Primitive Minds

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SPIRITS AND SEIZURES IN *BLEAK HOUSE* AND *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

Dickens had no patience with spiritualism. His periodical commentaries berate the "credulous persons who are abasing their intellects under the feet of that grossest of all impostures."[1] The converted spiritualist narrator of "Well Authenticated Rappings" in *Household Words* describes a ludicrous "visitation" in which he discovers that the spirit rapper knows the contents of his recently eaten lunch.[2] Whether the product of weak-mindedness or indigestion, belief in spirit communication, he derided, belongs to the primitive superstitions of the "idle" and "silly" and to the poor judgment of respectable men who fall prey to the impostures of scam artists and criminals.

Yet while, in his journalism especially, spectral events are frequently the projections of an infatuated spiritualist persona, they also invoke the materialism and monism of physiological psychology: "Wonders will never cease," an article from the September 1859 issue of *All the Year Round* cautions its

readers, but perhaps eventually they will belong to the "manuals of science" rather than the "curiosities of superstition."[3] Hence Dickens expressed his intolerance of celebrated mediums such as D.D. Home or their Christian advocates like William Howitt and insisted on segregating the "preposterous state of mind" from the "medical, legal, or other watchful experience."[4] Contemporary interest in the apparently supernatural, he argued, must move beyond "bald credulity" into an energetic spirit of inquiry that respects the "vast unexplored ocean" of mental science.[5]

This interest in the physical origin of spiritual experience begins to explain the narrators and characters in his narrative fiction who sometimes display dreamy awareness, including "spiritual" episodes of clairvoyance, prophecy, and ghostly visitation. Dickens's treatment of these phenomena, I propose, draws on a theory of dissolution (the counterpart to evolution) that anticipates later neurological studies of epilepsy. Although triggered by nervous dissolution, dreamy events are neither held up to narrative scorn nor dismissed as the meanderings of a disturbed mind. In fact, they enable anticipatory revelations in the novels' plots and allow for intuitive connections among characters inhabiting vastly different social worlds. Even where these spirit manifestations are transparent plot devices or where they are absorbed into metaphor (John Harmon was never literally dead; the "Ghost's Walk" at Chesney Wold is a legend animated by the scandal of Lady Dedlock's past), they retain their otherworldly reference in narratives that are elsewhere driven by ghostly sightings, visions, and voluminous mental events. During such episodes, consciousness expands to an awareness of relations and connections that defy ordinary perceptual limits.

In this sense, Dickens's segregation of the watchful from the preposterous is not fully enforced in the dreamy environment of his fiction, whose divining narrative structure allows for the curious connections among seemingly unrelated stories and the unfolding of intimate connections between present, past, and future events. Such spiritualizing of expansive social truths encapsulates what Dickens famously described in the preface to *Bleak House* as "the romantic side of familiar things."[6] Omniscient as well as the first-person narrators, who sometimes pretend to impartiality and watchful observation, are all vulnerable to a sense of unreality or to visions that disturb the order of the observable physical world. In dreamy disturbances of spatial and temporal narrative organization, objective knowledge dissolves into apparitional landscapes as often as spirits are disciplined to obey the laws of physical nature. These spectral events intrude into stories that are otherwise firmly committed to the realist portrayal of the motives, eccentricities, and other psychological habits that not only make up individual human lives but that also determine

the shape and scope of social institutions. Yet the many connections and conjunctions around which these broader social portraits coalesce are fully illuminated only by a clairvoyance that penetrates beyond the natural limits to perception imposed by time and space.

Lewes said of Dickens that he had, despite his perfect saneness of mind, a "vividness of imagination approaching . . . closely to hallucination,"[7] enabling him to represent ordinary objects like a street, or a house, or a room "not in the vague schematic way of ordinary imagination, but in the sharp definition of actual perception, all the salient details obtruding themselves on his attention."[8] "Psychologists," Lewes added, will understand both the extent and the limitation of the remark."[9] In identifying the point at which realism becomes hallucinatory in Dickens's style, Lewes combines his aesthetic evaluation with a diagnosis of mental abnormality. Such remarks are in keeping with the author-centered focus of Lewes's criticism. Yet they also suggest the engagement of literary form with mental science that characterized not only Lewes's career but, more broadly, a periodical-driven, intellectual culture in which fiction and scientific journalism were consumed by the same readership. In this interpretive context, not only the vividness but also the dreamy unreality of Dickens's "hallucinatory" writing is central to his realism. The dreamy forms in his narratives point naturalistically to his engagement with the psychic symptoms of a nervous disturbance; his writing explores the nervous pathways that shape perception and character. At the same time, the suspension of ordinary sensory encounter with the environment and the perception of phenomena that exist beyond the reach of the senses reveal intimate connections among characters who appear unrelated or seem remote from the central action of the novels.

Much has been written about this paradoxical aspect of Dickens's realism: his use of the ghost figure to answer the narratives' urge for connections or to chart disintegration in the social landscapes of *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend.* An occult vision, critics have shown, oversees the fantastic realities of social and biological intercrossing that unite the disparate characters and settings of, especially, *Bleak House.*[10] *Our Mutual Friend* romances its realist themes of material collapse and degeneration with the observations of narrators and characters reanimated from the dead.[11] The omniscience in both novels, Audrey Jaffe argues, is akin to a supernatural perception in which voices attached to individual minds dissolve into ones that emanate from nowhere.[12] Many readings that tie the spectral forms in Dickens to particular psychological mechanisms focus on Freud's theory of the uncanny, where the mind encounters once-familiar objects that have been long repressed.[13] Some, however, have concentrated on the psychology of

the time, citing studies of hysteria, the effects of stimulants or narcotics, and circulatory or digestive malfunctions that accounted for the origin of ghosts in the body.[14]

Yet despite the range of nervous disorders invoked by Dickens's representations of spiritual episodes (in which I include déjà vu, double-consciousness, and the previsions of trance states as well as actual spectral phenomena), there are several reasons why I read them here as symptoms of epilepsy. The first and probably least compelling of these is biographical: Dickens himself suffered what may have been epileptic seizures as a child.[15] He also witnessed the phrenologist John Elliotson's magnetic treatment of the epileptic Elizabeth O'Key in 1838, and in 1845 he conducted his own experiments in mesmerism, treating the Genoese Madame de la Rue for symptoms that included convulsions and catalepsy.[16] The second reason is that several of his characters suffer from grand mal seizures. For Mrs. Snagsby's servant Guster, in *Bleak House* these are set off by some reference to her parentage or by a sudden awareness of her implication in a network of events or characters. For the more prominent characters of Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend* and Monks of *Oliver Twist,* the "fits" are a physical expression of enormous mental anguish caused by suppressed familial, financial, or other close relationships. Dickens's depictions of "fits" as nervous episodes brought on by an obsessive preoccupation with something or somebody, by a horrified discovery of the subject's implication in a larger story, or by response to a psychic trigger (like Monks's loathing reaction to the sound of thunder) suggest that fanaticism, fixation, and sudden shifts in identity, along with falling and writhing, may be interpreted within the medical landscape of epilepsy.

