Much of Dickens's early fiction registers the author's suspicion of change and his advocacy of the values of the past. The year 1848, the year of revolutions, marks a transmutation in his thinking, as in *Dombey and Son* he shows himself fully in favor of social change while at the same time indicating that true salvation rests not with society but with individuals and the domestic affections. This attitude is likewise evident in *David Copperfield*, published over the next two years (1849–50). It is in *Bleak House*, however, that Dickens first anatomizes a whole society and shows its inhabitants imprisoned by the past, for it is in this novel of 1852–53 that Dickens forswears belief in an evolutionary, teleological doctrine of becoming and instead—like Carlyle, who sees islands of cosmos forever arising from and then sinking into chaos—embraces becoming as a process of endless change.

As is generally acknowledged, *Bleak House* is the first of the so-called dark novels belonging to the second half of Dickens's career. Where earlier his fiction was generally optimistic in tone, being the expression of one who seemed to believe in a benign universe in which the aspiring individual could improve himself both morally and physically, during the early 1850s his vision began to darken. On the one hand, he saw society as not only sick but also, in the words of his biographer Edgar Johnson, doomed to
"complete annihilation." 3 No longer was it a matter of amelioration of social ills, suggested by the coming of the railroad, the great symbol of social transformation, in *Dombey and Son*; now it required a total transformation of society following upon explosion and extinction. On the other hand, he witnessed every day individual acts of benevolence and altruism (such as those performed by his friend Angela Burdett Coutts) that seemed to indicate mankind's natural goodness and to suggest that, under certain conditions, society could be improved short of dissolution and rebirth. Which view was correct? As he reflected on the question, Dickens decided that neither one nor the other was correct but that both were true. 4 And having arrived at this conclusion—that his drive toward chaos was as strong as his drive toward order—he decided to cast his next novel in a form radically different from that of his previous fiction. He elected to present not one but two narratives, two different and discordant points of view expressed by two narrators, and to give priority to neither. The reader would be left to make up his mind about which view was true or to accept, like the author, the indeterminacy of the fiction. In settling on a novel expressive not of either/or but of both/and, Dickens showed himself a romantic ironist. 5

"In Bleak House, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things," Dickens says in his preface to the novel. Presumably the romantic side is Esther Summerson’s, 6 for Esther’s first-person narrative presents a world of health, love, and order. Hers is the Apollonian view of existence; in a plain, matter-of-fact style Esther speaks, in the past tense, for stasis, being. She is within the story, and her subjective point of view is one of contraction into the enclosed, man-made world represented by Bleak House, which at the end becomes even smaller, the miniaturized house in Yorkshire. Generically her narrative is a novelistic romance.

The other side—the "unromantic," familiar side—belongs to the nameless narrator. The world he sees is one of disease, distrust, and disorder, the world of Tom-all-Alone’s. In a lively,
extravagant style characterized by a dense poetic texture he speaks, in the historical present tense, for change, for chaos, for a world of ontological becoming. His is the Dionysian view of life. Outside the story, which he tells in the third person, he can go anywhere, but he does not know many of the thoughts and feelings of the characters about whom he speaks. Where Esther experiences and shares the warmth and feeling of domesticity, of love and friendship, the nameless narrator sees mainly the dark surfaces and sordid trappings in a milieu of power plays. Even though his more objective point of view is one of expansion, he primarily focuses on individuals leading desperate lives in an unfeeling world where they must remain alien and apart. It is telling that Esther does not appear within his narrative, whereas Tulkinghorn, the anaesthetic modern man, the very type of power, does not appear within hers. Generically his narrative is an anatomy,\(^7\) a dissection of the dead or dying body of mid-nineteenth-century England.

