

John O. Jordan, "Supposing" Bleak House, U. Virginia Press, Charlottesville and London, 2011, 184pp. +xiii

This is the most disarming and personal literary study I have ever come across. It is steeped in its author's experience and feelings. He tells us that the story of Esther Summerson's finding her dead mother makes him weep time and again. He does so in part because it evokes memories of his own mother's death. But it is the novel's pall of mystery, the shadowy depths of its being, that also has him in his grip. He tells us he has been studying it and talking about it with friends for years, he has listened to their papers at the annual Dickens conference he directs, and has pondered the huge bibliography on the subject. He has found his way into the novel's depths by following its psychological and psychoanalytical traces wherever they lead him. Early in his book he says he wishes to know what Esther's discovery of her origins "does for her as narrator [and] what it omits and leaves unresolved." (2)

His manner is patently engaging. His prose is gently persuasive, hedged round with quasi-apologetic words like "perhaps," "possibly," and "somewhat." He knows that certain readers will not like his approach. But he persuades us to follow along, however we respond to the method, and to experience what he has found and to test its validity. He calls attention to his title, "Supposing" Bleak House. "Supposing" is the last word of the novel, and Jordan has it appear on the title page where it is printed white on black. It is of course teasingly ambiguous, and its effect is curiously undercutting both in the novel itself as well as Jordan's discourse. It imbrues Jordan's arguments with tentativeness, and acts as a deliberate rhetorical device that makes us pay attention to the bold positions he takes. And some of his conclusions are startling indeed.

The first chapter dwells on the uses of "voice" in the novel and the questions and insights arising from them. As one of the two narrators of the story, writing from the end of the novel, "Esther Woodcourt knows from the beginning everything that will happen to Esther Summerson." (4) Thus as narrator she speaks with foreknowledge and hindsight so that her account is "a complex layering of temporalities that adds to the uncanny effect of the narrative as a whole." (5) The word "uncanny" hearkens back to Freud and more immediately to Robert Newsom's application of the term in his groundbreaking study Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: "Bleak House" and the Novel Tradition (1977) (To read Newsom now is to be struck at how fresh and penetrating his discussion is and to marvel that the discussion could be carried as far as it is in the reaches of Jordan's study.)

We note that for Jordan the uncanny and its variants are repeated ground notes, and arising as they do from pre-logical sources, words allowing for uncertainty [in addition to those mentioned above], "probably", "obliquely," "unconsciously," appear frequently. Esther's repetitions are often uncanny, arising out of her unconscious and the insistent memories of her earliest life that give rise to her "many fears, doubts, and fantasies." In addition, her narrative is haunted by a past that is always present and bears in its womb a future that, as her account proceeds, also becomes present.

The concept of "voice"—Esther's as voice knowing the past, present, and future--explains what might otherwise be seen as unjustified or perhaps proleptic. Esther compares Mrs. Rachel's parting kiss to her as child as "a thaw-drop from the stone porch" and therefore, we think, like the cold drip on the Ghost's Walk. How could she know this? As character, she could not know; but as "voice" knowing what is past, passing, or to come, she would.

Not all of the echoes are so readily explainable. Jordan says that the wheels of the carriage which comes to pick her up from school stimulate “an auditory memory of the sound of Bucket’s own coach during the chase sequence”—which of course happens much later---and that the roses on the hearthrug which hangs outside in the cold and snow are a reminiscence of the lip and complexion of Esther’s doll which in turn are connected with the dead cold face of her mother. Esther herself does not link these images, for the novel proceeds in chronological order. But Jordan elicits the concept of voice to suggest that as Esther is narrating one past time period she is free to “remember” events yet to come and so overlay the past with what lies ahead. The psychological critic makes the connections for us.

Jordan then interrogates Esther’s narrative much as a cross-questioning lawyer might an important witness. Lady Dedlock, speaking from behind Esther and Ada in the doorway of the keeper’s lodge, asks, “Is it not dangerous to sit in so exposed a place?” So much does Lady Dedlock’s voice resembles Esther’s that Ada believes Esther has spoken. We readily take the hint that Lady Dedlock and Esther are related. Jordan takes two positions about the remark, both hesitantly, then boldly. Esther partially reads the remark as a sign “of selfishness and aversion to her daughter” and, secondly, Ada is correct in thinking the remark Esther’s. Esther senses that Lady Dedlock is her mother and fears that if others see the relationship Lady Dedlock will be in danger. In a sense, then, Esther courts mutilation from the smallpox passed on from Jo to Charlie. It is therefore “Esther’s unconscious wish to protect her mother by effacing the physical resemblance between them” (18) If I am not clear here, it is not because Jordan is not clear but because I go too far in collapsing his argument.