The third reason is that nineteenth-century neurologists became increasingly interested in the dreamy states of mind precursory to or even constitutive of an epileptic seizure. By identifying the dreamy episode in which abnormal or fantastic memory penetrates awareness as something almost universally experienced, Dickens invites us to read his depictions of advanced epilepsy into the fabric of the larger stories in which they appear. These episodes are shadowed by those of characters who experience only dreamy awareness or recognition: Oliver's sleeping discovery of Monks and Fagin, Esther's intuitive discovery of her parentage in *Bleak House,* or the precognitive fear that affects many of the characters in *Our Mutual Friend.* Such episodes are instances of psychic voluminosity whose penetration of the ordinary workings of consciousness suggests levels of awareness operating below the inhibitory threshold of consciousness, even as they point to forms of nervous malfunction among those whose symptoms are slight enough that they do not provide evidence of disease.

Although the voluminous minds that produce premonition or discover unexpected links between characters and events in these stories do not inhabit falling bodies, they express symptoms of what Victorian neurology would describe as epileptic nervous dissolution—a pathology in which subjective states of mind are liberated from the objective truths of their environment. It is now commonplace to observe that we read Dickens's social worlds, not through the conscious mind of an individual character or narrator but in the impersonal network of overlapping events.[17] My focus on a nervous disorder as the narrative origin of this expansive social vision restores perception to individual minds, but to minds whose physical substratum has suffered trauma.[18] Epileptic dreaminess is paradoxically the means by which realities larger than those available to a single healthy consciousness become discernible: realities of hidden heredity, systemic corruption, and social disintegration.

I. GHOSTS IN THE BRAIN

Dreamy consciousness represents the conditions of heightened subjectivity and loss of cognitive awareness that is often associated with petit mal or what we now know as "complex partial" seizures. A passage from *David Copperfield* describes this experience of dreamy detachment as a clairvoyant connection between past, present, and future events and the remote histories that have brought these events into being:

> We all have some experience of a feeling which comes over us occasionally of what we are saying and doing having been said or done before, in a remote time—of our having been surrounded, dim ages ago, by the same faces, objects, and circumstances—of our knowing perfectly what will be said next, as if we suddenly remembered it.[19]

In this description, which has been quoted several times in medical literature on epilepsy and dreamy states, such mental episodes appear so slight that they barely disrupt the continuum of healthy mental experience.[20] Moreover, as Dickens emphasizes, they are almost universally experienced. The déjà vu is an everyday manifestation of the dreamy state that seems, for a few passing moments, to summon up memories of a former life. Here, although a healthy mind may barely pause to notice it, surrounding objects and people assume a heightened significance, manifesting as figures and events from a past so remote that it could not possibly inhabit a single memory.[21] Objects in the

external environment appear simultaneously to belong in that dim past and to stimulate predictions of the immediate future, like forewarning ghosts. As John Hughlings Jackson was to argue in his essays on epileptic dreamy states in the 1870s and 1880s, subject consciousness is so heightened and object consciousness so compromised during these states that present surroundings vanish, giving way to a sense of expanded awareness.[22] This may include "a feeling of being somewhere else" or "in some strange country"[23] or "a blending of past and present. . . . as if reminiscent of a former life" or of having "two minds."[24] One of Jackson's patients talks about experiencing "curious sensations . . . a sort of transportation to another world, lasting a second or two."[25] The fit may take the form of various visions when not quite unconscious.[26] Jackson would propose that the disease may manifest in something as slight as an "overconsciousness" or dreamy recognition of "some other and quasi-former surroundings."[27] In large part the dreamy state is ignored, he suggested, because it represents only "slightly raised activities . . . of healthy nervous arrangements."[28]

Through his contact with asylum physicians,[29] Dickens was aware of studies of mental illness that identified overlap and potential diagnostic confusions among epilepsy, hysteria, and monomania.[30] It is reasonable, however, to interpret the dreamy episodes depicted in novels that include epileptic characters as "petit mal" epileptic seizures, given that nineteenth-century medicine increasingly recognized epilepsy in the manifestation of psychic symptoms. Among the British physicians studying epilepsy, including James Prichard, Richard Bright, and Robert Bentley Todd, convulsions ceased to be considered its essential symptoms.[31] "Spasms," Herbert Mayo likewise observed, are always liable to be combined with a trance state in which the mind takes on an abnormal relationship with the nervous system.[32] One of the key continental studies, Esquirol's *Mental Maladies,* declared that epileptic attacks might involve only the milder premonitory or early symptoms such as "a simple convulsive movement of a limb, the head or lips, with a momentary privation of thought,"[33] while in *Des accès incomplets d'épilepsie* (1867), Théodore Herpin explored manifestations of Esquirol's "vertiges" in the form of an altered consciousness immediately preceding an episode of syncope.[34] Indeed, minor attacks, including those so slight that they might be barely detectable, increasingly came to be identified as seizures in their own right. By the 1880s, even loss of consciousness, which was nearly always identified as a key symptom, had been expanded in definition to include "alterations of mental activity" and "disordered . . . intelligence."[35]

Jackson's theory of epileptogenesis, based on the evidence he found that function is localized in the cerebral cortex, argued that epilepsy should not

be identified with any particular group of symptoms but rather by the "*sudden, excessive* and *rapid* discharge of gray matter of some *part* of the brain."[36] Even loss of consciousness, he argued, may not be essential to a diagnosis of epilepsy, since the disease may cause a "*defect* of consciousness" only.[37] Thus there was no reason to classify dreamy states or "intellectual aura" as they were more commonly known as premonitory or abortive symptoms of epilepsy. In large part the dreamy state was formerly treated as a precursory symptom or ignored, Jackson suggested, because in itself it represents only "slightly raised activities (slightly increased discharges) of healthy nervous arrangements."[38]

In his account of the physical substratum of mind, nervous centers—lower, middle, and higher—provide increasingly layered representations of different regions of the body.[39] In the highest centers, each unit represents all parts of the body at the same time that it represents one specially, thus allowing for a complex objective awareness of the self.[40] When, for example, a man is pricked on the back, he experiences both the nervous stimulation in the region affected, and the stimulation as affecting the self—an object (the body) and a subject of conscious awareness: The prick is to *his* back. Jackson speculates that if the whole body is represented in the units making up the division of the highest centers, with each part of the organ containing nervous arrangements for movements of the whole body, then it can be said that each unit is "the whole division in miniature" but "each of it is the whole of it in *different* miniature."[41] Thus each unifying or synthesizing center is "a series of miniature higher centers, each of which is in some degree 'potentially' the whole organism . . . in a different degree and order of representation of all parts."[42] These units, essentially the material basis of mind, therefore exist as potential, as much as they do actual, triggers of particular nervous and mental states. Reduced activity, or dissolution, in these centers is likely to increase automatic behavior. Elsewhere, this theory of nervous representation suggests an origin for the voluminous mental phenomena that he calls "dreamy." Objective awareness, choreographed by a higher center, selects particular objects in the environment for attention partly by choosing among the sensory images stored in the memory. When a higher center disintegrates and this objective awareness recedes, the mind is flooded with a multitude of subjective or sensory states that are normally "stored" in potential nervous configurations. Dreamy states, his case studies show, are nearly always experienced as a kind of expanded consciousness or "a diminished object consciousness with increased subject consciousness."[43]

The novels I discuss here predate Jackson's publications on epilepsy by some years. However, his studies are indebted to the physiological psychol-

ogy of Dickens's contemporaries. In particular, Herbert Spencer's evolutionist account of the mental faculties was crucial to Jacksonian neurology, since Spencer emphasized principles of divergence and increasing heterogeneity in response to associative triggers, arguing that the brain developed more complex forms through its interactions with the environment. Spencer's proposal that cortical activity was governed by the same sensory-motor mechanisms and the same adaptive principles as the rest of the body provided the basis for Jackson's clinical investigations of malfunctions in higher order nervous activity. Like Jackson, Spencer also emphasized the origin of mental events in discrete areas of the brain. Combined with a theory of nervous development, the phrenological principle of cerebral localization enabled both to link all psychological phenomena to specific nervous activity.

