

**Uncanny Connected Vessels:  
the Country and the City in *Bleak House***

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Dickens's earlier novels, such as *Oliver Twist* or *The Old Curiosity Shop* rested on a sharp spatial, aesthetic and moral polarity opposing the country and the city. *Martin Chuzzlewit* began to break down the barriers between country pastoral and urban corruption by inscribing disturbing and ominous elements in the descriptions of the Wiltshire setting in the very first chapters of the novel, and by staging numerous journeys between the country and London. Circulation and cross-influences between them are even more striking in *Bleak House*, the world of which looks like a huge uncanny web<sup>1</sup>—epitomized by Chancery and its destructive power—bringing (and trapping) together the most seemingly unlikely and distant persons or places. When they finally see Jo again, Allan Woodcourt and Mr. Jarndyce both think “how

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<sup>1</sup> The web is the emblem of Chancery, and of rapacious and/or actively evil characters in *Bleak House*, such as the sinister Tulkynghorn and his “cobweb-covered” vintage wine bottles (542) or Grandfather Smallweed's own father, described as “a horny-skinned, two-legged, money-getting species of spider who spun webs to catch unwary flies and retired into holes until they were entrapped” (264). The web is also associated with secret and painful past histories as when Krook declares in Chapter 5, when Esther is not aware she is visiting the very place where her unknown father lives: “And I have a liking for rust and must and cobwebs” (48). Quite significantly, Mr. Jarndyce tells Esther that, like the “little old woman” in the nursery rhyme, she will be “clever enough” to “sweep the cobwebs out of the sky” (90).

strangely fate has entangled this rough outcast in the web of very different lives” (594), echoing the narrator’s questions, which have received so much critical attention, about the “connexion” between Lincolnshire and London, and between the Dedlocks’ dignified footman, “The Mercury in powder” and “Jo the outlaw with the broom” (202). In *Bleak House*, the meetings or reunions that are sometimes thought to be unexpected “coincidence[s]” (315) have little to do with chance and rather seem to be the result of a powerful, web-like form of determinism. W. J. Harvey evokes the “rotten centre (Chancery and Tom All Alone’s) from which the “idea of corruption radiat[es] out” and “the constant to-and-fro movement between London, Bleak House, and Chesney Wold,” a dynamism “counterpointed, in plot terms, by the sense one has of convergence, especially the sense of something closing in on Lady Dedlock” (231). A. E. Dyson points out in “Bleak House: Esther Better Not Born?” that “In place of great individual villains like Ralph Nickleby, Fagin and Quilp, we now have Chancery, Tom-All-Along’s and a darkened world,” emphasizing the shift “towards a more pervasive sense of evil rooted in impersonal things” (248).

The first two chapters juxtapose and seem to contrast London (“In Chancery”) and the country (Chesney Wold, the Dedlocks’ family seat) but they immediately highlight the unsuspected points in common between them. The first two pages of the novel are unanimously and deservedly acclaimed for their style, symbolism and masterly concentration of most of the novel’s major themes and concerns. This first chapter casts a long shadow with its description of the “implacable November weather” (1) in London, and its emphasis on the pervasive damp, mud and fog. But the latter cannot be contained or dammed up by the city and spills over into the nearby countryside, a very apt preliminary symbol for the wide-ranging and ubiquitous nature of corruption, evil and suffering in this world: “Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights” (1). Therefore, the beginning of Chapter 2, with its description of Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire, represents a companion piece to “In Chancery,” although its unexpected title, “In Fashion,” may not immediately make this clear. And in spite of obvious differences, what dominates is a sense of uncanny similarity as the narrator insists: “It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want on this same *miry* afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery but that we may pass from the one scene to the other, *as the crow flies*” (7; my emphasis). At Chesney Wold, the London lawyer’s “black figure may be seen walking before breakfast like a larger species of rook” (149). Like the omniscient narrator’s constant journeys to and from

Lincolnshire, Tulkinghorn's uncannily abolish the distance with the capital, as does the gloomy weather that constantly prevails at Chesney Wold—"The weather is so very bad [...] that the liveliest imagination can scarcely apprehend its ever being fine again" (75)—, duplicating the damp, unhealthy, fog-shrouded London atmosphere. And the ethically connoted "mire" is present in both worlds. Quite predictably, when the dry, secretive lawyer ponders in his Chancery office "at that twilight hour on all the mysteries he knows," his impenetrable musings bring together Chesney Wold—"darkening woods in the country"—, and London—"vast blank shut-up houses in town" (280).