Dickens divides the sixty-seven chapters of *Bleak House* almost equally between the nameless narrator and Esther, the former having thirty-four and the latter one less. He has the first, she the last. Hers however is not, at least by implication, the last word, for chapter 67, "The Close of Esther’s Narrative," terminates not with a full stop but with a long dash, so that the final words of the novel read, "even supposing—— / THE END." There is, thus, no resolution or reconciliation of the two opposing points of view. The "darkness and vacancy" that the nameless narrator sees at the close of his narrative (chapter 66) is by no means enlightened and enlivened by Esther’s bright but unfinished summary. It is no wonder that in his working plan for Chapter 67 Dickens wrote: "Wind up. End(?)" For there could not be the kind of end that terminated the conventional novel, because at the close the spheres of the two narrators remain antinomic.\(^8\)

In having his novel recounted by two narrators representing conflicting but apparently equally valid points of view, Dickens,
resorting to the paradoxical view of the ironist, was tacitly admitting to the mystery of existence. There are certain things, phenomenal as well as noumenal, he concluded, we can never know. Life is what the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is—a "masterly fiction" (pp. 22, 760) constructed by an unknown but master fictioneer. One can expend "study, ability, eloquence, knowledge, intellect" (p. 760) on it, but one can never comprehend it. The fictioneer may provide clues but never answers. From Jo, who "don't know nothink," to Tulkinghorn and Bucket, who seem to know all, the mystery remains impenetrable.

Unlike the nameless narrator, who for all his apparent omniscience has no knowledge of the future, Esther from her partial perspective knows how her story will end. Indeed, her knowledge of the future colors her rendering of the present. She speaks of "the mystery of the future, and the little clue afforded to it by the voice of the present" (p. 69); but in fact the future up to a point well beyond her narrative is certainly known to her. Her position is that of an actor in as well as an observer-reporter of the events she wishes to relate. Constantly apologizing for her prominent part, she says that no matter how hard she tries she cannot keep herself out of it: "I hope any one who may read what I write will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can't be kept out" (pp. 102–3). But in spite of herself, it is as an actor, and not as a spectator, that she is more important. For as an observer Esther can see life from but one angle of vision. Although claiming to possess "always a rather noticing way—a silent way of noticing what passed" (p. 17), she often does not understand what she sees: "I saw, but did not comprehend," she admits (p. 713). As readers of her narrative we must necessarily see everything through her eyes; but for the narrative to make sense we must see more than she, must interpret the incidents she reports in a way different from hers. To the end, despite a good bit of evidence that should call her basic outlook into question, she remains what she was at the beginning;
namely, an optimist and a meliorist. To the degree that she is unchanged by her experiences there is thus never any Bildung in the part of the novel that she calls “my portion of these pages” (p. 17) and that appears, at first glance, as akin to the Bildungsroman.

But if her narrative is not an autobiography, which she insists it is not (“as if this were the narrative of my life” [p. 27]), why is she writing the story in which she is so heavily involved? Who assigned her the task? Somehow she is “obliged to write” (p. 27) this story ostensibly about others, but it ends up being mainly “my story” (p. 729) for the benefit of “any one who may read what I write” (p. 102), some “unknown friend” (p. 767). Moreover, how does she know that her narrative is only a “portion” of these pages? To write half of a book of which she apparently recognizes the other half to have been written by an omniscient narrator is tantamount to admitting her own fictionality.

And such is precisely the case. Esther Summerson is not only the ingenue of her narrative but also the novelist of her story. On several occasions she reveals herself as a conscious artist carefully constructing what she writes. About a certain incident she says: “What more the letters told me, needs not to be repeated here. It has its own times and places in my story” (p. 453). In similar manner she says: “I must write” (p. 378), “I will not dwell” (p. 703), “I proceed to other passages of my narrative” (p. 714), “I may at once finish what I know of his history” (p. 729). Only a conscientious craftsman would be at such pains to shape this account. Made constantly aware of the narrator at work on her narrative, we are unable to separate the teller from the tale. The dancer and the dance, to paraphrase Yeats, blend into pure artifice.