The chapter on “Voices” then centers on the night Esther and Charley go to Jenny’s cottage where Charley and then Esther contract small pox from Jo. The night sky was lurid, and Esther writes, “I had no thought, that night—none, I am quite sure—of what was soon to happen to me.” She stopped to look up at the sky and “had for a moment an indefinable expression of [herself] as being something different from what [she] then was.” Most readers think she is having a foreboding of the disease she is about to contract. But Jordan has a different idea, suggested, not insisted upon:

“My own suggestion is that Esther saw or sensed the presence of a ghost and that in writing about it she re-creates and reenters that disorienting, hallucinatory encounter. I think the ghost is Lady Dedlock and that in this paragraph Esther is describing the moment when she came to the sudden ‘unthought’ realization of who her mother was and is.” (23)

In the second chapter, “Illustration,” Jordan prescinds from the usual assumption that the illustrations are the work of Dickens and Hablot Brown and works instead from the concept of “focalization.” This “presumes that every image is seen from some particular aspect or aspects” and that we should look at the interaction of different perspectives to understand the image’s meaning. What are characters (or objects in the drawing) looking at? Who is observing them? Jordan carefully analyzes and explains three more or less straightforward illustrations in which Esther is the principal focalizer. In one, the resonant “Lady Dedlock in the Woods,” Jordan reads the scene as resonating back to Esther’s childhood and suggests that Charley Jellyby is a memory trace of the young Esther. What Charley is doing off to one side, moreover, is not “gathering violets,” as the verbal text says, but in a sense re-enacting Esther’s childhood burying of her doll and, more distantly, “the scene of young Honoraria Barbary burying the body of her infant daughter.” Jordan knows, of course, that no such scene ever takes place. Nevertheless, his method leads him to say of the burial, “this is the novel’s primal scene.” (41)

“Focalization” also allows that the observer may not be specified in the text. In the scene (“Consecrated Ground”) in which Jo and Lady Dedlock are looking into the burial ground and Jo is pointing to Nemo’s grave, Jordan looks for an unmentioned, unseen person who observes them from inside the graveyard. In a bold move, he suggests that the focalizer is the ghost of Captain Hawdon.

Chapter Three presents the “proto-psychoanalytic mythic structure that underlies the stories of Esther and her mother.” (44) Here Jordan finds in the trauma studies of his psychological teachers a number of concepts that he can apply to Esther. This he does with a broad hand. He speaks of Esther’s “sudden violent separation from her mother,” of “her recollection of her mother ... as cold and rejecting and as wishing Esther dead,” as part of a trauma reinforced by Miss Barbary’s cold treatment of her. This version of her experience carries Esther into a series of bifurcating, harsh, self-torturing and effacing attitudes. Even more than her rejection as an infant, Esther feels “betrayed” by her mother’s “refusal to recognize, accept and embrace her daughter once her existence has been revealed.” (57)

Our own reading here shows an Esther not made more distraught by her mother’s revelation to her, but strongly Victorian, fully eager to assist her mother in concealing her existence. Nevertheless she is at a low point in self-esteem, so much so that she also fears that the shock of seeing her disfigured face will distance Ada from her and destroy their love. But when she sees Esther, Ada’s look is all love, and there is “nothing else in it—no, nothing, nothing!” The extravagance of Esther’s reaction may sound strange to modern ears, but Jordan quotes the lines aptly. Esther is recovering from her trauma.

Intent on finding all possible sources of Esther’s psychic depths, and strongly influenced by psychological readings, Jordan finds four selves in her, reads her doll’s blank stare as looking at nothing since Esther’s self is “a psychic hole,” and reads her glance in a mirror just to adjust her bonnet as a refusal to look at her face, “worried perhaps that she may find nothing there.” (53)

Probing further, but in another direction, Jordan uncovers a mythic structure underlying the powerful movements that finally resolve the book’s dynamic forces. Tulkinghorn, descending to the depths of his wine cellar and bringing back a bottle of crusted port, is a type of Hades or Pluto, with Lady Dedlock as his Proserpine. Inspector Bucket, to continue the motif, is also connected to a version of the Proserpine myth, that of Orpheus and Eurydice. He is also a kind of psychoanalyst assisting Esther to re-enter the depths of her unconscious, “accompanying her, following as well as leading, on her difficult path toward recovery.” (61) With Esther then as his analysand, Bucket conducts the uniquely powerful night search that climaxes with his patient’s lifting the head of her dead mother as she lies beside the burial ground of her lover, Captain Hawdon. Jordan thus can make coherent sense of Esther at that moment calling Lady Dedlock “the mother of the dead child.” Esther has been long thinking of herself as having died shortly after her birth, startling and impossible as that is.

