet nevertheless remain committed to their fictiveness (*Scott’s Shadow*, pp. 122–23). Ding adds that, for Hume, “to believe is habitually to suspend disbelief, to leave off [one’s] skepticism,” since for Hume “reflection” on the operations of consciousness “reveals . . . a fundamental parallel between fiction and reality: if the belief in poetic fictions is illusory, then so is the belief in reality” (“Searching After the Splendid Nothing,” pp. 560, 553). This is a recognition that, Ding claims, must be avoided, since such belief (however illusory) sustains everyday life. Sarah Tindal Kareem casts Ding’s insight in Coleridgean terms: the “willing suspension of disbelief” describes not only the reader of fiction but also the Humean skeptic, who expresses a “self-conscious faith in matters of fact” and ultimately must “trust” the evidence of her senses despite the absence of an epistemic foundation.<sup>67</sup>

The foregoing arguments on Hume assume that the absence of an epistemic foundation necessitates a vertiginous fall into a metaphysical and epistemological void that can only be averted by suspending or bracketing one’s skeptical insights. Yet it is precisely such a conclusion that, I argue, both Hume and realist fiction discourage. Thus rather than teaching us, as Watt claims, to take “nothing on trust,” realism (and Humean empiricism) teaches us that the skeptical disposition is always circumscribed by a disposition to trust our phenomenal experience of

<sup>66</sup> Katherine Ding, “‘Searching After the Splendid Nothing’: Gothic Epistemology and the Rise of Fictionality,” *ELH*, 80 (2013), 552.

<sup>67</sup> Sarah Tindal Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), pp. 4, 97.

the external world. In a well-known passage from the *Treatise*, wherein Hume confronts the extremity of his own skeptical reflections, he asserts that what prevents philosophy from descending into the radical skepticism that doubts the very possibility of knowledge altogether is not “reason” but the “lively impression of [the] senses” and ordinary life: “I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends . . .” (*Treatise*, p. 316).<sup>68</sup> Hume’s skepticism finds its “delirium” checked by our “natural propensity” or “good-humour’d disposition” to believe the “vivacity” of our sensory impressions, which skepticism might assail but never wholly shakes (*Treatise*, pp. 313, 316–17). Thus rather than bracketing our skepticism in order to maintain our belief in the phenomenal world, Hume’s “naturalism” implies that it is in our nature to believe irrespective of what skeptical arguments about the external world are marshaled before us.<sup>69</sup> Belief, according to naturalism, is reflexive: we believe in the evidence of our senses because they impel belief. Hume’s “biperspectivalism,” as Michael Williams terms it, conceives the natural disposition to believe as distinct from the skeptical disposition that the philosopher adopts when interrogating epistemically justifiable knowledge about the external world.<sup>70</sup> Epistemological skepticism remains bounded by an ontology in which our subjective sensory impressions furnish the indubitable ground of our beliefs. “Beliefs are thus ideas that we rely on” (Williams, “Hume’s Skepticism,” p. 91), and without reliance, or trust, in them and the vivid sensory impressions from which they arise, we would be left, like George Berkeley, with a “forlorn Scepticism.”<sup>71</sup>

What Hume refers to as the “good humour’d disposition” to believe in “the general maxims of the world” that are beyond doubt and yet incapable of proof (*Treatise*, pp. 317, 316), I have

<sup>68</sup> This Humean insight, for those contemporary philosophers following Hume’s lead, reveals the limits of reason and skepticism as a special instance of philosophic thinking. See Greco, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> On P. F. Strawson’s argument on naturalism in Reid and Hume, see James Van Cleve, “Reid’s Response to the Skeptic,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, pp. 293–94.

<sup>70</sup> See Michael Williams, “Hume’s Skepticism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Skepticism*, pp. 102–4.

<sup>71</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (London: Jacob Tonson, 1734), p. 4.

referenced in this essay as the disposition of trust as a tacit, foundational certainty or ur-trust. In this way I read Hume's naturalism as approximating Wittgenstein's notion of belief as beginning in a form of certainty that is *nonpropositional* and *nonepistemic*, that is, a grasping of the phenomenal world that expresses fundamental beliefs about the world that are not grounded in reasoned justification yet are nevertheless necessary for steering our way through the world and acquiring justified knowledge.<sup>72</sup> "At the foundation of well-founded belief," Wittgenstein writes, "lies belief that is not founded" (*On Certainty*, p. 33e, §253). Groundless, unreflective certainty (i.e., ur-trust or belief-in) is paradoxically both the ground of our intentional mental states and propositional attitudes and the background, or "world-picture," that allows us to map and steer the world.<sup>73</sup> It is this "inherited background" of fundamental beliefs, rules, and normative descriptions that we assimilate from, and perform in,<sup>74</sup> the social world against which we form our propositional knowledge and "distinguish between true and false" (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 15e, §94). In this way our "picture of the world" functions as "a kind of mythology"—"rules of a game" that we do not learn explicitly but absorb through practice (Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 15e, §94–95).<sup>75</sup>