In *The Principles of Psychology* (1855), Spencer animated his phrenology with a detailed account of the evolutionary process causing organic change across time. He describes "the evolution of intelligence by the multiplication of experiences"[44] as a "progression of the lower to the higher instincts . . . towards greater specialty and complexity of correspondence."[45] The cumulative effect of these nervous changes influences the character of the species as well as of the individual:

> Let it be granted that this tendency is, in however slight a degree, inherited, so that if the experiences remain the same, each successive generation bequeaths a somewhat increased tendency, and it follows that, in cases like the one described, there must inevitably be established an automatic connection of nervous actions, corresponding to the external relations perpetually experienced if from some change in the environment of any species, its members are frequently brought into contact with a new relation.[46]

By introducing the principle of "mental evolution,"[47] Spencer updates both associative psychology (where all knowledge is the product entirely of experience) and phrenology, which makes too-discrete correlations between different regions of the brain and mental faculties, ignoring the processes of coordination among different regions that occurs in complex intellectual events.[48] The development of mind in the higher animals from reflex activity to intellect, complex emotions, and will (as psychical changes become less definitely coordinated and less automatic) is consistent with the general principle that "life in its multitudinous and infinitely varied embodiments, has arisen out of the lowest and simplest beginnings."[49]

Although not formulated as a mechanism for describing nervous disorder until some years later, Spencer's concept of "dissolution" appeared in

the context of political organization in *Social Statics* (1851)[50] and then as a general principle of evolutionary processes in *First Principles: A New System of Philosophy* (1862). In the latter, he argued that by means of adaptive responses to the environment, all phenomena evolve from "an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity."[51] This means they tend toward increasing complexity, becoming increasingly more differentiated, specialized, and heterogeneous. In dissolution, however, the reverse occurs as heterogeneous objects move back to indefinite, incoherent homogeneity: Complex molecules break up and their constituents take on looser structures; living organisms are subject to death and decay (and solid constituents assume gaseous forms); states are dissolved through social unrest; political collapse returns societies to a crude division of labor.[52] Such reversals, he argues, are integral to the evolutionary process. Indeed, the very condition of knowledge implies grasping not only the present nature of a thing but also its earliest, imperceptible state and its future, decayed state. "Intellectual progress consists largely . . . of widening our acquaintance with this past and this future."[53] Hence, in the 1873 edition of *The Principles of Psychology,* he added to the earlier account of mental evolution a description of the dismantling of the complex nervous arrangements that make higher and more deliberate processing possible, where there is an imprecise charging of the nervous system caused, for example, by feeble blood circulation (to which those with nervous complaints are particularly vulnerable) and producing failure or paralysis in the highest plexuses. The effects of this failure include monomania and strong disturbances where consciousness, loosened from its surroundings, "becomes a torrent of intense thoughts and feeling."[54]

Dickens was undoubtedly wary of Spencer given the latter's association with the philosophical radicalism of the *Westminster Review* (while *All the Year Round* contained three reviews of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species,* it did not review any of Spencer's work on evolution). However, Spencer's early phrenological studies, in particular his contributions to *The Zoist,* position him in the same circle within which Dickens maintained friendships with the leading British phreno-magnetists in the 1830s and 1840s, Chauncey Townshend and John Elliotson.[55] In keeping with the themes of *The Zoist,* which Elliotson edited, Spencer's articles examined not only several phrenological matters but also the trance phenomena of insensitivity to pain and spectral visions. Among other essays on these subjects, he wrote "A Theory Concerning the Organ of Wonder" (1845), which argued that spectral encounters could be traced to a region of the frontal lobe where wonder or "reviviscence" enabled reanimation of past impressions. This faculty, a powerful agent to the imagination, and thus physically visible in the skull shapes

of great writers, could cause the revived impressions to be confused with real perceptions. Visionaries and prophets, whose mental organization also privileges this faculty, thus believe they communicate directly with spirits. Household ghosts appear when "during the gloom of night and under the influence of appropriate feeling, every dimly distinguished object calls up in the mind some pre-existing impression [and the] . . . mental image is mistaken for the thing seen."[56]

Spencer's phrenological investigation of spectral and other dreamy events complement Elliotson's inquiries in *The Zoist* and elsewhere into the organic origins of trance phenomena. In *Human Physiology* (1840), Elliotson reports how, whether as a result of nervous disorders such as epilepsy or by means of artificial somnambulism, subjects can become either insensible to external stimuli, partially sensible as in the case of sleep walking, or else manifest exalted power in one or more faculties. These altered states can also house an alternative state of consciousness or "double consciousness," in which a second personality emerges with a set of memories independent of those that belong to the original state. In 1837 and 1838, Elliotson and Charles Dupotet conducted experiments at University College, London, in therapeutic mesmerism, especially as treatment for the symptoms of epilepsy.[57]

In *Human Physiology,* Elliotson cautions that scientists investigating reports of marvelous phenomena—such as where subjects speak a language they have never learned or experience lucid vision wherein they observe events belonging to a distant time—must be alert to the possibility of fraud.[58] Nonetheless, he organized secret séances in which the phenomena of table turning and mesmeric clairvoyance were observed under experimental conditions. His lengthy report in issue 2 of *The Zoist,* the "Various Trials of the Clairvoyance of Alexis Didier," presented accounts of lucid vision witnessed by numerous dependable gentlemen including medical men "all of whom were perfectly satisfied of the fairness of the experiments."[59] In the 1846–47 issue he reported on a study of double states of consciousness in which he identified how both artificially induced and spontaneous trance states reveal the abnormal excitation of a particular region of the brain associated with a particular faculty.[60]

Dickens's own library reflected a combined interest in material and supernatural accounts of the exotic productions of the mind. It housed books that investigated the nervous and evolutionary origins of dreamy states like Macnish's *Philosophy of Sleep* (1840), Elliotson's *Human Physiology* (1840), and William Engledue's *Cerebral Physiology and Materialism* (1842). Yet it also contained copies of Beaumont's *Treatises on Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcraft, and Other Magical Practices* (1705), Augustine Calmet's *Phantom World; or*

The Philosophy of Spirits, Apparitions &c (1850), Robert Owen's *Footfalls on the Boundary of Another World* (1860), and Frank Seafield's *The Literature and Curiosity of Dreams* (1865).[61] The studies in the second list all propose the existence of genuine spiritual phenomena even as they explored the physiological conditions for experiencing them. Seafield alternates accounts of the material causes of dreams with those of their divinatory significance. Calmet declares that apparitions may be delivered by angels and "spirits of the blessed" or they may be the products of a powerful imagination, overly subtle senses, or the derangement caused by madness or fever.[62] And Owen proposes that abnormal conditions of sleep, which include coma, somnambulism, trance, and ecstasy, revealed an exaltation of mental powers whose modified form we experience in normal sleep in which "every night . . . we pass the threshold of material existence" and where "the grave restores its dead."[63] Such dreams cannot be the "purposeless wanderings of a vagrant imagination"[64] or the product of old associations "drawn from the forgotten depths of the memory," because they never existed there.[65]

Like these studies, Dickens's novels investigate the question of ghosts in the brain. In so doing, they replicate the kind of spiritual phenomena that medical scientists witnessed in nervously or artificially induced trance states and interpret "supernatural" events as nervous episodes in what seems like a literary articulation of the evolutionist neuropsychology that Spencer and later Jackson developed. Nervous disorder permeates the narrative voices in *Bleak House,* which are sensitive not only to the self-improving potential of the mind but also to its opposing tendencies—episodes in which the self splits into more than one personality or where object consciousness gives way to moments of heightened subjectivity. In *Our Mutual Friend,* the prevailing metaphors of dust and disintegration penetrate narrative consciousness, as dreadful anticipations and heavenly visions alike align disparate plots and unrelated characters. The disorganization of matter becomes the means by which little events achieve larger significance. In Dickens's nervous portraits, a principle of dissolution animates dreamy connections and projections made between and among characters, even as it links their mental suffering to the crumbling and corrupt edifices of the modern metropolis.

