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Discipline Must Be Maintained: Surveillance and Power in *Bleak House*

On Monday July 5, 1852, *Times* (of London)reported a curious courtroom story that had occurred before a judge during the past weekend. A Detective Storey had brought charges against “several young men employed in the Stock-exchange,” who had interfered in the detective’s apprehension of “a person who had obtained money under false pretenses.” Giving the suspect chase, Detective Storey:

...believed [the suspect] had gone into the Stock-exchange. In consequence of this, he went to the door of the exchange and stated upon what business he had come, at the same time informing the porter that he was an officer. Upon this a number of persons in the Stock-exchange came forward, and raised various cries such as “Turn him out!” “Kick him out!” “Bonnet him!” “He’s a spy!” and so on. They then hustled him, and pushed him about from side to side, but refused to let him go in for the purpose of discovering the man for whom he was in search (“Police”).

This incident reveals a growing distrust and resentment toward the newly formed Metropolitan Police in London, specifically toward its plainclothes detectives. As Phillip T. Smith notes in his *Policing Victorian London*, “spying on private citizens ... as well as on suspected criminals, was obvious at the time, and even led to complains from the articulate public” (70). It would seem that these complaints regarding the “spying” involved in detective work had begun to manifest themselves as a direct interference of the detective’s ability to do his job in the story recounted above. Though it is possible that the men at the stock exchange were protecting whomever the detective was attempting to apprehend, even this act of *concealing* the suspect from the detective is a form of interference. Either way, *The Times* story goes on to describe the conclusion of this particular affair: those accused claim only to have been having “a lark” and the prosecutor requires those accused to apologize to the detective in order to have the charges dropped. The unnamed reporter comments that the presiding judge supported this resolution, for if the case had preceded “it might have been his duty ... to have dealt very seriously with the matter, either with a heavy sentence or by sending it [the case] to a higher tribunal,” (“Police”). The leniency of the deal offered to the young men from the stock exchange is not necessarily worth noting here, however the interaction of two institutions that embodied the power of the state – the courts and the police department – is fascinating. When we consider this situation in terms of power, we find that the detective has been rendered incapable of exercising his surveillance (a power granted to him by the state), and therefore must bring those who interfere with the state’s power before another institution of the state. This institution (the court) requires the offenders to apologize for their actions, or face the consequences. Through this procedure, each power has reinforced the other, and this interaction – between the plainclothes detective and the court – would have been a relatively new occurrence.

This is because the Metropolitan Police department was still a relatively young institution; the detective department that allowed for the plainclothes undercover work of Detective Storey had not been established until 1842 (Smith 61). In *Household Words*, Charles Dickens examines the new phenomena of the undercover detective by reporting on Inspector Charles Field in an essay titled *On Duty with Inspector Field*. In this essay, Dickens is quick to note the inspector’s powers of observation – most critically located in Field’s eyes. Several times throughout the essay Dickens draws the reader’s attention to the inspector’s “eye that searches every corner of the cellar as he talks," (266) or the inspector’s ability to bring “his shrewd eye to bear on every corner of its solitary galleries, before he reports 'all right'” (265). This emphasis on the inspector’s keen powers of observation finds itself expressed again in the character of Detective Bucket in *Bleak House*. However, Bucket is not the only character who watches others in the novel. Many characters in *Bleak House* actively engage in surveilling the novel’s inhabitants, and this method of surveillance can be linked to institutions of the state (one of which – the police force – Bucket represents). This is because Dickens presents the power of the state in *Bleak House* as a system of surveillance.

This system of surveillance manifests itself in two ways throughout the novel: the state exerts its power through surveillance via institutions, and individuals who surveil one another in the text reinforce this power. This system is far from perfect and often fails to function properly, but by exploring its presence in Dickens’ novel, we may be able to better understand the way Charles Dickens conceptualized the government of his time. This paper will explore these two systems by examining Dickens’ text along with the scholarly discourse that has emerged regarding *Bleak House* and surveillance within the past several decades. One wonders if Dickens had set out to capture this aspect of state power in his novel, or if due to the nature of power in our time we begin to notice the beginning of its structures. While this essay will not attempt to answer this question, it should be kept in mind that a reading of surveillance in *Bleak House* is not necessarily anachronistic, for the obvious reason that Jeremy Bentham had already published his *Panopticon* (1787). It should also be noted that this essay will rely on Foucault’s interpretation of that text in order to better understand the role of state’s institutions and their use of surveillance in *Bleak House*.