While in everyday life we do not self-consciously reflect upon this "mythology," the meta-language of realism supplies a potential site for such critical practice: by moving us between the poles of first- and second-order trust, it generates awareness of the groundless certainty that underpins our "world-picture." I thus interpret realist fiction not only as a mode that invites "ironic credulity" against the backdrop of skeptical incredulity,

<sup>72</sup> See Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* pp. 9, 60–62. On beliefs as akin to a map "by which we steer," see D. M. Armstrong, *Belief, Truth, and Knowledge*, p. 3, emphasis in original.

<sup>73</sup> See Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 24e, §167; and Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* pp. 53–54, 61.

<sup>74</sup> On normative description, see Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 24e, §167; and Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* p. 91.

<sup>75</sup> While the world-picture is not proof about the objective world, it is nevertheless "conditioned by reality" and functions as reliable evidence: our trust in it forms the bedrock of both everyday knowledge and science (Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* p. 152).

but also as making possible another level of self-reflective insight in which we apprehend the dynamic of belief and skepticism as a second-order experience that is made possible by a first-order, nonepistemic foundation of trust and certitude. It is this trust that supplies the conditions for the possibility of doubt. Hence, rather than read the realist novel's overt fictionality as engaging readers in an epistemic and phenomenological experience that oscillates "between credulity and skepticism" (Kareem, *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder*, p. 2), we can instead understand it as encouraging readers to adopt a self-reflective stance in which they achieve awareness of the groundless certainty that persists and makes possible the epistemological see-saw of justified belief and skepticism. The "nothing" that Austen's novels describe, then, does not designate a skeptical abyss but the phenomenological background that we groundlessly assume on trust and believe *in* because without this groundless, indubitable belief we would possess no foundation for our other (rationally justified) beliefs.

*Bleak House* stages this everyday epistemic encounter with the world through its narrative structure, which poises the distrust, skepticism, and endless suspense associated with the Jarnyce case against the attitude of trust and affectionate disposition of Esther. The reader's suspension between these two narrative points of view does not simply teach habits of doubt and the bracketing of habituated beliefs but,<sup>76</sup> as Wittgenstein states, that our doubt unfolds against a background of certainty (*On Certainty*, p. 15e, §94; p. 23e, §160). In this regard, Esther's narrative gives voice to the epistemic and ethical value of a trusting disposition and functions in the novel as the background of trust and credulity against which all our doubt unfolds. Esther presents herself early in the novel as precisely the background of trust that grounds our belief and circumspect knowing of *Bleak House's* world: "It seems so curious to me to be obliged to write all this about myself! As if this narrative

<sup>76</sup> For critics such as Caroline Levine, skepticism's "suspension of judgment" was particularly integral to the role suspense plays in realist novels by promoting the reader's experience of doubt. See Caroline Levine, *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense: Victorian Realism and Narrative Doubt* (Charlottesville: Univ. of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 3–8.

were the narrative of *my* life! But my little body will soon fall into the background now” (*Bleak House*, p. 27, emphasis in original). The affectionate and trusting disposition that falls into the background—a disposition that quickens Esther’s comprehension and underpins her noticing way—is also our disposition and our medium of noticing things even as we observe the distrustful suspense enacted by the omniscient narrator. We see this readerly relation to Esther exemplified in an early scene when Esther sits between Richard and Ada and claims: “They . . . really seemed to have fallen in love with me, instead of one another; they were so confiding, and so trustful, and so fond of me” (*Bleak House*, p. 160). As in this *mise-en-scène*, the novel positions us between the trusting, confiding nature of Ada and the extreme skepticism of Richard without realizing that, all the while, Esther’s combination of trust and careful observation is the one being cultivated in us as we question the world of *Bleak House* against a backdrop of credulity.