Where Esther’s narrative is a personal fiction, the nameless narrator’s is an impersonal one. As W. J. Harvey observes, “The general impression is of a vast, collective choric voice brilliantly mimicking the varied life it describes.” And even though Esther does not appear in the nameless narrator’s part of the book, her
narrative is dependent upon his, is a "portion" of that chorus, and is assimilated into it as another voice. Her narrative is therefore but another document in the whole array of documents woven to form the text of Bleak House.

The novel has been called "a document about the interpretation of documents." I would argue that the profusion of documents attests to the novel's insistence upon its own textuality, its status as a fiction and an artifice, in sum, a metafiction like Carlyle's Sartor Resartus. From the beginning Bleak House shows itself as a kind of theatrical world where the drama is enacted in accordance with various scripts, references to which are scattered throughout the novel.

The celebrated opening of chapter 1 reads like the directions for a stage setting for a play:

London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth. Smoke lowering down from the chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke.

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time.

The curtain then rises and we are introduced to the High Court of Chancery, where the costumed actors are "running their goat-hair and horse-hair warded heads against walls of words, and making a pretence of equity with serious faces, as players might" (p. 6,
Having enacted the drama of Jarndyce and Jarndyce many times, the players find their roles by no means taxing. They go through their business automatically. Mr. Tangle has played his part for so long that “he is famous for it,” and his eighteen associates, “each armed with a little summary of eighteen hundred sheets, bob up like eighteen hammers in a piano-forte, make eighteen bows, and drop into their eighteen places” (p. 9). In the Court of Chancery Esther finds “no reality in the whole scene” (p. 308).

Cursory deliberations out of the way, the Chancellor exits, and the curtain closes briefly so “that we may pass from the one scene to the other,” to the world of fashion, where the chief players are Sir Leicester and Lady Dedlock. Like the actors in the Court of Chancery those in the world of fashion “have played at strange games” (p. 10). “It is not a large world” in comparison “to this world of ours” (p. 11), says the nameless narrator-playwright, as in a moment of parabasis he turns to address his audience. It is played out in a succession of lunches, dinners, balls, “and other melancholy pageants” (p. 500). Yet the persons who visit the Dedlocks in London or in Lincolnshire are the great actors for whom the stage is reserved. A People there are, no doubt—a certain large number of supernumeraries, who are to be occasionally addressed, and relied upon for shouts and choruses, as on the theatrical stage; but [they], their followers and assigns, are the born first-actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever. (p. 146)

From the scenes of law and fashion the rest of the drama of Bleak House is to be enacted.

Nearly all the actors in the drama are aware of their status as dramatis personae and the illusory nature of their theatrical endeavors. Miss Flite, the same as many of the characters involved in Chancery suits, fully realizes that she is condemned to play a
part in a play that, for her at any rate, never ends, that she will "be always in expectation of what never comes," the famous "Judgement" of her case (p. 440). Richard Carstone is aware of his Don Quixote role, of "fighting with shadows and being defeated by them" (p. 489). Snagsby "is doubtful of his being awake and out—doubtful of the reality of the streets through which he goes—doubtful of the reality of the moon" (p. 284). And even Esther, who most of the time seems to have such a firm grip on what she perceives as reality, even she is not sure, during the search for her mother, that she is "not in a dream" (p. 676) or "that the unreal things were more substantial than the real" (p. 13). The sense of unreality—of make-believe, illusion, and theatricality—is heightened by the numerous disguises in which characters (for example, Lady Dedlock, Hortense, and Jenny) assume the dress of others or (like Esther's aunt and Captain Hawdon) assume different names and identities.