II. EPILEPSY AND THE VANISHING SELF: *BLEAK HOUSE*

In Tennyson's *The Princess,* "weird seizures" deliver the speaker into "a world of ghosts."[66] In Dickens's novels, revelations of identity provide the conditions for a similar kind of epileptic disturbance as they precipitate a feeling

of nonself, or of a ghost of the self, whose knowledge of past events and buried associations is larger than the sum of individual experiences in the mind that contains them.[67] The altered perceptions, ghostly visions, and prescient awareness that sometimes attend the alterations of subjectivity in the dreamy state are especially pronounced in the narrative organization of *Bleak House,* since the division of narrative labor between third- and first-person voices alerts us to how the subjective mind negotiates the objective world. At the same time, connections among the many improbably related characters and their stories unfold through hazy presentiments as much as they do through the accidents and coincidences of the plot: dreamy minds make connections across time and space, linking the poorest of London's poor with a great country family, orphaned nobodies with titled somebodies, and the multigenerational suit in Chancery with the ancient line of the Dedlocks.

Such revelations are linked to instances of suspended selfhood in the novels. George Levine describes the way in which "scientific" characters, like Inspector Bucket, manifest the Baconian self-abnegation, or "clearing of idols," essential to objective understanding.[68] Such renunciations of self can be achieved through "the moral strength of self restraint" (and are therefore sometimes successfully performed in *Bleak House* by Esther, as they are by Inspector Bucket) and through self-annihilation, as in *Our Mutual Friend,* where John Harmon is able to observe the behavior of other characters from the position of a "dead" man.[69] Levine's argument can be linked with that of Catherine Gallagher, who shows how, in the latter novel, bioeconomic value (derived from living and laboring human bodies) is stored up in nonvital and nonorganic forms. This process of commodification, which Gallagher recognizes as "life in abeyance" is manifest in "apparent lapses in identity, breaks in the continuity of the self and moments of self-alienation associated with the marketplace."[70]

As a character whose self is suspended at once through her powers of self-restraint and her social nonexistence as orphan and illegitimate daughter of a man known as "Nemo" or "nobody," *Bleak House*'s Esther embodies the crossed-out identity achieved both through the self-abnegation and suspended animation that Levine and Gallagher describe. Yet the discovery of her parentage, however socially disgraceful it remains, triggers an intensified subject consciousness, whose psychic ferocity in turn precipitates experiences of dreamy unreality. This other kind of self-loss, or dissolving of identity, enables neither detached observation nor the accumulation of value. On the one hand, as narrator, Esther becomes suddenly interested and connected where formerly she had been morally impartial and removed; on the other hand, her dreamy mind offers nothing like regenerative promise either in

the form of reproductive biopower (both Jarndyce and Woodcourt admire her instead for the self-restraint and moral strength that "all around . . . see in Esther Summerson" [866]) or in the form of useful information, since, as she says of the perceptual confusion she suffers when she is almost dying of smallpox, the less she says of her "strange afflictions," "the more intelligible" (514) she can be. The barely intelligible, dreamy voice that represents the mind under the pressure of dreadful self-recognition threatens the very order and revitalizing potential of narrative meaning, promising to overwhelm objective knowledge and to substitute portent for profit. Like the abyss of Chancery, this voice plots hazy possibilities and dim connections more than it does outcomes and advantages.

Esther, on the face of it, does not seem a likely candidate for nervous disturbance. She exercises a powerful self-control that suggests the active engagement of her will with the activity of her mind. A decade ago, Timothy Peltason rescued Esther from the charge of relentless selflessness by highlighting episodes in the novel that reveal her "force of self . . . under the names of will and desire."[71] Yet whether understood as self-control or self-expression, her will is sometimes overcome by dreamy episodes during which her mind, suddenly flooded by subjective awareness, becomes attuned to a range of possible identities or phantom selves, past, present, and future. As Esther's objective awareness of her surroundings recedes, her will falters, and she is temporarily unable to look at herself sternly as an objective observer or to fashion her social position as the "useful, amiable [and] serviceable" (569) "little woman" (640) of obscure origins to whom friends turn for comfort and advice.

Many such moments occur in her story. The most obvious instance is during her illness when divisions of time between childhood, adolescence, and youth "became confused with one another" (513) and when her sense of independent self dissolves into an image of the terrifying connectedness of everything: "a great flaming necklace" that is "strung together somewhere in great black space" (514). Yet these experiences of unreality and the altered sense of self that signals the onset of the illness are not entirely new for Esther. When she and Charley first leave to visit Jenny's cottage and help the orphan Jo, they pause at the gate leaving Bleak House, where Esther observes a strange light in the sky overhanging the darkened skyline of London. The spectacle is both "beautiful and awful," "immovable and heaving," revealing the terrible worldliness of London's "waste" with the light of a seemingly divine fire (450). Struck by this strange conflation of opposites, Esther experiences a doubleness in her own psyche, as she has "for a moment an

undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was," even though she is quite sure that she had no thought of "what was soon to happen"—referring perhaps to the symptoms of the illness but more probably to the discovery of her parents' identities (450). Here, in a subjective response to an atmospheric effect (as Monks responds to thunder in *Oliver Twist*), Esther's objective consciousness is flooded by that subjective awareness. She then undergoes one of those not-quite-describable moments of detachment from identity that Jackson would record, in this case linked to form of a peculiar clairvoyance, in which she experiences viscerally the effects of the knowledge of her parentage that is yet to come.[72]

Her dreamy states and the revelations they entail are always characterized by a feeling of indistinctness, whether something "undefinable," as it is at the garden gate; or the haziness of the light under the atmospheric conditions of dawn, twilight, fog, or shadow; or by a dreamlike or confused state of mind. The first time she meets Lady Dedlock, the latter's face is "in a confused way, like a broken glass to me, in which I saw scraps of old remembrances" (268); the second time, just before the mother reveals herself to the daughter, Esther "cannot say what was in my whirling thoughts" as she is struck by "something in her face I had pined for and dreamed of as a little child" (532). While she and Inspector Bucket are searching for Lady Dedlock at the end of the novel, premonitions of her death take on physical symptoms as "thoughts [that] shudder through me" (804), but they also have an unreality to them, as "I was far from sure that I was not in a dream" (803). Recalling the walk to the burial ground where they will find the body, Esther admits to "confused impressions"; "it was neither night nor day" (844). Almost-everyday fluctuations of consciousness, Esther's memories of events are here like her memories of childhood: indistinct and fragmentary yet overflowing with premonition. Or they are like her still more ordinary state of sleep in which objects become "indistinct and mingled" (57), and the separate identities of others as well of herself dissolves.