Beyond this striking blurring of frontiers between the country and the city, what is also particularly pioneering and original in *Bleak House* is the individualized and symbolic treatment of the landscape that serves complex and varied aims: symbolizing the past, foreshadowing the future, and providing indirect psychological portraits of both the characters associated with the landscapes and of Esther in the 33 chapters (out of 67) when she is in charge of the narrative and takes over from the omniscient narrator.<sup>2</sup>

The only instances of peaceful and beautiful country settings are actually present in Esther's narrative. They are strictly restricted to a few places and reserved for a few characters, serving as an index to their moral worth. This concerns Bleak House, both Mr. Jarndyce's mansion in Hertfordshire (especially in Chapter 6, that is very aptly entitled "Quite at Home"), and the miniature copy of it he creates in Yorkshire for Allan and Esther at the end of the novel. Similarly, Mr. Boythorn's house in Lincolnshire (in Chapters 18 and 36) is characterized by a distinctly pastoral mood. Its flowers, grounds, orchards and market garden stand for "maturity and abundance," but also peace and serenity. The "whole air" is like a "great nosegay" (228) and the "old lime-tree walk" looks to Esther "like green cloisters" (227). Her descriptions of these places, landscapes and their inhabitants correspond, in plot terms, to moments of relatively carefree happiness and, in Chapter 36, to a period of recovery (after her long disease), but they also reflect her personality, assuming the role of mindscapes. The idyllic tonality may therefore be largely due to the intrinsic beauty and serenity of these country places, but it also, presumably, results from a

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<sup>2</sup> But, oddly, only 11 out of these 33 chapters are entitled "Esther's Narrative," which is not the case for "A Progress" (Ch. 3), or for two other key chapters told by her: "Lady Dedlock" (Ch. 18), in which she meets her mother for the first time (without knowing it), and "Chesney Wold" (Ch. 36), in which Lady Dedlock reveals her identity to her.

form of subjective projection akin to wish fulfilment. Actually, at the end of Chapter 30 (Caddy's wedding day), Esther thus defines herself in the third person: "they said that wherever Dame Durden went, there was sunshine and summer air" (391).

This type of remark is what has long led critics to dismiss her as transparent, if not insipid. Among them, W. J. Harvey, for instance, wrote that:

We do not, so to speak, look at Esther; we look through her at the teeming Dickensian world [...]. Esther is as lucid and neutral as a clear window. We look through at a human landscape but we are not, as with James, constantly aware that the window is limited by its frame or that it has a scratch here and an opaque spot there. (229)

A. E. Dyson, in his introduction to the Casebook Series on *Bleak House* (1969), highlights Esther's status as objective recorder of the world, comparing her narrative to a "daguerreotype," namely "a photographic process in which the impression was taken on a silver plate sensitised by iodine, and then developed by vapour of mercury," and adding that Esther was "accredited with the art" by "several reviewers" in the 1850s when this technique was quite "voguish" (14). Such a view quite ignores the various factors responsible for the "sensitization" of the photographic "plate," and the "vapour of mercury"—in other words the *melancholy*—that influences her narrative and gives it its very enigmatic and distinctive tonality. Critical views of Esther gradually changed, though, revealing and addressing what had been unperceived, misunderstood or ignored—the ambiguity, complexity and opacity of both her personality and narrative, and their strategic importance. In his "Introduction" to the New Casebook on *Bleak House* (1998), Jeremy Tambling evokes Catherine Belsey's "important study *Critical Practice* (1980), which takes *Bleak House* as nineteenth-century classic realism, finding in it a convergence of discourses that arrive at a single truth" (6), and he goes on to add that "Esther's narrative, though it seems straightforward, calm and unironical, is more ambiguous, even duplicitous, than Belsey allows" (7). Likewise, in "Interpretation in *Bleak House*" (1998), John Hillis Miller remarks that the novel "does not easily yield its meaning" that is "by no means transparent. Both narrators hide as much as they reveal" (31). As Esther reluctantly (or so it seems) admits, she is a very observant person but we become aware, as we read on, that she does not always yield or communicate the result of what she sees, notices, or learns: "I had always rather a noticing way—not a quick way, oh, no!—a *silent way of noticing* what passed before me *and thinking I should*

*like to understand it better*" (14; my emphasis). Both Esther and her text are darker than it seems, and haunted.