The list of aliases or number of roles that the actors play is very large, almost requiring a playbill for the reader-spectator. Captain Hawdon is also Nemo or Nimrod; Gridley is known as "the man from Shropshire"; Bartholomew Smallwood is called Small and Chick Weed; Tony Jobling assumes the alias of Mr. Weevle; Caroline Jellyby is known as Caddy, her brother as Peepy; George Rouncewell is called Trooper George, Old William Tell, and Old Shaw, the Life Guardsman; Jo is called Toughy or the Tough Subject; Mr. Bagnet is given the sobriquet Lignum Vitae; Mr. Kenge is Conversation Kenge; Ada and Richard are "Wards in Jarndyce" and she is referred to by Esther only as "my darling"; Esther herself is called Old Woman, Cobweb, Mrs. Shipton, Mother Hubbard, Dame Durden, and Fitz-Jarndyce; the Snagsby's maid Augusta is nicknamed Guster; Krook calls himself Lord Chancellor; Esther's maid Charlotte is nicknamed Charley. With these numerous aliases and disguises it is no wonder that characters like Jo can say of Hortense disguised as Lady Dedlock, "It is her and it an't her" (p. 282); or that Mr. Jarndyce can say to George, "You talk of yourself as if you were somebody else!"
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(p. 619); or that Sir Leicester can say to George, "You are another self to me" (p. 697).

The role that Lady Dedlock plays is that of the proud ennuyée, characterized by "an exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue not to be ruffled by interest or satisfaction" (p. 13). Her pose is constant: she is "always the same exhausted deity" (p. 150). Yet "underneath that mask," she tells Esther, there is "the reality" of her suffering (p. 452). Few penetrate the disguise to see, as Tulkinghorn does, that "she has been acting a part" (p. 579); for "so long accustomed to suppress emotion, and keep down reality" (p. 663), she plays it perfectly.

Her husband assumes a complementary role, although there is less beneath the mask. He is "that effigy and figure-head of a baronet" (p. 220), always addressed by Bucket (as if reading from a program listing the cast of characters) as "Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet." Proud of his ancient name and exalted position, he loves the role of grand seigneur and "supposes all his dependents to be utterly bereft of individual characters, intentions, or opinions, and is persuaded that he was born to supersede the necessity of their having any" (p. 220).

Tulkinghorn, in his own quiet but mysterious way, is among the most theatrical of characters in Bleak House. Deliberately old-fashioned in dress, wearing knee breeches tied with ribbons and gaiters, he plays the role of "the steward of the legal mysteries, the butler of the legal cellar" (p. 14), at fashionable Chesney Wold, where he is "so oddly out of place, and yet so perfectly at home" (p. 150). He is "mute, close, irresponsive" (p. 14) with "a countenance as imperturbable as Death" (p. 429). He has no pity or anger and is "indifferent to everything but his calling," which is "the acquisition of secrets, and the holding possession of such power as they give him" (p. 451). Having gained "mastery" of this role (p. 503), he does not vary his repertory. As the nameless narrator says, "his own unchanging character" is the part "he can act" with perfection (p. 579).

Esther's role is also an unvarying one. It is that of the modest, meek, loyal, and loving young woman who enjoys being cast
in the character of an elderly housekeeper. She describes herself as “a methodical, old-maidish sort of foolish little person” (p. 85) who willingly accepts being called Little Old Woman, Mother Hubbard, Dame Durden, “and so many names of that sort, that [her] own name soon became quite lost among them” (p. 90). She is the keeper of the keys, which are evidently pure stage properties because she never seems to unlock anything.