In all of these moments, her awareness of the external world is overwhelmed as her subject consciousness is intensified, while her strange sense of not-self, or of a ghostly self, is sometimes prelude to a strong premonition. Even when she has not the faintest idea of her connection to Lady Dedlock, she feels that "*I-I,* little Esther Summerson, the child who lived a life apart, and on whose birthday there was no rejoicing—seemed to arise before my own eyes, evoked out of the past by some power in this fashionable lady" (268). Earlier, the first morning she wakes up in Bleak House, she watches objects within and outside her room emerge "from the indistinctness of last

night, disclos[ing] the scene over which the wind had wandered in the dark, like my memory over my life"(105). She is referring to a moment the previous night, when she had allowed her mind to wander back over her childhood and then "raise[] up shadowy speculations" (95) about her parentage. The simile draws the dim forms of the external world—the objects in the dawn light—into the territory of her wandering mind, where thoughts of the past summon up the ghostly figures of her parents.

Such apparitional moments, or simply the confusion and indistinctness that often accompanies them are, nonetheless, sometimes defeated by Esther's will, suggesting Dickens's confidence in the moral treatment of madness promoted by progressive asylum doctors like John Conolly.[73] She evades the disarming "shadowy speculations" about her parentage by recalling "Esther, Esther! Duty, my dear!" (95). She avoids the "fitful, dazzling"(244) habits of mind that destroy her cousin Richard, by exercising the "application and concentration" that he lacks, and she recovers from the auralike "dread and faintness"(532) that precedes her mother's revelation by reflecting on her "sacred obligation" (538) not to alert others to her discovery. Perhaps most powerfully, when she first looks at herself in the mirror after the illness has altered her features, she overcomes the estrangement from her own image by reminding herself firmly that she must begin life afresh as something other than a beauty. At such moments her story announces the victory of will over mental confusion and self-loss.

There is, however, a character that experiences a far more extreme loss of volition than Esther, experiencing not a dreamy state, but rather grand mal epileptic attacks. Guster has "fits," attributable, the narrator suggests, "to a tender heart, and a susceptible something that might have been imagination" (164) if it had not been for her stifling upbringing at the hands of the parish. In Jackson's cartography of nervous disorder, such emotional and intellectual undernourishment results in less activity in the higher nervous centers, suggesting that Guster might be more susceptible to a disorder in the lower and more automatic centers. Like Esther, and like Jo, whose unhappy plight "sends her into a fit of unusual duration" (164), Guster is an orphan. Unlike Esther, however, she communicates the distressed state of her nerves and mind only through her convulsions, and her ghostliness is that of the improbable séance specter so derided by Dickens: When she announces the visit of the Chadbands, she "comes rustling and scratching down the little staircase like a popular ghost" (281).

In "The Uncommercial Traveller," Dickens seems to speculate about the interiority of the female epileptic that he denies Guster in *Bleak House.* Here, the narrator visits a ward for the "idiotic and imbecile" in the Wapping

workhouse, full of women who "drop," "roll," and "tear."[74] Among these, the one who reputedly has the worst attacks of them all, is a young woman who sits "with her face turned up, pondering." The traveler wonders:

> Whether this young woman, brooding like this in the summer season, ever thinks that somewhere there are trees and flowers, even mountains and the great sea? Whether, not to go so far, this young woman ever has any dim revelation of that young woman who is not here and will never come here, who is courted and caressed, and loved, and has a husband, and bears children, and lives in a home, and who never knows what it is to have this lashing and tearing come upon her? And whether this young woman, God help her, gives herself up then, and drops like a coach-horse from the moon?[75]

The traveler's compassion for the girl—his dismay at the bleakness of her life—is expressed here, not in a satire on the poverty of institutional care, but rather in an imaginative description of an alternative life of domestic contentment that she will probably never live. As the creation of the sick woman's mind, this other self arises as a "dim revelation." This spectral self then in turn signals the onset of a grand mal seizure. The odd thing is that it is the narrator himself who earlier claimed to have encountered the ghost of a drowned man on the swing bridge over the locks near the workhouse. Although he describes this "apparition" with not a little irony—it too appears like a séance grotesque with "a ghastly grin and a sound like gurgling water in its throat"—the ghost functions as a premonition, warning him about the desperate condition of the female residents of the workhouse.[76] To read this encounter as a clairvoyant episode is also to recognize the narrator's own implication in the scene with the epileptic girl: the speculations about what might have been come from him, and the "other young woman" is the apparitional creature of his mind as much as it is of the girl's.

Just as manifestations of the dreamy state become the property of not just cerebral disease but the ordinary observing mind in this scene, in *Bleak House* epilepsy inflicts not only Guster's and Esther's stories but also the quality of large portions of the anonymous narrator's tale. The fog that covers all of London in the opening paragraphs of the novel famously provides a metaphor for the murky conduct of Chancery. This fog makes forms indistinct and undistinguishable. It is the first of many of the narrator's descriptions of atmospheric effects that estrange the observer from a familiar environment, like the "dilating" (654) effect of dusk over Tom-all-Alone's or the twilight over Chesney Wold that changes known forms into "distant phantom[s]" (593). In this last description, the evening landscape is in sympathy with the

ghostly presence haunting the house and its contents, in particular casting a menacing shadow over the portrait of Lady Dedlock. Curiously, in describing the way that Chesney Wold is still inhabited, in portrait form, by the generations of Dedlocks who have lived there, the narrator's omniscience expands speculatively from the present, visible world into the worlds of the lived past, the future, and the dead:

> The present summer evening, as the sun goes down, the preparations are complete. Dreary and solemn the old house looks, with so many appliances of habitation, and with no inhabitants except the pictured forms upon the walls. So did these come and go, a Dedlock in possession might have ruminated passing along; so did they see this gallery hushed and quiet, as I see it now; so think, as I think, of the gap that they would make in this domain when they were gone; so find it, as I find it, difficult to believe that it could be, without them; so pass from my world, as I pass from theirs, now closing the reverberating door; so leave no blank to miss them, and so die. (592–93)

Here the narrator breaks the rules of third-person anonymity, not in the limited mode of free indirect discourse, where anonymity enables the penetration of characters' consciousness but by projecting his voice into the body of a Dedlock and there inhabiting his own subjective, first-person "I." This spectral intrusion into the objective world then itself becomes the occasion for an imaginative, if not clairvoyant, representation of the dead ancestors that moves simultaneously into the past and into the future. It is the moment in this narrator's tale that parallels Esther's vertiginous reflection following her illness that "I felt for myself as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes" (653). The narrator's Dedlock imagines himself as a dead ancestor, who in turn tries to imagine a future in which he is no longer the living master of the house. This layering of spectral voices and the collapse of linear time it temporarily effects is dizzying. Reader and narrator recover their balance only when the living and the dead are separated again by the closing of the "the reverberating door" (593). Then the portraits assume a comfortably caricaturelike quality as they come to satirical life in the light of the sunset: a Justice winks; and an ancestress in high-heels assumes a halo.