The evidence, however, suggests, how *fractured* her life is, so much so that the happy marriage disappears from the narrative in place of the memory of the former days, *as though the trauma was what remained, unworked through*, requiring her to tell her autobiography, though not acknowledging even to herself that she is the subject of it. (Tambling, "Introduction," 8; my emphasis)

In the highly symbolic third chapter in which Esther is in control of the narrative for the first time, and tells us about her dreary childhood at her "godmother's," when her "birthday was the most melancholy day at home in the whole year" (15), literal and figurative shadows are omnipresent. On one of these cheerless birthdays, when she questions her "godmother" about her Mamma, her relative answers her that "Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it" (16). Esther has been surrounded, dogged and inhabited by shadows since her disgraceful birth, as she regularly reminds us, for instance on the day when she learns she will go to a boarding-school:

One sunny afternoon when I had come home from school with my books and portfolio, watching *my long shadow at my side*, and as *I was gliding upstairs* to my room as usual, my godmother looked out of the parlour-door and called me back. (17; my emphasis)

There is already the suggestion of something split and spectral about the little girl "gliding upstairs" to her room "as usual." However, at this early stage, Esther's ghostly (and haunted) status is merely suggested and may pass unnoticed until she *explicitly* represents herself as her own ghost at the end of Chapter 45.<sup>3</sup> Just as her shadow, taller than she is, walks alongside her in this childhood episode, she also unconsciously harbours her dark, shadow-like mother, or the dim memory of her, within her, uncannily reversing the mother-child relationship. She buries her doll<sup>4</sup> (her symbolic *alter ego*) in a highly connoted place in the garden: "[I] quietly laid her—I am half ashamed to tell it—in the garden-earth *under the tree that shaded my old window*" (21; my emphasis).

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<sup>3</sup> "And in [Allan's] last look as we drove away, I saw that he was very sorry for me. I was glad to see it. I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes. I was glad to be tenderly remembered, to be gently pitied, not to be quite forgotten" (575).

<sup>4</sup> For illuminating analyses of the meaning and symbolism of the doll, see Audrey Jaffe (168, in particular) and Christine Van Boheemen-Saaf.

All this points to Esther's dual nature, the coexistence of her sunny and her night sides, of her conscious discourse and acts, and her unconscious voice and thought-processes. Likewise, although, when a child, her conscious self feels love for this unknown, longed-for mother, although when she finally meets her and discovers her identity in Chapter 36, she still expresses love and deep compassion for her, the way she depicts Lady Dedlock's estate, and her effect on the landscape, as a taint and a source of gloom, obscurely suggests she has imbibed Victorian values and prejudices about fallen women. As Virginia Blain argues in "Double Vision and the Double Standard in *Bleak House*," so as to expunge this "'inheritance of shame' as she aptly terms it," Esther "join[s] with the patriarchy, the world of men, of male legality and legitimacy, and to do this effectively she has to cast off her mother" and to take part in "the death-chase" with Inspector Bucket (79). But I would argue that her unconscious self casts off Lady Dedlock much earlier than this. As a matter of fact, the smallpox that disfigures her, that T. Stoehr interprets as the sign of disgrace, and the "symbol of the secret and guilty connections between the high and the low in society" (237–38), can mean something radically different. Because of it, Esther looks so altered that her face has become quite unlike her mother's while, as Guppy had pointed out, they used to look like doubles of each other. When, in Chapter 36, Esther *consciously* rejoices that her scars will prevent her from *disgracing her mother* (467) by eliminating the resemblance between them, we may consider that she is *unconsciously* rejoicing that the vanished likeness has freed her *from her mother's disgrace*—"nobody could ever now look at me and look at her and remotely think of any near tie between us" (467).