We do not know that we have entered into a realism grounded on the supposition of trust until the end of the novel when Esther addresses us as “the unknown friend” to whom her confession has been entrusted (*Bleak House*, p. 767). As with interpersonal relations, the reflexive and self-supporting nature of trust creates conditions of obligation that engender trustworthiness. Just as Esther trusts her narrative with us, we are obligated to take her narrative on trust—the supposition that grounds her belief is also the grounds for our belief in the narrative. We can understand the transaction between Esther and the reader as the basis for the novel’s realism if, as Hilary Schor claims, we see realism as presenting a contract between reader and text for belief.<sup>77</sup> This notion of contractual obligation with respect to realism is particularly important for my reading of *Bleak House* since British contract theory from Hobbes to Locke and Hume has its roots in the language of trust and promises: through contract we promise to uphold our agreements, and trust is the supposition that grounds promise-making since we would only make promises under the condition

<sup>77</sup> See Hilary M. Schor, *Curious Subjects: Women and the Trials of Realism* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), p. 43.

that we already trust.<sup>78</sup> *Bleak House* makes this supposition the grounds of its realism and, in so doing, implicitly critiques Hume's assertion that testimony that cannot be traced back to immediate experience is mere supposition and grounded in nothing "real." In *Bleak House*, the testimonies that lead back to what is not real is Chancery and the Jarndyce case—that "masterly fiction" whose mode is not that of realism but the dramatic mode of "Farce" (*Bleak House*, pp. 22, 758).

I have characterized trust in suppositional terms, and this characterization poses relevance both for everyday life and for the realist novels that seek to depict it. To apprehend and judge our world, Wittgenstein reminds us, we must begin to trust somewhere, and this presupposition goes without saying because it is logically necessary to making our way through the world and interacting with others.<sup>79</sup> Much like practical life, novelistic realism demands that its readers perform a "suppositional exercise" that they never explicitly declare in illocutionary terms and yet remains requisite to the act of reading and contemplating the fictional world (Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," pp. 346–48). In "The Reality Effect" (1968), Roland Barthes writes that modern realism achieves its effect by omitting the "*Let there be, suppose...*" with which ancient rhetoric candidly begins.<sup>80</sup> Yet in "renounc[ing] this implicit introduction" (Barthes, "The Reality Effect," p. 147), modern realism achieves even greater verisimilitude: by omitting the supposition of trust that sanctions our belief in the fictional world, it all the more accurately stages the unreflective ur-trust and belief in the phenomenal world that we enact in daily life.

My argument here extends the commonplace assertion that realism shows us what our everyday world is like. Harry Shaw writes, for example, that while literary realism "does not attempt to represent the world 'directly,'" it does posit "an ontological claim" as to "what our world is really like"—an ontological

<sup>78</sup> On the relation between promises, trust, and contract theory, see Hollis, *Trust within Reason*; and Gambetta, "Can We Trust Trust," p. 221.

<sup>79</sup> On the logical necessity of hinge beliefs, see Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p. 44e, §341–43; and Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty"*, p. 31.

<sup>80</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Reality Effect," in his *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), p. 147, emphasis in original.

claim that, Shaw avers, the novel establishes through its metonymic representation of “the social and historical quotidian” (*Narrating Reality*, pp. 94–95, 106–7). For Barthes, showing what the “world is really like” is central to realism’s “*referential illusion*,” whose minor descriptive details appear “to *denote* the real directly,” but in fact only “*signify* it” (“The Reality Effect,” p. 148, emphasis in original). Yet realism’s signification of what the “world is really like” replicates something even more essential to everyday experience: it makes apparent how a groundless yet indubitable supposition—a “let there be” or “suppose”—underwrites our experience of the phenomenal world and intersubjective relations. This is to say, then, that if the realist mode makes an ontological claim about what the world is like, this ontological claim about the mind’s relationship to the world entails a nonskepticist stance wherein we self-consciously experience what it is like to be, feel, and think in a world that we unreflectively assume on trust.

The preceding account of realism suggests that, in contrast to those arguments that link realism with the modernizing forces of skepticism or secularization, the reader’s affective experience of trust in the testimonial knowledge afforded by realist texts models the very form of “attitudinal faith” or belief-in that would seem to be waning in an increasingly secular age.<sup>81</sup> I have thus far theorized belief-in through philosophical discourse, but I turn now to a nineteenth-century text that theorizes belief and religious faith in a manner akin to notions of ur-trust and objective certainty, John Henry Cardinal Newman’s *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870). Newman’s target in the *Essay* is the very text that has now become central to philosophical discussions of trust and testimonial knowledge, Hume’s chapter “Of Miracles” from the *Treatise of Human Nature*. Throughout the *Essay*, Newman articulates his defense of belief, whether secular or theological, through the language of trust and testimonial knowledge. Newman counters Hume’s

<sup>81</sup> Andrew H. Miller connects the novel to skeptical inquiry, particularly through its use of point of view (see Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008], p. 25). On the relationship between processes of secularization and the novel’s rise, see McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel*.

claim that miracles are improbable because they violate “the laws of nature” by emphasizing the inner, private experience of belief as a form of “certitude” or “assent” in which we assert unconditionally the truth of our concrete perceptions.<sup>82</sup> This experience of certitude is an interior, affective response—“a specific feeling” in which the reflexive mind feels knowing that it knows (Newman, *Essay*, pp. 203–4). The mind feels such certitude not only toward concrete experience and the testimony of others, but also toward “the world unseen” (Newman, *Essay*, pp. 92, 240).