The narrator's prescience is sometimes manifest in the subjunctive mood of the voice that asks, as it does in the preceding passage, about what a character, real or imagined, "might have" thought or whether, for instance, Tulkinghorn *would* see a woman pass if he looked out the window at a certain moment. It is the voice that suggests "it *may* be the gathering gloom of the

evening or it *may* be the darker gloom within herself" that casts a shadow on Lady Dedlock's face "*as if*" she wished for Tulkinghorn's death (598, my emphasis), and it is the voice that examines the scene of Tulkinghorn's murder with cinematic precision while imagining the ghost stories that the details it notes will spawn. This voice sacrifices both omniscient knowledge of the minds of characters (the knowledge that Tulkinghorn himself, "always at hand, haunting every place" [681], possesses and uses to his own dark ends), as well as knowledge about the visible world based on forensic evidence of the kind Guppy assembles, for intuitive anticipation of possible revelations or events to come. Hence, even as the narrator describes how Bucket "mounts a high tower in his mind" (798) to deduce the whereabouts of Lady Dedlock in the dramatic closing scenes of the novel, that narrative voice almost imperceptibly slips away from the detective's rational, speculating mind to uncover the mystery for the reader well in advance of Bucket and Esther's too-late discovery. At this moment, Bucket's reasoned deduction surrenders to a subjunctive mood that carries the reader beyond ordinary perception and discovery, not by penetrating the objective and subjective worlds of all places and all characters, but by inhabiting a field of the possible:

> Where is she? Living or dead, where is she? If, as he folds the handkerchief and carefully puts it up, it were able, with an enchanted power, to bring before him the place where she found it . . . would he descry her there? On the waste, where the brick-kilns are burning with a pale blue flare; where the straw-roofs of the wretched huts in which the bricks are made, are being scattered by the wind . . . there is a lonely figure with the sad world to itself. It is the figure of a woman too, but it is miserably dressed, and no such clothes ever came through the hall, and out at the great door, of the Dedlock mansion. (798)

Such dissolution, manifest in the drifting away from definite forms and signs, complements the images of physical change across time. The first chapter opens with the twin images of a megalosaurus wandering up Holborn Hill and of "new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud" (11) created by London's foot walkers, collapsing the comings and goings of the present into the vastness of geological time and intimating the interconnectedness of events as they are shaped by inevitable and unchanging natural forces. "What connexion," the narrator asks, "can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, very curiously been brought together!" (235). Given the mid-century popularity of Robert Chambers's *Vestiges of the Natural His-*

tory of Creation and the fact that Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* had gone through seven editions by 1851, it is hard not to interpret the "gulfs" he invokes here as those among natural forms and species as well as among social classes. Yet nothing in the novel suggests either natural or social progress. Instead neglect and indifference return creatures to their most primitive forms. Even the "lower animals" at Chesney Wold, the narrator speculates, might have more "motions of fancy" (95) than the stunted imaginations of the servants and stable hands that take care of them, and an "educated, improved, developed dog, who has been taught his duties and knows how to discharge them" (238) can, unlike the poor, uneducated orphan Jo, respond to his environment with more than brute sense. Hence too the dog, we are reminded, if turned wild, like Jo, will produce descendants that lack any of these domestic talents. Because he is continually being "moved on," Jo's mental and physical condition ironizes the very idea of evolutionary progress in a city where everything is "moving to some purpose" (291).

This social dissolution, imaged as a descending hierarchy of social beings, traverses the episodes and descriptions of mental dissolution. When Guster offers Jo food, asks him whether he has any parents, and lays the "first decent hand" on him, she has to repress "symptoms favorable to the fit"(384). Meanwhile Jo himself is rendered, as he so often is, mute and "petrified" (383). Both have suffered, like Esther, because they are orphaned, and both are most vulnerable to a psychomotor dysfunction at the moment they experience feelings of domestic tenderness, just as just as Esther is affected by her own inklings of familial connection. Yet neither, like her, has the capacity for self-direction that can summon her to duty with a commanding, "Esther!" Esther's superior mind (the result of the education and affection she has received as much as of native determination) often enables her to restrain her own mind's tendency to dissolution—a tendency that, as we have seen, gives her an expanded awareness of the relationships among people and places. Jo is also paired with Esther, however, as a character that belongs to the improbable connection between Chesney Wold and Tom-all-Alone's. He is "unconscious of the link" and he "sums up his mental condition, when asked a question, by replying that he 'don't know nothink'" (235). Esther, on the other hand, has a "knowledge of details perfectly surprising" (624) and the capacity, however dreadful she finds it, to understand her own place in the unfolding mystery.

Looking back on her illness, Esther reflects that her object in reporting its horrifying symptoms is to contribute to medical knowledge: "It may be that if we knew more of such strange afflictions, we might be the better able to alleviate their intensity" (514). This reflects her effort to shape her

narrative as an expression of duty rather than hubris. But when the activity of her mind escapes the disciplining exercise of her will, her story becomes something other than the record of "progress" it claims to be by the title of her first chapter. Ostensibly, the ending secures the providential narrative, as the "goodness and tenderness of God" (911) reveals itself in the blessing and restoring of good characters who have suffered: Ada, Charley, and Caddy. This blessing is expanded in the formation of something like a Rousseauean *petite société* around the marriage of Esther and Woodcourt, whose goodness ensures the happiness of all those whom they touch: patients, friends, and children alike. Chesney Wold is left to "darkness and vacancy" (910), while Bleak House becomes the scene of new life and a generation liberated from the moral quicksand of Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Yet Esther's closing reflection seems to shift the narrative emphasis on moral restraint and its domestic and social rewards back to the more peculiar activity of her mind. In response to her husband's suggestion that the mirror should show her that, despite the scars of her illness, she is prettier than ever, she responds privately in the form of an incomplete phrase whose mood is subjunctive: "they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—" (914). This abandoned reflection ends the novel with moral as well as semantic uncertainty: What if she *were* as or more beautiful than before her illness? The mirror suddenly ceases to be an instrument of self-discipline. It is possible to read this closing speculation as another moment of dissolution, a form of knowing that is neither that of third-person narrative omniscience nor of first-person moral self-fashioning. Instead it represents a heightening of subjectivity as awareness of the objective world becomes confused. Esther's closing half-thought, in other words, invokes the ghostly form that represents the dissolving of a conscious moment into a host of potential states.

III. THE DISEMBODIED VOICES OF *OUR MUTUAL FRIEND*

Ghosts are everywhere in *Our Mutual Friend.* Shortly after she meets John Rokesmith, Mrs Boffin sees the faces of old Harmon and his children all over the house; Lizzie appears to hear her father's voice calling her at the moment of his death; Jenny Wren sees her Jewish father substitute Riah as a dead man stepping out from the grave; Riderhood at one time saw towing posts turn into ominous figures in the gloom; and of course the reportedly dead John Harmon rises from the ashes to inhabit several new identities and hover around the lives of those to whom he was formerly connected "like a ghost."[77] This figurative ghost is the keystone to the plot, absorbing

and transforming the myriad events in the novel into a single narrative. Yet ghosts have psychological origins too in the story. The visual and auditory hallucinations that Mrs. Boffin and Lizzie experience are, as Mr. Boffin suggests, the effect of "thinking and dwelling on that dark spot" (240). In Spencer's terms, they loom out of a mind in which wonder or reviviscence has taken an excessive hold, overwhelming impressions conveyed by the immediate senses with those delivered by the memory. Such specters arise like the images that come to Lizzie out of the hollow of the fire. Her foreknowledge of "dreadful things" (72) "comes like pictures" (71). Charley reproaches her with being a "dreamer" and tells her instead to "look into the real world" (278) and control her clairvoyant "fancies" (279). But she cannot control them. When she looks into the fire she sees visions of her life or of lives that might be hers that make her "exalted and forgetful" (405). The mesmerized state that comes upon her when she stares at the flames liberates old impressions from the exercise of her will and she becomes enraptured by them.