The unconscious rejection of the mother is also evinced in Esther's descriptions of the landscape around Chesney Wold, through the dichotomy present in Chapters 18 ("Lady Dedlock") and 36 ("Chesney Wold") that juxtapose the idyllic descriptions of Mr. Boythorn's house and grounds and the Gothic, *unheimlich* way in which the Dedlock estate (and its mistress) are represented. Although it is set in the country and contiguous with Mr. Boythorn's house, it seems to belong to another dimension, it has none of the positive qualities attached to the country, and even worse, Esther's narrative, as if shaped and prompted by subliminal forces, turns Chesney Wold into a source of blight, of ubiquitous and contagious darkness, the very darkness she inherited from her birth and has always tried to suppress.

Symbolically, when in Chapter 18 (significantly entitled “Lady Dedlock”), she narrates the blissful days spent with Ada and Mr. Jarndyce at Mr. Boythorn’s, the mere presence of Lady Dedlock nearby is enough to make the initially dreamy weather sultry and stormy, and to spoil and darken it just as the “shadow” on Esther’s birth has spoiled and darkened her early years. A violent storm finally breaks out, and of course, when it occurs, Lady Dedlock is around. In the lodge, her standing position behind Esther, who is sitting and cannot see her, but feels her presence, and the focus on her hand resting on Esther’s shoulder, convey a sense of domination and possession, suggesting her haunting power, and her tight, invisible hold: “Lady Dedlock had taken shelter in the lodge before our arrival there and had come out of the gloom within. She stood behind my chair with her hand upon it. I saw her with her hand close to my shoulder when I turned my head” (234).<sup>5</sup>

The same type of scenario whereby Lady Dedlock seems to materialise from darkness and to be inseparable from it occurs in Chapter 36, just before the momentous meeting when she discloses her identity to her daughter. At the very moment when Esther is thinking of the ghostly “female shape” that is said to haunt the Ghost’s Walk, another dim figure suddenly appears, as if conjured up by Esther’s thoughts, a scene prefiguring Freud’s 1919 essay on the *Unheimlich*. As in Chapter 18, the arrival of Lady Dedlock radically transforms the pastoral mood.

I was resting at my favourite point after a long ramble, and Charley was gathering violets at a little distance from me. I had been looking at the Ghost’s Walk lying in a deep shade of masonry afar off and picturing to myself the female shape that was said to haunt it when I became aware of a figure approaching through the wood. The perspective was so long and so darkened by leaves, and the shadows of the branches on the ground made it so much more intricate to the eye, that at first I could not discern what figure it was. By little and little it revealed itself to be a woman’s—a lady’s—Lady Dedlock’s. (465)

Landscapes, whether depicted by the omniscient narrator or by Esther, are always saturated with and shaped by the past. But what the “landscape painting” present in Esther’s chapters reveals to us primarily is who and what she (does not (yet) know she) is. The depiction—that Garrett Stewart compares to a “spot of time” (239–40)—of the cataclysmic-looking evening sky she sees (shortly before her illness, and her

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<sup>5</sup> Her irresistible fascination is repeatedly evoked in Chapters 18 (on p. 230, for instance) and 36: “She gave me her hand, and its deadly coldness, so at variance with the enforced composure of her features, deepened the fascination that overpowered me” (466).

discovery of her origins) with its “pale dead light both beautiful and awful,” the “long sullen lines of cloud” that “waved up like a sea stricken immovable as it was heaving,” and the “lurid glare” that “overhung the whole dark waste” (393) *towards London* conveys her sense of alienation:

I had no thought that night—none, I am quite sure—of what was soon to happen to me. But I have always remembered since that when we had stopped at the garden-gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, I had for a moment *an undefinable impression of myself as being something different* from what I then was. I know it was then and there that I had it. I have ever since connected the feeling with that spot and time and with everything associated with that spot and time, to the distant voices in the town, the barking of a dog, and the sound of wheels coming down the *miry* hill. (393; my emphasis)