Such certitude as “felt,” reflexive knowledge grounds itself in what Newman terms the illative sense or, more plainly, our innate rational capacity to make inferences and to judge (*Essay*, p. 345). As a form of tacit knowledge that takes our reasoning capacities as a given, the illative sense functions as the basis for judging and trusting our empirical experience and the testimony of others. Newman thus pushes the empirical skepticism of Hume and Locke to its limits, asking what justification we have for trusting our perceptions of the “laws of nature.” He seeks to demonstrate that some of the most basic philosophical assertions are beyond logical demonstration and are thus “tethered” to “the testimony of psychological facts,” which are frequently impervious to testing (Newman, *Essay*, pp. 179, 164). From the boy who “trust[s]” the truthfulness and authority of his mother to certitude in “secular” and “divine knowledge” (Newman, *Essay*, pp. 16, 237), trust and testimonial knowledge are the underlying enthymeme, the *suppose* that is assumed even by Hume, and that enables us to feel, think, and act in a world constructed by both individuals and the inherited experience of the human community.<sup>83</sup> Newman—the conservative Catholic-convert and guiding light of the Oxford movement—here sounds very much like the later Wittgenstein of *On Certainty*.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> John Henry Cardinal Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909), pp. 81–83, 203–4.

<sup>83</sup> Hugo Meynell argues that Newman assumes a “continuity” between religious belief and the belief that informs science and everyday practical life (see Meynell, “Newman’s Vindication of Faith in the *Grammar of Assent*,” in *Newman after a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], p. 250).

<sup>84</sup> Moyal-Sharrock compares Wittgenstein’s objective certainty to “religious belief,” i.e., “enacted faith” (*Understanding Wittgenstein’s “On Certainty,”* p. 200, emphasis in original).

Given the continuum that Newman assumes between certainty in worlds seen and unseen, his argument presents a productive avenue for examining the particular type of belief that imaginative “fiction” engenders. Rachel Ablow argues that Newman allows for an understanding of belief as akin to fiction: “fiction’s usefulness lies in the way it encourages readers to experience beliefs *as if* they were their own—a state that ultimately comes to seem indistinguishable from believing it ‘for real.’”<sup>85</sup> As I have been arguing, the reason why belief in real and imagined worlds can feel “indistinguishable” is because in both cases the certitude or belief in the “testimony in particulars” anchors itself in a groundless trust (Newman, *Essay*, p. 62). Newman’s argument on certitude poses another point of relevance for theories of realist fiction, particularly its historicist varieties. Newman suggests in the *Essay* that the “illative sense” has a “range” that renders even empirical social sciences like history, which presumably rely on a factual chain of “testimony,” subject to “divination” (*Essay*, pp. 345, 366, 370). In order to present a full image of the past, historians must compensate for what is unavailable either to the senses or through testimony by exercising their “tact” and “judgment” and filling in gaps imaginatively (Newman, *Essay*, p. 370). Our knowledge of the historical past, concrete experience, and worlds unseen are all equally “tethered” to what is beyond demonstration.

We can extend Newman’s observations on historiography to acts of perception and realist effect. Drawing on recent work in cognitive psychology, Elaine Auyoung contends that everyday perceptual experience compensates for incomplete visual information by supplying what is missing through acts of inference that draw upon “preexisting knowledge and expectations.”<sup>86</sup> In a similar fashion, novelistic description relies on “partial cues” to the reader, who then constructs “implied fictional worlds” from “fragmentary details” (Auyoung, “Rethinking the Reality Effect,” pp. 582, 585). Auyoung’s observations echo Roman

<sup>85</sup> Rachel Ablow, “Reading and Re-reading: Wilde, Newman, and the Fiction of Belief,” in *The Feeling of Reading*, p. 158.

<sup>86</sup> Elaine Auyoung, “Rethinking the Reality Effect: Detail and the Novel,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cognitive Literary Studies*, ed. Lisa Zunshine (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), p. 583.