Of the lesser characters Skimpole is adept in the role of the “mere child” cheerfully refusing responsibility as “a thing that has always been above me—or below me” (p. 727). George Rouncwell is Trooper George who never relaxes his military bearing and rides “with imaginary clank and jingle of accoutrements” (p. 748). Bagnet likewise maintains his military role, constantly saying that “discipline must be maintained.” Mr. Jellyby plays the part that cannot be described “better than by saying that he is the husband of Mrs. Jellyby” (p. 35). Mr. Quale is the “train-bearer and organ-blower to a whole procession” of other dramatis personae (p. 183). Mr. Turveydrop is “not like anything in the world but a model of Deportment” (p. 171), who acts the role of Regency dandy “like the second gentleman in Europe’” (p. 292). Bucket has perfected the role of detective as he sneaks furtively about, seeming “in some undefinable manner to lurk and lounge” and pretending “to have a fixed purpose in his mind of going straight ahead, [then] wheels off, sharply, at the very last moment” (p. 277). Mr. Kenge, the lawyer, who in court is “truly eloquent” (p. 26), has “formed himself on the model of a great lord who was his client” (p. 23). Guppy, who “plays the deepest games of chess without any adversary” (p. 244), constantly rehearses the role of lawyer, sometimes haranguing his friend Tony as “gentlemen of the jury” (p. 251) and getting himself into “a state little short of forensic lunacy” (p. 495). Young Smallwood aims to emulate Guppy and “founds himself entirely on him” (p. 245). The French maid Hortense has modeled herself on the villains of melodrama; Chadband has elected to play the part of “orator.”

Though many of these characters have freely chosen the
parts they play, others have had roles imposed upon them. Richard acts in a way “foreign to [his] nature” (p. 462), having been changed by his involvement in litigation (p. 464). Lady Dedlock initially believes that she manages others, whereas in fact “differential people manage her, lead her” (p. 14). Ultimately she discovers that she must play a role as Tulkinghorn directs “on this gaudy platform, on which [her] miserable deception has been so long acted” (p. 512). In the same fashion George believes that he too must act as directed by Tulkinghorn, who, he says, “has got a power over me” and “keeps me on a constant see-saw” (p. 566).

Other characters seem to be little more than puppets or ventriloquists’ dummies. Mr. Jellyby, controlled by his wife, never speaks but seems as if he would: he “several times opened his mouth, as if he had something on his mind; but had always shut it again, without saying anything” (p. 41). Mr. Pardiggle is like Mr. Jellyby; he is, says his wife, “under my direction” (p. 95). Snagsby is also ruled by his wife, who “manages the money, reproaches the Tax-gatherers, appoints the times and places of devotion on Sundays, [and] licenses Mr. Snagsby’s entertainments” (p. 118). Though he and his wife are “one voice,” that voice appears “to proceed from Mrs. Snagsby alone” (p. 117). Bagnet too has little voice save that given to him by his wife, whom he continually urges to tell what his opinion on a given subject might be. Without her, he, like a mannequin, cannot speak: “If my old girl had been here,” he says, “I’d have told him!” (p. 426). Smallwood is like a puppet, which must be continually “shaken up,” or a mechanical doll, which “having run down” must be wound up (p. 492). Rosa, who is being trained by Lady Dedlock, is referred to as “this doll, this puppet” (p. 143).

Esther conceives of herself in doll-like terms, even calling herself a “little person” (p. 85). Significantly, her first companion is a doll, and appropriately she is set up in the end by Mr. Jarndyce in a miniaturized Bleak House, with, as she says, “doll’s rooms” suited to “my little tastes and fancies, my little methods
and inventions" (p. 751). The "mere child" Skimpole would, says Mr. Jarndyce, also be suited to "a habitable doll's house," in which all a boy's desires would be fulfilled by someone else (p. 75). It is as though such characters possessed no life of their own but were dependent on someone or something to get them through their assigned parts.

Then there are persons like John Jarndyce, who, as guardian to Esther, Richard, and Ada, is constantly hovering in the background—and sometimes in the foreground—to guide them. In addition he is the benefactor to, among others, Miss Flite, Skimpole, and the Coavinses. He knows what others feel when they do not know it themselves. He "penetrated [Woodcourt's] secret when Dame Durden was blind to it" (p. 752). He arranges Esther's life almost from the beginning down to the point when she marries Woodcourt, presenting her, without any consultation about her wishes, a new Bleak House of which she is to be the mistress. Mainly he works his manipulations in silence and in secret, gaining knowledge of others without imparting information about himself. "I have long been in Allan Woodcourt's confidence," he says, "although he was not . . . in mine" (p. 752). Esther does not know till she is nineteen years old that he has been her benefactor for a long time.