When the “landscape painting” is carried out by the omniscient narrator, his prerogative (denied Esther, whose perspective is inevitably more restricted) is to achieve the feat whereby the description of a place fosters a realistic or referential illusion, is fraught with psychological symbolism (revealing a character’s hidden side), while prefiguring many episodes as well, and sometimes also working on the analeptic mode, as in the representation of Chesney Wold in Chapter 2. A. E. Dyson praised “the poetic intensity of [Dickens’s] language and the endless ground-swell of resonances beneath the plot” (“Introduction,” 14–15), a view shared by Daniel Tyler and the contributors to *Dickens’s Style* (2013), and by J. Hillis Miller who claims in “Moments of Decision in *Bleak House*” (2001) that “The genius is in the detail. This is one reason why a responsible reading of *Bleak House* is obliged to make citations, long or short, bits and pieces from the whole [...]” (50–51).

The beginning of Chapter 2, through the description of Chesney Wold—“a deadened world” (7)—, elaborates an intricate poetic and semantic network around the aptly named character of Lady Dedlock. She is *the first fully individualized* character appearing in the novel (not taking into account the Lord Chancellor in Chapter 1), a sure sign of her dramatic and symbolic importance. According to Hillis Miller (1998), “Metaphor and metonymy together make up the grammatical armature by which the reader of *Bleak House* is led to make a whole out of discontinuous parts” (32). And this is precisely how the “landscape painting” in Chapter 2 works although the totality is reconstructed on a second reading. It is impossible to ascertain whether, here, the perspective is the omniscient narrator’s throughout or whether, through internal focalisation and a form of free indirect speech, it alternates



with Lady Dedlock's vision of her estate, as she looks out of the window "in the early twilight" (8). But what this passage, situated at the beginning of the novel, obsessively and paradoxically conveys is the sense of an ending. Chesney Wold is described as "extremely dreary" because of the incessant rain and the oppressive silence which it produces, muffling or deadening the few sounds that could otherwise be heard. The dominant impression is one of stillness and lifelessness with the evocation of the flat land and its "stagnant river," the half ruined bridge in the park, the trees that "seem wet through" (7), the vases on the terrace "catch[ing] the rain all day," the "little church in the park" with its "mouldy" look and its "general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves" (8). But the hypallage of the "melancholy trees" (7) begins to alert us to the allusive psychological dimension of the description that indirectly portrays Lady Dedlock and gives us access to her psyche, her deep suffering and to her death-in-life existence: "The adjacent low-lying ground for half a mile in breadth is a stagnant river with melancholy trees for islands in it and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain" (7). This enables us to understand that the parenthesis about Lady Dedlock being childless (8) is no mere detail but should be related to her state of chronic depression, that nobody knows about, metaphorized by the landscape of Chesney Wold. At this stage of the novel, she thinks herself childless, as she believes her illegitimate baby died years before. The unremitting rain symbolizes her incurable grief and externalizes it. Like the tears she may secretly have shed, for years, in the privacy of her boudoir or in her room at night, or like all the invisible ones shed behind her social mask, "the heavy drops fall—drip, drip, drip—upon the broad flagged pavement, called from old time the Ghost's Walk, all night" (8). The same sentence reappears, almost *verbatim*, in Chapter 7, subtly drawing a link between mother and daughter, between Lady Dedlock's unremitting suffering and Esther's future grief, and introducing the *unheimlich* motif of the ghosts from the past: "While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire. The rain is ever falling—drip, drip, drip—by day and night upon the broad flagged terrace-pavement, the Ghost's Walk" (75).

Besides, the metaphor of the rain incessantly "puncturing" the surface of the stagnant river in Chapter 2 expresses the idea of slow torture and the intensity of the character's pain. Beyond its psychological complexity, this first description of Chesney Wold also works proleptically: the image of the sharp, needle-like rain may