Lizzie's trance states summon up images of herself or an alternate self (the rich woman that might love Eugene) whose vividness makes them seem apart from herself. This out-of-body experience approximates that of the "dying" John Harmon, who later recalls how, under the influence of the stupefying drug that Riderhood gave him, "I saw a figure like myself lying dressed in my clothes on a bed" (426), and that "[t]he figure like myself was assailed, and my valise was in its hand" (426), and "[t]his is John Harmon, drowning" (426). In a description of dreamy dissociation that echoes Tennyson's, he recollects that "I could not have said that my name was John Harmon—I could not have thought it," but then demands of himself, "This is still correct?" (426). The narrative is accurate, he reflects "with the exception that I cannot possibly express it to myself without using the word I. But it was not I. There was no such thing as I, within my knowledge" (426). These "deranged impressions," he reflects, "are not pervaded by any idea of time" (425). As he moves through this series of hazy recollections, John Rokesmith does indeed raise the ghost of John Harmon, to whom he addresses this narrative and whom he apostrophizes with a desperate "Don't evade it, John Harmon, don't evade it" (423). This is not an indulgence in the metaphor of his death and "rebirth" as Rokesmith, the "fanciful side of the situation" in which he can describe his loneliness in the figure of a ghost who has no place among the living. It is the "real side" (422) of that circumstance, in which his dreamy consciousness, unable to integrate his former state of mind with his present one summons that older self up as a specter, one that is as remote from his subjective experience as the first-person narrative is from

the dreamy unreality that it endeavors to capture through the artificially imposed pronoun "I."

Although artificially induced, this division of self approximates the many instances of "double consciousness," or divided personality, that Elliotson records in *Human Physiology,* whose cause may be nervous disease.[78] Harmon's split self is also bound to the broader pattern of doublings and substitutions that structure the narrative: Bradley Headstone not only disguises himself as Riderhood, looking "in the clothes of [another] man, as if they were his own" (697) but is united to him in death by the iron ring that causes it; Mr. Venus's trade in human parts parallels Gaffer Hexam's business in drowned bodies; Silas Wegg and Charlie Hexam are consumed by the same desire for "getting on" (127); Eugene Wrayburn's obsession with "the lonely girl . . . by the fire" (211) is not contrasted but rather coupled with the uncontrollable passion of her other lover, and like Lizzie herself, both men are entranced by gazing into the "charmed flame" (872), whose mesmeric power seems to be a stand-in for the enchanting beauty that awakens a new personality in each of them. The plot depends on these usually unlikely doubles as much as it depends on coincidence to bring together its very disparate players and unrelated places.

This nervous symptom of double consciousness—or the oscillation between two entirely different states of mind—is another expression of the dreamy disturbance that at once prevents the integration of self and divorces it from the social world. Perhaps the most unexpected link is between Harmon and Bradley, since despite their shared experience of social and self-alienation, only the latter suffers from a diagnosable disorder. In Harmon's efforts to make sense of what has passed, of who he is, and to make himself more substantial than the ghosts of the churchyard he is walking through, Harmon ventriloquizes an "I" that "was not I" (426). This is precisely the state of epileptic nervous collapse that Bradley falls into by the end of the novel. His condition first manifests in the *idée fixe* that strips him of all "power of self-command"(396), and becomes full-blown under the influence of rage and fear after his failed attack on Eugene in "fits" wherein he becomes seized with giddiness, and begins "biting and knocking" (821). Despite the loss of moral and then motor restraint, Bradley retains a state of consciousness in which he is profoundly aware of his own mind and, in this respect, never approaches madness. "The state of the man was murderous, and he knew it" (609). Like Harmon, he preserves some intellectual awareness, recognizing his two selves belong to one body even as he experiences them as two. By day, in the schoolroom, he maintains his

"disciplined show," even as he contemplates his other, nocturnal state, "perfectly comprehend[ing] that he hated his rival with his strongest and worst forces, and that if he tracked him to Lizzie Hexam, his so doing would never serve himself with her. . . . And he knew as well what act of his would follow if he did, as he knew that his mother had borne him" (609). His core sense of identity—reason and self-perception anchored in the knowledge of his birth—survives the assault on his power of self-government by his passions, yet only by substituting detached awareness of these dueling selves for the integrated self that can align feeling with moral judgment. By the end of the story, when he "twists" and "falls" in front of his pupils, such awareness disappears with consciousness, yet its trace remains in an even further-removed point of self-recognition, as he sees his own facial distortions in the reactions of the horrified boys. This dreamy fit, in which Bradley knows himself only while being outside himself, follows on the two acts of violence that precipitate all other events in the novel.

Given this prominence in the plot, it is scarcely surprising that the narrative voice too sometimes slides into dreamy uncertainty in which thought becomes unmoored from identity. A full chapter before the discovery of Gaffer's body, Lizzie hears her father call her: "She opened the door, and said in an alarmed tone, 'Father, was that you calling me?'" This premonition is then revived in the narrative memory directly after Eugene, Mortimer, Riderhood, and the Inspector pull Gaffer from the water. Here, in an exaggerated, otherworldly form of free indirect discourse, not only direct quotation, but even the pronouns that might at least temporarily anchor the voice in a character are abandoned to a stream of images ranging across the consciousness of several witnesses to the scene and then left to drift away from all human awareness entirely:

> Father, was that you calling me? Father! I thought I heard you call me twice before! Words never to be answered, those, upon the earth side of the grave. The wind sweeps jeeringly over Father, whips him with the frayed ends of his dress and his jagged hair, tries to turn him where he lies stark on his back, and force his face towards the rising sun, that he may be shamed the more. A lull, and the wind is secret and prying with him; lifts and lets fall a rag; hides palpitating under another rag; runs nimbly through his hair and beard. Then in a rush it cruelly taunts him. Father was that you calling me? Was it you, the voiceless and the dead? Was it you, thus buffeted as you lie here in a heap? Was it you, thus baptized unto Death, with these flying impurities now flung upon your face? Why not speak, Father? Soaking into this filthy ground as you lie here, is your own shape. Did you never

> see such a shape soaked into your boat? Speak to us, the winds the only listeners left you! (222)

This passage, preceded by a description of the dead body on the windswept shore and followed by the direct speech of the inspector, presents a dreamy interlude on the otherwise direct depiction of this dramatic event. Given the echo of Lizzie's earlier cry, it appears to represent her lucid vision of the scene, for she is not present. Yet the high diction of "sweeps jeeringly" and "hides palpitatingly" is not Lizzie's; nor is it the inspector's, although he too might be expected to observe the shape and the position of the body with exceptional scrutiny. Considering his demonstrated ability, when roused, to create "reviving impressions"(54) with language and given that it was he who witnessed Lizzie's earlier cry, it seems for a moment that it could be Eugene's. Yet Eugene, as Lizzie observes, has little-to-no capacity to enter imaginatively into the suffering of others. Eventually we are told it is the winds that speak, but their "prying" and "taunting" of the body is incommensurate with the cries of distress they carry. Voice is configured in the spectral conflation of words recalled from an earlier episode and present impressions recorded by a mind liberated from the sensory limits of a single being. Oddly evoking the hybrid figure in Mortimer's dream, "M.R.F. Eugene Gaffer Harmon" (224), this is the voice that belongs to no living body in particular and that, mediumlike, addresses "the voiceless and the dead."