The most obvious institution vested with state power in *Bleak House* is the Court of Chancery, but how that power is wielded through surveillance is not apparent at first glance. In the opening of the novel the anonymous narrator tells the reader of the court’s omnipresence: “[Chancery] has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; ... its worn out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard” (15). Being everywhere and touching everything, the Court of Chancery keeps an elaborate paper trail on many of the characters in the novel. While this vast quantity of paper produced by the court is sometimes marked as the seeds from which madness will grow,[[1]](#footnote-1) the court’s bureaucracy exists as official government documentation on the actions of citizens. For example, it is Chancery’s interpretation of the “heavy charges of paper” that Esther, Ada, and Richard (as wards of the court) will be transferred to the care of John Jarndyce (19). As Miller notes, it is through the court’s bureaucratic paper trail that Chancery derives its power of “decision and interpretation,” over its subjects; this bureaucratic power acts at the same time to divert these subjects back “into the work of establishing the very channels for its diversion” (67-8) by never actually delivering a judgment in any of their cases. That is to say, once caught in its web, the subject will be used to reinforce the power of the institution until either the case, or the subject, expires. Therefore, Chancery’s real power of surveillance lies in its ability to continuously “implant and sanction its own technical procedures” over its subjects (Miller 67), thereby keeping them within its view.

This system of surveillance requires a number of supernumeraries needed to carry out and continue to support the power of the state: solicitors, Lord High Chancellors, copyists, detectives, and others are all the face of the court as each coalesces to create the effect of facelessness. This conception of Chancery is reminiscent of Bentham’s panopticon as described by Foucault in *Discipline & Punish*: “Bethanm laid down the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable” (201). Of all the characters in *Bleak House*, Gridley best understands this “monstrous system” of surveillance as being composed of many individuals reinforcing the state’s power through its own apparatuses. Though “told, on all hands,” that no individual is responsible for this process, that rather “it’s the system” he should direct his rage towards, Gridley believes otherwise (251). Fearing he may be driven to violence by the frustration of never receiving judgment from Chancery, Gridley states that he reserves the right to “accuse the individual works of that system against [him]” when he arrives in heaven (252). Gridley’s realization of the individual faces that make up this system is important, because it will allow the novel to introduce a key figure in its second narrative feature: Inspector Bucket. Bucket’s appearance, (at first literally materializing from thin air in the service of Tulkinghorn), allows *Bleak House* to depart from a satire of bureaucracy into the realms of murder-mystery plot.

Before doing so, Dickens will use Bucket to demonstrate the inescapability of those subjects caught in the Chancery system of surveillance, while also widening this system of surveillance to include the police force. Gridley, wanted for contempt of court, will have to die before he can escape Bucket; the act of hiding is impossible under this system of surveillance. This is because Bucket, (and enjoined through him Chancery), always gets his man – as the anonymous narrator tells us, “nothing escapes him” (804). Gaining access to Gridley’s hiding place through the use of *disguise*, Bucket is described by Esther as having “appeared to vanished by magic, and to leave another and quite a different man in his place,” when he chooses to reveal his true identity (401). The use of disguise in this situation is essential in the act of surveillance. Surveillance requires that its subjects are unaware of who is surveilling them, thus Bucket’s transformation appears magical to Esther. Furthermore, it is important to note that Bucket finds Gridley by peering through a skylight on the roof of George’s Shooting Gallery, which is reminiscent of the inspector in Bentham’s tower peering down on his inmates (Foucault 200). For Miller, Inspector Bucket’s omnipresence follows him everywhere he goes in *Bleak House*,and this acknowledges “that the police can break out of their limits to become a total, all-pervasive institution like Chancery” (78). One particular moment that illustrates this sense of an all-pervasive force of surveillance embodied by Bucket occurs when Allan Woodcourt tells us that Jo believes Bucket to “be everywhere, cognizant of everything” (Dickens, *Bleak House* 722). Though Jo is delusional from fever when he describes Bucket this way, as a denizen of Tom-all-Alone’s, Jo would have been familiar with Bucket’s “thoroughgoing knowledge of the place as well as the extreme deference shown to him by its inhabitants” (Miller 76). Furthermore, the fact that Inspector Bucket can easily enter the slums of Tom’s or the aristocratic world of the Dedlocks with ease shows the true penetrating power of the Police as having penetrated all the level of society.