Another "guardian"—guardian of the peace, as it were—is Bucket, who is "impossible to be evaded or declined" (p. 316). A shadowy presence, he is, says Jo, "in all manner of places, all at wunst" (p. 55) and further, again according to Jo, not only "everywhere" but "cognisant of everything" (p. 563). He keeps secret documents "in his book of Fate" (p. 629), the contents of which would incriminate almost everyone if they were revealed.

The notion of fate or of some superior power capable of appropriating the most trivial details and controlling their lives is uppermost in the minds of many of the characters of Bleak House, especially the suitors in Chancery, making them feel like puppets. "There's a cruel attraction in the place," says Miss Flite. "You can't leave it" (p. 440). Gridley is, by his own account.
undone by "the system" (p. 193); nonetheless, he feels powerless to abandon his insane fight against it. Richard Carstone is the major example of the fatal attraction of Chancery. With him as with the others, litigation becomes a monomania, "the object of [his] life" (p. 464), which he feels "condemned" to pursue (p. 288). By his own confession it leads him to madness as it had Miss Flite and Gridley: "I can't help it now, and can't be sane" (p. 546), because "I [am caught in] the net in which my destiny has worked me" (p. 609). Even those who refuse active participation in suits in Chancery are nevertheless drawn into them against their wills. For John Jarndyce the case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce is "the ill-fated cause" (p. 9), "the family curse," "the horrible phantom that has haunted us so many years" (p. 302). "We can't get out of the suit on any terms, for we are made parties to it, and must be parties to it, whether we like it or not" (p. 89). Why this should be so is inexplicable: "How mankind ever came to be afflicted , or for whose sins these young people ever fell into a pit of it, I don't know: so it is" (p. 91).

The Old Testament belief that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children, as found in Numbers 14:18, echoes throughout the novel and on several occasions is specifically alluded to. As a child, and perhaps even as an adult, Esther is made to feel guilty and "degraded" because of some past unknown crime. "Your mother, Esther, is your disgrace," her aunt tells her, "and you were hers." "Pray daily that the sins of others be not visited upon your head" (p. 19, repeated p. 453). This degradation, the cause of which Esther learns only much later, has its ramifications in the lives of her aunt, Boythorn, and of course her mother, Lady Dedlock. Her aunt breaks off her engagement to be married to Boythorn and dies an embittered spirit because of it. For Boythorn "that time has had its influence on all his later life. He has never since been what he might have been" (p. 111). Lady Dedlock's subsequent life has been governed by guilt and her fear of the discovery of it. "The dark road I have trodden for so many years will end where it will," she says resign-
"I follow it alone to the end, whatever the end may be. While the road lasts, nothing turns me" (p. 451). In each life there seems to be, as Snagsby several times remarks, "quite a Fate in it. Quite a Fate" (p. 395). So many of the actors feel, as Skimpole declares, that like puppets they "have no Will at all" (p. 385) and that their lives are governed by scripts collected in something like Bucket's "book of Fate" (p. 629).

