

How Dickens Conceived Esther's Narrative: An Hypothesis

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IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY, 1967, I gave a series of six Lectures at the Victorian Studies Centre of the University of Leicester, newly founded under the enlightened and energetic leadership of Professor Philip Collins,' notes Sylvère Monod in his article (based on those lectures) titled 'Esther Summerson, Charles Dickens and the Reader of *Bleak House*'.¹ I should like to pay tribute to the Victorian Studies Centre, via Professor Monod (he and I are fellow translators of this novel, he into French and I into Japanese), by dealing with the same subject, Esther Summerson. Given the time restrictions, I shall limit myself to addressing one question: how did Dickens come up with the idea of using her as a co-narrator?

Bleak House is divided into two parts, one in which the 'semi-omniscient', third-person narrator takes charge, and the other in which Esther carries out the task of narration.² Michael Slater calls this a 'sensationally new narrative

technique'.³ When the novel came out, however, the technical innovation did not create much excitement, as Philip Collins observed in his *Critical Heritage* anthology: 'Dickens's experiment [in the dual narration] was little discussed'.⁴ From our point of view, with the awareness of modern narrative theories, this paucity of interest looks simply peculiar.

For, indeed, there was nothing like it before, or after. In novels with plural narrators the narration is invariably shared by characters, not by a character and a third-person narrator. As far as I know, *Bleak House* is the only instance of that type of sharing—except, perhaps, for John Updike's 1963 novel, *The Centaur*. But here, the narrative task is divided tacitly: the third-person narrator and first-person character alternate without recognising each other. In *Bleak House* Esther knows she collaborates with someone else, for she speaks of 'my portion' of the narrative (Ch. 3); the other narrator reveals his awareness of Esther's part, if very briefly, when he says, 'While Esther sleeps' (Ch. 7). In fact, a fictional character making a contract for a shared publication with an author-like narrator is preposterous. In the fictional world a character is a flesh-and-blood human being, while the third-person narrator is a superhuman entity that knows everything and can go anywhere. Technically, as Seymour Chatman argues, the narrator belongs to the domain of 'discourse' (expression) and a character to that of 'story' (content); they belong to different dimensions.⁵

How, then, did Dickens hit upon such a singular idea? Michael Slater remarks:

We have no hint from Dickens as to why he chose this double narrative form; ... it is possible that in writing *Copperfield* he had found that combining satire with first-person narration where the narrator is supposed to be as ingenuous as the young David Copperfield posed a serious difficulty. In the case of a young woman narrator like Esther Summerson this difficulty would have been much increased, hence, perhaps, Dickens's decision to split the narration in this novel.⁶

Since no evidence exists, we can only speculate.⁷ What follows is my own hypothesis.

The first step, I propose, is to examine what was happening in Dickens's writing life, when he began to compose *Bleak House*. Judging from his letters, he started thinking about the novel in August 1851 (17 August: 'I begin to be pondering afar off, a new book'). Next month his imagination had apparently warmed up (28 September: 'I am in the first throes of a new book'), but in early October his creative engagement was disturbed because of the house-moving (9 October: 'I am three parts distracted and the fourth part wretched in the agonies of getting into a new house. . . . I can

not work at my new book'). Then, on 12 October, he drafted a preliminary advertisement for the new novel. Oddly enough, it merely refers to a 'New Serial Work . . . In Twenty Monthly Numbers . . . with Illustrations by H. K. Browne', with no date for publication. In fact, this advertisement was never published, because, as the Pilgrim editors state, at this stage the writing 'had not yet begun'.⁸ Presumably he was still distracted by the house-moving. Finally, settled in the new house in Tavistock Square, he reports on 17 November: 'I am beginning to find my papers, and to know where the pen and ink are'. We may safely infer that he commenced putting pen to paper shortly afterwards.

There is, I submit, an important key to the conception of the narrative form of *Bleak House* buried somewhere in early October 1851, when the novel was in gestation. In order to see this clearly, I suggest we look back a little in the novelist's creative life. In March 1850 he founded the weekly magazine, *Household Words*. With complete editorial control he printed articles on recent events in various fields such as science, politics, natural history and geography; he used a number of contributors, but he edited every item and tried to ensure that the magazine would achieve coherence. He himself wrote, at the end of 1850, an article titled 'A December Vision', where he talks about the miserable state of urban street children, a contagious disease arising from polluted air, and the malfunction of the legal system of Equity. All these issues were to constitute important elements of *Bleak House*, as has been long recognised. I wish to explore, however, a different connection between the magazine and the novel.

A week after the publication of 'A December Vision', there appeared, on 21 December, the 'Christmas Number' of *Household Words*. Dickens had already claimed Christmas as his own field, as it were, starting with the great success of *A Christmas Carol* back in 1843. That was followed by *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth*, *The Battle of Life*, and after one year's hiatus, *The Haunted Man* in 1848. Since they had turned out to be very popular, it was natural that Dickens should have conceived a Christmas special issue of *Household Words*, with a view to tapping further into this particular vein.

For the 1850 Christmas Number Dickens asked nine people to provide essays, stories or poems (to be published anonymously), each treating the seasonal theme, he himself contributing a piece called 'A Christmas Tree'. It was obviously a brilliant idea, and when the next Christmas came around in 1851, the year of *Bleak House*'s composition, Dickens thought he would do the same thing again. However, it was slightly different this time. In 1850 it had been a 'Christmas Number', but in 1851 it was an 'Extra Number for Christmas'—a separate issue, appearing on Christmas Day. Clearly it had become a more elaborate affair.

It is in this context that I now wish to examine a letter Dickens wrote to his sub-editor, W. H. Wills, dated 6 October. He says:

On Saturday the 25th. we had better dine at the office—with Morley, Horne, and (I suppose) Forster—to decide upon the form and idea of the Christmas No. I think it would be well to let Morley and Horne know beforehand what we are going to meet for; as they might then have some suggestion to make. On second thoughts Monday the 27th. might be better.