Another such spectral intrusion occurs in Book 3, when Bella and Rokesmith are returning from their visit to Lizzie. Here the narrative voice recognizes their impending union, a voice that is once again routed through the "awareness" of a nonhuman agent:

> The railway, at this point, knowingly shutting a green eye and opening a red one, they had to run for it. As Bella could not run easily so wrapped up, the Secretary had to help her. When she took her opposite place in the carriage corner, the brightness in her face was so charming to behold, that on her exclaiming, "What beautiful stars and what a glorious night!" the Secretary said "Yes," but seemed to prefer to see the night and the stars in the light of her lovely little countenance, to looking out of the window.
>
> 'O boofer lady, fascinating boofer lady! If I were but legally executor of Johnny's will! If I had but the right to pay your legacy and to take your receipt!—Something to this purpose surely mingled with the blast of the train as it cleared the stations, all knowingly shutting up their green eyes and opening their red ones when they prepared to let the boofer lady pass. (594)

The railway's "knowingness" seems at first a projection of Rokesmith's pleasure, which imagines the inanimate world to be working in his interest, engineering circumstance to bring him physically closer to the object of his desire. Yet in the first paragraph, the voice pulls away from the Secretary's conscious experience as it ponders that he "seemed to prefer" looking at the girl to looking at the stars. Moreover, the invocation of the "boofer lady" in the second paragraph could represent Rokesmith's thoughts only if he were morbidly invoking the figure of the dead Johnny, the boy that Mrs. Boffin hoped to adopt as a substitute for the younger, "dead" John Harmon. The identity of "I" is ambiguous here, as is the person referred to as "Johnny," since the diminutive form of the name suggests not the elder Harmon, who is of course the author of the will, but rather the dead child or else the younger Harmon in his infancy. Even the identity of the "boofer lady" is obscure, since the dying Betty mistook Lizzie for Bella, calling out to the "boofer" as in her confused state she appears to inhabit the mind of her dead great-grandchild, Johnny. Once again, impressions recorded in earlier scenes are revived in a floating consciousness that seems as incapable of fixing an identity to the figures it describes as it is unable to distinguish the living from the dead. Strangely combining the thoughts of a dead child, a dying woman, and a hopeful lover, this voice then blends with and animates the sounds of the train—the nonhuman object that, like the wind of the earlier passage, belongs to the visual content of the scene itself.

These descriptions, part hallucinatory revival of earlier impressions, part self-conscious omniscience that brings the usually invisible narrative voice into ghostly half-presence, suggest that the dreamy state and the physiological conditions that underlie it infect the very medium of narrative. Mary Poovey has shown that Dickens resists the interpolative role of narrative fiction, whose function is to diffuse disruptive impulses, particularly fear.[79] She argues that, like other formal modes of analysis that navigate the relationship between human impulses and sociality, imaginative literature obfuscates real sources of danger—those that are too painful or too terrifying to contemplate—by displacing these into abstractions such as "human nature" or "the market." Structurally equivalent to the Freudian ego, these abstract forms protect the subject by blocking it from its true source of danger. However, Dickens uses free indirect discourse, Poovey suggests, to reveal rather than obscure, unstated emotions and anxieties. When voices begin to merge, unpredicted relationships and unmanageable affects may suddenly appear. Narrative becomes both socially destabilizing and cognitively disorienting. Yet if we restore Dickens's narrative to the scientific contexts in which he wrote and read, we can see alongside this scorn for imaginary forms that

"obliterate free will," another kind of emphasis. What is risked in free indirect discourse is not the inhibitory structure that manages individual passions but rather the diagnostic quality of narrative—its observation and labeling of nervous disorders. As the narrative voice assumes a ghostly, nonhuman form that rolls across other minds, collapsing differences in space and time, its investigative and explanatory powers are overwhelmed by a state of dreamy confusion which suspends the higher faculty of judgment—a phenomenon that is comically encrypted, perhaps, in the early scene at the Veneerings where narrative attention is apparently gratuitously turned to the "Analytical Chemist's" contempt for the Harmon story.

An essay by Edmund Dixon that appeared in the April 10, 1858, issue of *Household Words* offers a prototype for Dickens's peculiar kind of dreamy storytelling. In "A Microscopic Dream," a natural scientist finds himself transformed into a microscopically small life form. The dream, he implies, is the combined effect of associative connection and the nervous state into which his work has thrown him. Circumstance, however, offers the possibility that the "vision" was delivered to him by the direct influence of a clairvoyant magician, who exercises power and insight "over men and things" and to whom he has promised, at peril of such transformation, to explain the mystery and purpose of lower and smaller forms of existence.[80] In the dream, he undergoes physical dissolution "much like a lump of sugar might feel when it is dissolved in a glass of cold water" to become finally "an animated droplet" with "no definite shape or form." In this primitive state, he is able to assume any shape he pleases and attach himself to any life form he comes into contact with. Like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol,* he is released from the vision the same way he was drawn into it, by the sound of the clock striking the hour. This dreamer is the scientist-counterpart to the spectral narrator of *Our Mutual Friend.* Through the dissolution and recombination of miniature life forms, he experiences multiple identities and states of awareness, all of which are tenuously attached to a single subjective "I." The physical transformation into a more primitive condition also parallels the novel's depictions of nervous retreat as it is expressed in the dreamy state.

Moreover, by invoking the figure of decay, Dixon's essay draws attention to the link between nervous decline and dust in *Our Mutual Friend.* Dust is the primitive residue of larger, more complex forms that are either dead or discarded, yet in this story it also conceals the revivifying treasures that promise to enrich and transform present lives. Bloated corpses, like the household detritus and vegetable refuse of the dust heaps become "meat and drink" (45) to the living. Hence Rokesmith's musing thought that "if the dead could know, *or do know,* how the living use them" (429, my emphasis),

the best and worst of motives would become transparent. The prevailing figure of dust suggests that, in keeping with the perpetual cycle of evolution and dissolution, the dead do not quite stay dead. Hence Jenny Wren's cry to Riah: "Come back and be dead . . . come up and be dead" (335). Jenny, whose ecstatic moments of "lightness" when she is "taken up" by her "blessed children" (290) are so many deaths from which she returns to the pain of life, belying Riderhood's conviction that he who has once been drowned cannot die from drowning a second time. Jenny returns, however, as something half-angelic herself, "looking down out of a Glory of her long bright hair" (335) to call the living back to death, while Bradley orders Riderhood to "Come down" and be drowned again (874). As though to emblematize these efforts to keep down the dead, Lizzie's miserable interview with Charley and Headstone takes place in a raised church graveyard where the dead sit "above the level of the living" (451).

Although there is no megalosaurus in *Our Mutual Friend* to hint at the manifold hidden, material connections between the monstrous secrets of the past and the mental demons of the present, the novel shares with *Bleak House* an interpretation of visions and voices from beyond the grave as the effects of nervous disorganization. As lives and fortunes are reconstituted out of dust and rot, so are the dead reanimated in the dreamy visions precipitated by suffering and delivered by the dissolution of complex structures in the brain. Where dreamy self-loss in the first novel produces divinatory glimpses into ghostly lives that might have been, disembodied voices merge the worlds of the living and the dead, in the second. In this way, both stories mimic the marvels of the séance room even as they illuminate the cerebral origins of the spiritual events that it unleashes.