As many commentators on *Bleak House* have observed, the novel abounds in references to documents and writings of all kinds. Ink flows profusely: from Guppy's having "inked himself by accident" (p. 28) to Caddy's being in "a state of ink" (p. 38) to Jo's "Inkwhich" (p. 200) to Esther's closing narrative "penned" in ink (p. 727). Papers relating to Jarndyce and Jarndyce exist in the thousands, perhaps millions, "great heaps, and piles, and bags and bags-full" (p. 308), and "everybody must have copies, over and over again, of everything that has accumulated about it" (p. 88). The case ends with the discovery of a new document, a will, amidst Krook's hoard of documents and the subsequent destruction of "immense masses of papers" (p. 759). Everyone seems obsessed with documents: Gridley, Miss Flite, Richard, even Krook, whose "monomania [is] to think he is possessed of documents" (p. 401), but who cannot read or write. Kenge and Tulkinghorn are always surrounded by papers. Snagsby and Nemo copy them, as does the illiterate Krook. Letterwriting is a major enterprise in the novel. Mrs. Jellyby and Mrs. Pardiggle spend all day every day on correspondence; the start of the feud between Boythorn and Sir Leicester begins with a letter and reply; Mr. Jarndyce assumes responsibility for Esther because of a letter from her aunt; Jarndyce proposes marriage to Esther not orally but by means of a letter; Tulkinghorn drafts "mysterious instructions" (p. 120); Lady Dedlock's letters to Captain Hawdon are responsible for her undoing; Tulkinghorn discovers Lady Dedlock's secret by matching the handwriting on a letter in George's possession to the documents copied by Nemo; Hortense's letters of accusation of Lady Dedlock fall about "like a shower of lady-
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birds" (pp. 650–51); Lady Dedlock's last words are letters. In short, letters and documents of all sorts are basic to the plot and texture of the novel.

They are important because the actors view them as scripts authorizing their performances on the stage of Bleak House. Receiving Mr. Jarndyce's letter of proposal, Esther learned it "by heart" and "repeated its contents" immediately (p. 734) and then later "repeated every word of the letter twice over" (p. 750). Then comes Woodcourt's proposal, which was "an unforeseen page in my life" (p. 731). In his interview with Lady Dedlock, Guppy reads, with difficulty, from a script that he himself has prepared (pp. 360–61). In the beginning Caddy Jellyby "can't do anything hardly, except write" at her mother's direction (p. 44), but as it turns out, this has been valuable experience because her husband, Prince Turveydrop, is very bad at writing and Caddy must "write letters enough for both" (p. 177). Lady Dedlock is forced into the position where, she says to Tulkinghorn, "I will write anything that you will dictate" (p. 509). As for the lawyer himself, his destiny is not in the stars but "written in other characters nearer to hand" (p. 507). At Richard's start of yet another career John Jarndyce is hopeful that there has been "a new page turned for you to write your lives in" (p. 303), but this new page turns out to be one from "dusty bundles of papers which seemed like dusty mirrors reflecting his own mind" (p. 611). Even Jo, who knows so little of the written word, wants spelled out "wery large so that any one could see it anywheres" his regret at giving the fever to Esther (p. 570). In the world of the novel a thing apparently takes on reality in the minds of the actors only when it is written. Thus the doll's house in Yorkshire becomes a new Bleak House when it is re-presented verbally, that is, when it has "written over it, BLEAK HOUSE" (p. 751). Bucket alone of all the actors is averse to writing, being "no great scribe" because to him the written word is "too artless and direct a way of doing delicate business" (p. 629). Which is to say, faced with a script he
feels constrained by it. And yet even he is governed by one: "I say what I must say," he admits, "and no more" (p. 638).

Hovering above the stage on which the play is enacted is the author who in fact has written "the book of Fate," *Bleak House*, from which the actors are assigned their parts. For the most part he is content to be transcendent, to be a spectator looking down on his creation. Occasionally, however, he descends onto the stage, becomes immanent in his work, and lets the audience witness him among the players. We see him in the third-person narrative when he breaks into the action to address his players or, even, his audience. "Do you hear, Jo?" (p. 238). "Young man of the name of Guppy" (p. 361). "Look at a millstone, Mr. George, for some change in its expression, and you will find it quite as soon as in the face of Mr. Tulkinghorn" (p. 429). These are among the apostrophes to his characters. And among the direct addresses to his audience there is the famous parabasis following the death of Jo:

> Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (p. 572)

There are also remarks made to "Your Highness" (pp. 11, 403), whose identity is never revealed, remarks that seem to be made solely for the purpose of the author's intrusion into the narrative.