This point, and indeed much of Miller’s reading of surveillance in *Bleak House,* has drawn criticism from Lauren Goodlad. In a chapter from her invaluable *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State* that considers the sanitation plot of *Bleak House*, Goodlad argues that Miller is missing Tom-all-Alone’s actual raison d'être in the novel. Instead of embodying a “representation of the containment of power” (Miller 75), Tom-all-Alone’s exist as a “conspicuous by-product of England’s [political] deadlock” (Goodlad 98). While Bucket does possess “panoptical knowledge” of Tom’s denizens, “his visible power to intimidate and coerce” speaks more broadly of a failure inherent in the British political system during the writing of *Bleak House*. That is to say, instead of representing a dominating system of power and surveillance, Inspector Bucket “polices for the status quo ... bourgeois and aristocratic interest” (Goodlad 99). For Goodlad, this is especially clear in Dickens’ painting of Chancery as an ineffective and “archaic” institution that was constantly stalled and unable to reach a judgment. She argues that through this portrayal Dickens was commenting on the deadlock present in the English political system instead of portraying the invention of a modern bureaucratic organization’s system of surveillance (96). While Goodlad’s arguments are true, one must ask, how is it that these symbols of deadlock – Chancery and Tom-all-Alone’s – remain deadlocked? How is it that the Detective Police and the Court of Chancery continue to maintain their power while the political system remains in this state of deadlock? For each question, the answer is surveillance.

To illustrate this point let us pursue a seemingly unrelated question: who owns Tom-all-Alone’s? First, let us consider a remark made by John Jarndyce to Esther regarding a piece of property caught-up in their Chancery suit. Jarndyce tells Esther:

there is, in that city of London there, some property of ours, which is much at this day what Bleak House was then, -- I say property of ours, meaning of the Suit’s, but I ought to call it the property of Costs; for Costs is the only power on Earth that will ever get anything out of it now, or will ever know it for anything but an eyesore and a heartsore. It is a street of perishing blind houses, with their eyes stones out; glass a pane of glass, without so much as a window-frame, with the bare blank shutters tumbling from their hinges and falling asunder; the iron rails peeling away in flakes rust; the chimneys sinking in; the stone steps to every door (and every door might be Death’s Door) turning stagnant green; the very crutches on which the ruins are propped, decaying. (117-18).

The urban location described by Jarndyce here could be Tom-all-Alone’s, and the anonymous narrator following a description of Jo’s home strengthens this idea: “this desirable property is in Chancery, of course,” this is then followed by a suggestion that the “Tom” of Tom-all-Alone’s is the “original plaintiff or defendant in Jarndyce and Jarndyce” (257). If the property was once Jarndyce’s hardly matters, because the narrator tells us that it has fallen into the possession of Chancery, thus making the state itself the owner of the property. As we have seen, this is an area that is also well known by the Police (as shown by Inspector Bucket’s familiarity with its denizens). It is therefore reasonable to suggest that in *Bleak House,* Tom’s exists as a site of surveillance perfected, even if it also serves to enhance the sanitation plot outlined by Goodlad. Owned by the court and policed by its supernumeraries, all its denizens – whether fearful of the police because of their ability to intimidate, or because of their panoptical knowledge of the denizens’ activities – are placed into “a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers” of “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assure ... automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 200). Jo’s fear of Inspector Bucket, who sees and knows all, while also being unaware of the *true owner* of Tom’s,[[2]](#footnote-2) is the perfected subject of surveillance. He is the product of a system that manages people, the same system that has *caused* the sanitation problem by remaining in deadlock. The deadlock outlined by Goodlad is essential for this system to continue its project of the management of the poor.[[3]](#footnote-3) With this in mind, one can read both Miller’s and Goodlad’s interpretations of *Bleak House* at the same time.