foreshadow the effect her face has on Esther when they meet for the first time in the Chesney Wold church. Esther evokes a “shard” sinking into her mind, unearthing “scraps of old remembrances” and in “a confused way,” looking “like a broken glass” (230). Moreover, in Chapter 2, the depiction of the family church and its smell “as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves” (8)<sup>6</sup> foreshadows the London graveyard of Chapter 11 (139), where Nemo is buried, and Lady Dedlock dies herself in Chapter 59. The end is therefore inscribed in the beginning. Similarly, the rain which is here so obsessively present, and is evoked so insistently in the novel whenever the action is set at Chesney Wold, short-circuits chronology, as all the funereal connotations attached to the landscape do: in Chapter 2, everything in the setting is ruined, dead or dying, drenched and sodden, as Lady Dedlock herself will be in Chapter 59 (“Esther’s Narrative”), when her dead body is found in the graveyard: “On the step at the gate, drenched in the fearful wet of such a place, which oozed and splashed down everywhere, I saw, with a cry of pity and horror, a woman lying—Jenny, the mother of the dead child” (746).<sup>7</sup> Here, the description of the graveyard conveys the same uncanny impression of *displaced* animation as the introduction to Chesney Wold in Chapter 2, with the “melancholy trees” or the pulpit that “*breaks out into a cold sweat*” (8; my emphasis) in the Dedlock chapel. This metaphor introduces the notion of pathology—Chesney Wold is “unhealthy for want of air” (7)—and prefigures the “thick humidity” of the “filthy houses” that “hemmed in” the graveyard and on “whose walls a thick humidity *broke out* like a disease” (746; my emphasis). We see that the normative discourse of contagion and pathology is (unconsciously?) present in both narratives, the omniscient one in Chapter 2 and Esther’s in Chapter 59. Besides, the (metonymic) hypallage of the “heaps of *dishonoured graves* and stones” that Esther “could dimly see” (746; my emphasis) achieves the same psychological intensity as “the melancholy trees” in Chapter 2. There is nevertheless a major difference, as “dishonoured” additionally introduces an ethical perspective and indirectly points to Lady Dedlock’s status as a fallen woman.

The conclusion to the first “portrait” of Chesney Wold and its mistress is a family reunion scene at the lodge that Lady Dedlock watches from her boudoir window at dusk. It puts her “quite out of temper” (8), and this is when the narrator reports her

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<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 18, that Esther should meet Lady Dedlock for the first time in a place so unmistakably associated with death, points to how ill-fated their relationship is bound to be.

<sup>7</sup> Esther is initially wrong about the dead woman’s identity but unconsciously, and symbolically, right about the “dead child,” as she is somehow dead in more sense than one.

apparently *blasé* words: “My Lady Dedlock says she has been ‘*bored to death*’” (8; my emphasis). What may initially sound like one of the many instances of the narrator’s usually caustic irony to her, to her husband, to her icy boredom, ironically called the “freezing mood” of a “perfectly well-bred” woman (9)<sup>8</sup> takes on a tragic significance once we know the end of the novel—the discovery of her body, wet through and *frozen to death*, on her lover’s grave: “I passed on to the gate and stooped down. I lifted the heavy head, put the long dank hair aside, and turned the face. And it was my mother, cold and dead” (747).

What Chapter 2 also skilfully introduces is the theme of erasure or self-effacement (most of the time linked to a death-wish). It is prevalent in *Bleak House*, affecting many of the characters: George Rouncewell, Caddy Jellyby, Jo, Nemo, and of course Esther and her mother. T. Peltason evokes for instance George’s “insistence on being ‘scratched’ from his mother’s will” and analyzes it as “both a denial of self and a refusal of relatedness” (219). But the theme is not addressed explicitly or directly in the case of Lady Dedlock. It is metaphorized through an unexpected vehicle, namely the eerie treatment of the family portraits at Chesney Wold, a leitmotif in the novel—they are referred to again in Chapters 12 (140), 29 (368), 50 (517–18)—that gradually makes us aware of their symbolic and proleptic roles. When the shutters are opened, “Then, do the frozen Dedlocks thaw” (518) while Lady Dedlock will soon be frozen to death. The portraits already play a key and active role in Chapter 2, but it is as yet unperceived. Here, like Lady Dedlock, they feel depressed and lonely, and as she will do, they go back to where they belong, darkness: “The pictures of the Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the damp walls in mere lowness of spirits, as the housekeeper has passed [...] shutting up the shutters” (8). The same strategy of self-effacement characterizes Lady Dedlock’s flight when Inspector Bucket and Esther lose her trace in the snowy countryside:

The sleet fell all that day unceasingly, *a thick mist came on early, and it never rose or lightened for a moment*. Such roads I had never seen. I sometimes feared we had missed the way and got into the ploughed grounds *or the marshes*. [...]