We can never know who "Your Highness" is any more than we can identify in the fictional world who assigned Esther to write "my portion of these pages" or who might be the "unknown friend to whom I write" and from whom she will part "not without much dear remembrance" (even though she does not know him or her) (p. 767). We shall never know because Dickens did not intend for us to know. What he did intend was for us to recognize the presence of the author in his work, to see the stage
manager controlling the action and commenting on it. Even in Esther's narrative we catch a glimpse of him from time to time. We see him, for example, behind Esther's remarks in this colloquy with Miss Flite:

"My dear," said she, "my brave physician ought to have a Title bestowed upon him. And no doubt he will. You are of that opinion?"

I said it was not the custom in England to confer titles on men distinguished by peaceful services, however good and great; unless occasionally, when they consisted of the accumulation of some very large amount of money.

"Why good gracious," said Miss Flite, "how can you say that? Surely you know that all the greatest ornaments of England in knowledge, imagination, active humanity, and improvement of every sort, are added to its nobility! You must be rambling a little now if you don't know that this is the great reason why titles will always last in the land!"

I am afraid she believed what she said; for there were moments when she was very mad indeed. (pp. 442-43)

This is not Esther speaking, as anyone who has read thus far in the novel can easily discern. This kind of irony is foreign to her nature, and Dickens, who was perfectly capable of controlling the tone of his characters' remarks, knew it. This is, as Browning might have said, "Charles Dickens loquitur." His aim is to break the fictional illusion, to step onto the stage, to comment, and in effect, to say: "This is not life enacted here. It is art, not a representation but a re-presentation of life, and I am the artist."

The authorial voice is of course discoverable in many other of Dickens's works. Bleak House is different from his earlier novels, however, in that in addition to his voice there is the author's presence hovering over the proceedings. It is the kind of suspended presence that in 1849 he envisioned for himself in the magazine he wished to edit. It was to be "a certain SHADOW, which may go into any place, and be cognisant of ev-
The "Mononymity" of Bleak House

eything, a kind of semi-omniscient, omnipresent, intangible creature.' In brief, this authorial "shadow" was to be "an odd, unsubstantial, whimsical, new thing: a sort of previously unthought-of Power going about everyone's inseparable companion." When Household Words was in fact launched in 1850, Dickens insisted on the principle of anonymity, all the articles being unsigned; on the masthead, however, Dickens was identified as its "Conductor," and across the top of each page there were printed the words "Conducted by Charles Dickens." It was, as Douglas Jerrold remarked, "mononymous throughout." When Household Words was in fact launched in 1850, Dickens insisted on the principle of anonymity, all the articles being unsigned; on the masthead, however, Dickens was identified as its "Conductor," and across the top of each page there were printed the words "Conducted by Charles Dickens." It was, as Douglas Jerrold remarked, "mononymous throughout."

The egotistical sublime was a very strong component of Dickens's nature. In Bleak House, however, he managed sufficiently to subdue this aspect of his personality to the negatively capable and to merge with it to the point where, like the Christian God, he could be both immanent and transcendent. Looking down on his creation he entertains and tolerates the rival views—of order and of chaos, of being and of becoming—expressed by his dual narrators. Entering into his fictive world he, not unlike Thackeray's Manager of the Performance, sympathizes with the physical and moral plight of his characters. He is a kind of presiding "shadow," who is both optimistic and pessimistic, who accepts free will as well as determinism, and who, with a kind of Nietzschean gaiety, witnesses the world being constantly created and de-created, formed in order to be transformed. The universe he presents is one where meaning is neither fixed nor absent but always becoming. In sum, Dickens shows himself in Bleak House as a tough-minded romantic ironist engaged in the serious business of metaphysical, aesthetic, and ethical play. The nimbleness and agility of "mononymity" manifested here he would never quite attain elsewhere.