Ingarden's claim that the omission of descriptive attributes regarding persons or things in a literary text (e.g., lyric, novels, drama) creates a site of "indeterminacy" that the reader will "involuntarily fill . . . out" in order to "'concretize'" the representation.<sup>87</sup> The act of filling out, as Newman's analysis of historiography indicates, need not be restricted to the novel's descriptive details. Drawing on Shaw's argument that the nineteenth-century novel's metonymic historicism cultivates "a habit of mind" wherein readers think through psychological and causal relations (*Narrating Reality*, pp. 106–7), Rae Greiner notes that this mental habit also requires readers to engage in acts of sympathy, wherein they infer details about characters' thought-processes that the novel otherwise leaves unstated and yet without which the narrative representation would not come fully "into life" (*Sympathetic Realism*, pp. 24, 26, 36).

We need not interpret such supplementary acts, whether in history, imaginative literature, or everyday experience, as displaying the skeptical limits of knowledge. In her reading of *Bleak House*, Auyoung claims that Dickens's skepticism distinguishes between what can be known and what we as readers imaginatively supply by "filling in the gaps" of missing information.<sup>88</sup> Yet it is precisely the distinction between the known and the imagined that Newman's foregrounding of trust makes so problematic, since even what we know requires us to make inferences that rely on trust and testimonial knowledge of concrete experience inherited from others. The process of "filling in" that Auyoung describes in fact identifies the phenomenological experience of certainty—the "picture of the world" that is both the "background" of inherited knowledge that we continually fill in and the taken-for-granted "ground" by which we steer (Moyal-Sharrock, *Understanding Wittgenstein's "On Certainty,"* pp. 53–55). It is this evolving "world-picture" that we bring to concrete experience, history, and literature as we fill in missing details and bring our picture, whether real or imagined, into life.

<sup>87</sup> Roman Ingarden, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 50, 52–53.

<sup>88</sup> Elaine Auyoung, "Standing Outside *Bleak House*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 68 (2013), 184, 186, 193, 197. Auyoung borrows the phrase "filling in the gaps" from Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (1978).

By examining the role that trust plays in practical life, ethics, and theoretical knowledge, I have sought to disclose something that is so obvious about ordinary experience that it escapes our attention. Realism, in this regard, reveals something familiar about our everyday life that we do not notice because the reflexive enactment of trust is the enabling presupposition of our phenomenological experience of, and epistemic encounter with, the world. It is this “difficulty of seeing the obvious,” as Stanley Cavell phrases it, that my argument on trust and *Bleak House*’s realist effect has unpacked.<sup>89</sup> In referencing the recalcitrance of the obvious to perspicuity, Cavell builds on Wittgenstein’s observations that “the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.) The real foundations of his enquiry do not strike a man at all. Unless *that* fact has at some time struck him.”<sup>90</sup> To be struck by what otherwise does not strike us as the “foundation” of our inquiry is neither to discover the conditions for the possibility of certain knowledge nor to fall into the skeptical abyss of its absence. Rather, it is to be struck by a groundless trust that we establish in practice and that we rely on without explication; like the shared communicative practices of language, this trust is “the condition of linguistic intelligibility” and implicates us in commitments for which we are accountable even if we do not always consciously deliberate upon it.<sup>91</sup> This tendency to forget, or not reflect upon, the obvious represents an aspect of ordinary phenomenological experience that realist novels reproduce in readers and, within the envelope of fictionality, render an object of possible contemplation. Yet if realism (like philosophy) invites us to reflect critically on the obvious, it is a reflective stance that we abandon as we rejoin a world with others. I dine, I play a game of backgammon, I converse, and I can do very well without knowing this—even supposing—.

<sup>89</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays, Updated Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), p. 310.

<sup>90</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), p. 50e, §129, emphasis in original.

<sup>91</sup> Espen Hammer, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 8, 22.

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ABSTRACT

Supritha Rajan, "The Epistemology of Trust and Realist Effect in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*" (pp. 64–106)

This essay argues that the narrative structure of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852–1853), which repeatedly shifts from the omniscient narrator's skeptical stance to Esther's trusting disposition, demonstrates how skepticism is ultimately grounded in an epistemology of trust. Trust constitutes a non-skeptical, affective attitude whose certitude in the phenomenal world is not subject to demonstrative proof. The latter model of trust is not only fundamental to epistemology, but also to ethical relations and practical life. The important role that trust plays in everyday life also poses relevance to our understanding of realist representation. Using *Bleak House* as its novelistic example, this essay considers realism as a mode that achieves its effect by inviting readers to adopt an attitude of trust. Such an account runs counter to traditional epistemologies of realism, which have typically aligned it with post-Cartesian skepticism.

Keywords: Charles Dickens; *Bleak House*; trust; Realism; epistemology