After examining the roles of institutional surveillance in the novel, it is pertinent to undertake an examination of how individuals surveil one another in order to strengthen the power of the state. Goodlad’s reading of Bucket (and thus, the Police themselves) as working to maintain a power whose foundations can be found within aristocratic interests is a good point of departure. This reading of power within *Bleak House* allows us to see how the interests of the aristocracy (as well as the bourgeoisie) coincide, if not replicate themselves, in the interests of the state. These interests are manifested in Sir Leicester Dedlock, (hence the “deadlock” of government), as well as his wife, who herself is an object of surveillance by “the fashionable intelligence.” While this fashionable intelligence does not appear to have sinister intentions, it does track Lady Dedlock’s movements from Paris to London and back again, all in the name of knowing “all fashionable things” (20). What is fashionable though is really a bourgeois value, and belief in this value replicates the power of the aristocracy. This replication of value via surveillance is exemplified in *Bleak* House by Mr. Jobling’s (AKA Mr. Weevel’s) “weakness for fashion,” which expresses itself in his collection of “copper plate impressions” of aristocratic women in grand displays of their wealth (330-31). The anonymous narrator mentions that Lady Dedlock’s visage is reproduced in one of these plates, drawing attention to the “terrace ... vase ... shawl ... fur ... and a bracelet on her arm” (510), thus turning her into an image which can be consumed and reproduced in terms of commodity, or rather: in terms of bourgeoisie value. This system of value, produced by the surveillance of Lady Dedlock, reinforces the power of the state through cultural reproduction that ensures its continued existence.

Perhaps the most compelling case of an individual’s surveillance in support of state power by replicating it can be found in Esther. Rather than being surveilled in order to reproduce the values of the dominate class (and thus the state), Esther surveils both of her houses as well as the supernumeraries attached to them. Upon our meeting Esther, she immediately tells us that “I had always ... a silent way of noticing what passed before me,” (28) and this habit is what makes Esther an ideal narrator for *Bleak House*. She has the ability to notice the small details that would otherwise be overlooked. As Elizabeth Langland points out in her reading of *Bleak House*, “[Esther’s] prominence as narrator makes her perspective, her way of seeing and judging, central” (88). This is because the power of femininity in the domestic realm of the middle-class cannot be overlooked, especially if we want to understand the way that surveillance in *Bleak House* operates. Langland suggest that Esther engages in an effective form of surveillance over her charges (Caddy, Charlie, Richard, Ada, Jarndyce, and the house itself), much in the same way that Bucket carries out his duties (98). Take for example Esther’s dominance over the domestic activities of Bleak House, or her ability to ascertain Richard’s true intentions several times throughout the novel by sending Woodcourt to spy on him, despite Richard’s wishes that she remains unaware of his situation. As Langland points out, Esther’s ability to reproduce her dominance of the domestic within both Charlie and Caddy, “is a form of middle-class colonization,” that worked to “consolidate upper-middle-class centrality and power,” within readers of *Bleak House*. (92, 97). Thus, we see that through Esther’s dominance of the domestic space, she is in replicating power structures that support the state.

These are just a few examples of surveillance in Dickens’ *Bleak House*. Other examples that have not been touched on, but are worth mentioning can be found in minor as well as major characters who appear throughout the novel. Many characters, such as Esther, Tulkinghorn, Mr. or Mrs. Snagsby, Guppy, Smallweed, Skimpole, and others surveil, while other characters become the object of their surveillance. It could be argued that characters such as Krook or Mrs. Bagnet do both. What is clear is that all of these characters, whether instruments or subjects of surveillance, do so in the interest of continuing the power of the state. If this is a conscious or subconscious act, a full examination of every example may end up reproducing the length of the novel itself, and this is perhaps the most telling point: we cannot overlook the fact that *Bleak House* is a novel of surveillance. This observation becomes important to us today, as questions of privacy and the power of the state to read our correspondences or listen to our phone calls enter the mainstream. When we consider the seeds of the surveillance state present in a novel such as *Bleak House*, we can begin to understand that our current situation did not happen overnight, but has unfolded throughout the course of history.

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1. Consider the “mystification” of the “wicked heaps of papers” John Jarndyce sees as having driven his uncle to suicide (*Bleak House 119).* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the ownership of Tom-all-Alone’s the anonymous narrator lets us know that “Certainty, Jo don’t know” (257). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The need to manage the poor is the need to contain Tom’s “revenge,” i.e.: the medical crisis that Goodlad’s sanitation reading of *Bleak House* has in mind. What I am suggesting is that the surveillance of Tom’s denizens was of upmost importance in this attempt to contain disease. While Goodlad sees Bucket’s need to move Jo along and out of existence as a means of protecting Lady Dedlock’s secret, one may also see Jo’s banishment from the city as a form of quarantine. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)