At last, when we were changing, he told me that *he had lost the track of the dress* so long that he began to be surprised. It was nothing, he said, to

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<sup>8</sup> However, strikingly, the narrator can express compassion to Lady Dedlock, and show an in-depth understanding of repression: “In truth she is not a hard lady naturally [...]. But so long accustomed to suppress emotion and keep down reality, so long schooled for her own purposes in that destructive school which *shuts up the natural feelings of the heart like flies in amber* and spreads one uniform and dreary gloss over the good and bad, the feeling and the unfeeling [...], she had subdued even her wonder until now” (694; my emphasis).

lose such a track for one while, and to take it up for another while, and so on; but it had disappeared here in an unaccountable manner, and we had not come upon it since.

[...] I looked among the stems of the trees and followed the discoloured marks in the snow where the thaw was sinking into it and undermining it [...]. (719–20; my emphasis)

With the evocation of this “thick mist” shrouding the landscape, everything comes full circle and brings us back to London, to the very first page of the novel: “Fog everywhere” (I, 1). During her flight, Lady Dedlock becomes a mere “dress” vanishing in the misty winter landscape, an invisible woman whose footsteps are erased by the sleet and thaw. The dress is not even her own, unlike Esther’s “dear old doll,” humanized by the feminine possessive adjective and buried “in *her* own shawl” (21; my emphasis). Lady Dedlock undergoes the dehumanizing reduction to a dress that, in addition, stands for her degradation and social effacement as it was swapped with Jenny, a working-class woman. As opposed to what Esther feared, imagining her lying down “lying down” in a wood to die (720), her life ends in London. But her slow death from exposure on Nemo’s grave takes place behind the scenes, mediated and staged in Chapter 58 through the image of the moribund-looking oil lamps at the Dedlocks’ London residence, and of their desperate struggle against the winter gloom, so omnipresent within and without. Their “gasping” twinkle can be regarded as a case of hypallage, a displaced figuration of Lady Dedlock’s death agony, just as their “half frozen and half thawed” life sums up the existence she has always led, nearing its end now:

The day is now beginning to decline. The mist and the sleet into which the snow has all resolved itself are darker, and the blaze begins to tell more vividly upon the room walls and furniture. The gloom augments; the bright gas springs up in the streets; and the pertinacious oil lamps which yet hold their ground there, *with their source of life half frozen and half thawed, twinkle gaspingly* like fiery fish out of water—as they are. (731; my emphasis)

The narrative strategy and poetics of *Bleak House* are dizzyingly complex and rest on a depolarized and dark vision of existence whereby, owing to the metaphoric and ideological web woven by the two narratives, the frontiers between the country and the city become permeable and blurred, and, as we saw, the distance between them is abolished in the most unexpected ways. Some country landscapes are the *unheimlich* doubles of cityscapes and *vice-versa*. The dream-like, subliminal and subterranean logic that largely informs the style and plot of the novel is sometimes

simultaneously analeptic and proleptic, and collapses the chronological boundaries between scenes and episodes, bringing together the past, the present and the future. This foreshortening of the diachronic perspective produces a sense of constriction akin to claustrophobia. Everything merges and converges in this world where evil, corruption and suffering are as diffuse, elusive and ubiquitous as the unhealthy London fog.

Entropy approaches a maximum. Emblems of this perilous condition abound in *Bleak House*—the fog and mud of its admirable opening, the constant rain at Chesney Wold, the spontaneous combustion of Krook, the ultimate consumption of costs in the Jarndyce estate, the deaths of so many characters in the course of the novel (I count nine). (Hillis Miller, 1998, 31)

The apparently happy pastoral final chapter largely fails to correct this, especially because, in spite of its overall sunshiny and blissful tonality, it is *deliberately* left unfinished and its final words “even supposing—” express insecurity and doubt rather than definitive hope and final reassurance.

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