Dickens, I take it, wanted to have a serious discussion on 'the form and idea' of the Christmas Number on the 27th, presumably hoping to leave the matter behind before starting the composition of the new novel.

Now, here is my speculation: sometime after 6 October 1851 (the date of the above letter), when he was reflecting upon the Christmas writing, an idea occurred to Dickens about the new novel, which inspired him to compose the preliminary advertisement on 12 October—at that time no word was written yet, but (I am guessing) he had the form. I suggest that whilst contemplating a collaborative composition of the Christmas piece Dickens came up with the idea of collaborative composition of a novel. Dickens, I submit, took an imaginative leap from writing with other people to writing with a fictional character; he decided to hire Esther as a contributor.

Esther, we will recall, speaks of her 'portion' of the narrative (Ch. 3). This is a word Dickens the editor actually employed: 'I should say [your work] might be spread into four portions—though more would be objectionable, as I conceive, to the fair reading of the story' (to Elizabeth Gaskell, 5 February, 1850); 'It is clear to me that nobody might could would or should understand what [Horne's Diary] means, if we were to print this portion by itself, quite ignorant of what is to follow or when it is to come' (to W. H. Wills, 7 October 1852). Perhaps, much as the editor gives a certain portion of the magazine to a contributor, Dickens gave Esther half of his novel.

I have said that the idea of the omniscient narrator and a character making a contract is preposterous. It is so, from our standpoint. But obviously it was not the case in the nineteenth century. The reviewer of the *Eclectic Review* (December 1853), a notable exception to the contemporary indifference to the novel's narrative method, states:

The tale is told by two parties, or rather distributed to the share of two parties;—one is the author speaking in his own person; the other is a female actor in the story. Thus there was requisite the diversity of style proper to the fictitious historian, and a gentle lady whose tastes cling to the narrow circle of home life. Yet, in this, he has admirably succeeded.

This reviewer has no problem with the categorical mixture of author and character, and their collaboration in narration.⁹ In dealing with the 'sensationally new' technique of *Bleak House*, perhaps we should forget about 'sophisticated' narrative theories. An author having a contract with a fictional character may be absurd, but it would have been a real enough proposition for Dickens. I have used the word 'leap' above—a leap from writing with other people to writing with a character—but for Dickens it was not really a leap.

Dickens's daughter Mamie says he 'turned his own creations into living realities, with whom he wept'¹⁰; according to his son Henry, the novelist declared, 'when I am describing a scene I can as distinctly see the people I am describing as I can see you now'¹¹; another son Charles says '[my father] lived two lives, one with us and one with his fictitious people, and . . . the children of his brain were much more real to him.'¹² In the heat of imaginative creation Dickens literally saw his characters; he was in the same world with them, breathing the same air with them. In these quotations we have strong testimonies regarding that phenomenon. In addition, there is concrete evidence for it in the text of *Bleak House*, where Guppy and Jobling chance upon Krook who has spontaneously combusted:

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

(Ch. 32: my underlining)

When the two characters are frightened and take flight, Dickens the narrator, or Dickens the author, runs away *together with them*.¹³ If he ran with Guppy, I am positive Dickens sat with Esther, showing her how to go about her 'portion' of the narrative, or was able to imagine he had done so. No doubt Esther was an ideal contributor: unlike, for example, Mrs Gaskell, whom he later found too stubborn for his liking, Esther obediently listened to what he said.¹⁴ And he did not have to pay.

1 *Dickens Studies* 5 (1969), 5.

2 The adjective 'semi-omniscient' is Dickens's own. In his talk, 'Bleak House through Binoculars' (Dickens Fellowship Conference, July 2002), Malcolm Andrews pointed out the relevance of 'the Shadow'—'a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature', which Dickens proposes as a possible idea for the prospective periodical (see his letter to John Forster dated 7 October 1849). Dickens's description here is apt for *Bleak House* in that the roving narrator often pretends not to know everything.

- 3 Michael Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 336.
- 4 *Dickens: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), 273.
- 5 See Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990), Ch. 7, esp. 116–21. According to Chatman, the narrator is an agent of presentation, and need not be human.
- 6 Slater, *Charles Dickens*, 336.
- 7 Speaking of the possible connection between *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*, Ellen Moers suggests that ‘The very form of his novel . . . was perhaps conceived in a spirit of rivalry with Charlotte Brontë’. See ‘*Bleak House: the Agitating Women*’. *The Dickensian* 69 (1973), 22.
- 8 The preliminary advertisement and the editorial comment appear on p. 518 of the Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 6, ed. Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson and Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
- 9 Nor does the reviewer of *Bentley’s Monthly Review* (October 1853), who also notes the peculiarity of the narration.
- 10 Mamie Dickens, *Charles Dickens by His Eldest Daughter* (2nd ed. 1889; New York: Haskell House, 1977), 100.
- 11 Henry Fielding Dickens, ‘The Social Influence of Dickens.’ *The Dickensian* 1 (1905), 63.
- 12 Charles Dickens, Jr. ‘Reminiscences of My Father’ (1934). Philip Collins ed. *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections* (London: Macmillan, 1981), 120.
- 13 It might be possible to read the last sentence of this passage as free indirect discourse representing Guppy and Jobling’s consciousness, but the convoluted syntax strongly suggests the presence of the ‘semi-omniscient’ narrator.
- 14 Compare Anny Sadrin’s suggestion of ‘the likeness [Esther] bears to the Manchester lady novelist’. See ‘Charlotte Dickens: the Female Narrator of *Bleak House*’. *Dickens Quarterly* 9 (1992), 50.