Permit me now to report more cursorily on the final three chapters of Jordan’s discourse. In the first he is tenacious in his search for the authentic Esther, disappointed that at the end she has again slipped into the Dame Durden figure and, as narrator, lost all the power and drive of the preceding chapters. We are not told, for example, what her reaction was to finding her dead mother, an omission that Jordan fills in by sending us back to Esther’s passionate cries at the death of her aunt, Miss Barbary. But why is the end of her narrative so disappointing, “Dickens at his sentimental worst,” in Jordan’s words? He briefly toys with the notion that Esther is knowingly writing a novel and so provides readers what is expected, the happy ending and the

ticking off of characters. But this supposition will not do for the close and admirable reader, John Jordan, who makes his case harder by pointing out one weakness after another in these final pages. He is, we feel, driven to find solutions and persists even at the expense of plausibility. That these solutions include seeing not one but three candidates for the figure he sees in front of the door of the Chesney Wold mausoleum, makes Jordan worry that he may be going too far. "There is no way to be sure of this," "If these speculations have any merit," "Is it too much to suggest..." are certainly cooling cards for critics and also a way of letting him follow through on his psychological quest. He is after all trying to penetrate "the uncanny" and to lay out his findings for future researchers.

In Chapter Five Jordan lets himself go in playful flights into a world of resemblances and connections, many between the novel and Dickens's letters. The implicit premise is the truism that every author has experienced everything in his book, one way or other. All of it is in some sense in him. Letters and novels are merely texts. What we do in reading one, we can do in reading the other. And so Jordan is free to trace every connection, direct, indirect and tangential, which, when gathered together, produce a nexus of intersecting lines linking each with all. For the less airborne reader, such happy tagging of one character to another can go a mite far. Consider the linking of Catherine Dickens with Lady Dedlock: both are of a nervous disposition; both have babies that are dead, one actually, the other imagined to be; both are cold: Lady Dedlock trudging to death in the snow, Mrs. Dickens taking a cold water cure. Multiple one-subject connections abound: Skimpole is Dickens, John Dickens and Wilkins Micawber; Esther is Mrs. Dickens and Dora Annie ("of course"), John Dickens is also Gridley, who is replaced by Richard and Dickens. Even the novel's images link and repeat one another. The novel is splashed with ink, littered with dead infants, and walled by mirrors. Jordan's high-flying peroration linking Dickens's biography with his novel, does not fail for panache: "Dickens's descent into a personal past... is also a descent into the haunted house of English history."

The sixth chapter, "Specters," begins by citing studies of Bleak House as a social novel reflecting contemporary England. But with dazzling sleight of hand Jordan "adopts a somewhat more historical approach and takes as his point of departure a simple question: if Bleak House is a ghost story, who are its ghosts?" (114) The word "if" bears a heavy weight. There is a ghost, surely, as there are ghosts in many of Dickens fictions, with references to "shades," "ghosts," and "shadows" liberally supplied. But for Jordan, this ghost story has a "principal biographical ghost threading its way through the pages ... that of Dora Annie Dickens"—Dickens's recently deceased daughter of eight months.

Jordan's method and its logic get him to this point. The child Dickens had named Dora Annie was born mid-way in his writing of David Copperfield, four days before he planned that David's wife Dora was to die. He joked with Forster about "killing" the fictive child. In the event his Dora Annie died heartbreakingly and unexpectedly, eleven months before Dickens published the first number of Bleak House. During that time and for years thereafter he mourned his child with the "ill-omened" name.

Jordan tells this story in complete detail and in seeking "a juxtaposition of patterns" between novel and epistolary texts, finds in Dora Annie a pervasive presence. Consistently, then, he reads many other aspects of the novel through a psychologist's lens. Thus, the first Lady Dedlock's injury is "the physical mark of a rift between husband and wife, but also a rift between their social classes and political parties." And "The term [for her] 'favourite brother' in Mrs. Rouncewell's story may even be a euphemism for 'lover.'" Turning next to Dickens's A Child's History of England, which was written at the same time as Bleak House, Jordan is once more on

the hunt for parallels. He finds the overthrow of Charles the First important to both books. And of course he finds oblique echoes and parallels: Dickens to Cromwell, the death of Krook to Joan of Arc's, Dickens's telling of the history of England to Mrs. Rouncewell's account of Dedlock family history. We easily agree that there is some consonance between the political and social ideas of Bleak House and A Child's History of England. Jordan just goes further: he apologizes as he moves along, into parallel after parallel, is apologetic, yes, but also insistent, relentless.

In an "Epilogue," subtitled "Christmas," Jordan surprises us once more by stepping aside from his principal subject to express what moves him to elevated joy in Dickens. He shares the considered, balanced yet finally elated vision Dickens expressed in "What Christmas is As We Grow Older." The essay was written a few months before the first number of Bleak House appeared, and its concluding paragraph is the penultimate one for Jordan. It expresses a broad vision of the world, the world of "the living and the dead" that embraces all, Jordan concludes, from Guster and Jo to Lady Dedlock and—surprise, surprise!—"Marx and Derrida and Smike and you and I, dear reader."

Summarizing these chapters, however carefully done, does the book scant justice. Its arguments are of a piece, gleaming with interesting detail, and the whole cannot fail to impress. This is a serious, deeply considered book which will have an assured place in the studies of Bleak House.

Patrick J. McCarthy
Emeritus, U.C. Santa Barbara