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BLEAK HOUSE IN REAL TIME

MATTHEW RUBERY

In Dickens's *Bleak House*, Miss Flite invites the wards in Jarndyce to her lodgings with the warning: "Youth, and hope, and beauty are very seldom there. It is a long, long time since I had a visit from either."¹ It is one thing for the novel to describe this interval for an audience. It is another thing to make us experience for ourselves the "long, long time" elapsed since the endless Chancery suit drove away from her door all youthful bloom. Yet this is exactly what serial publication of Dickens's novel obligated readers to do by drawing out its reception over a span of one and a half years. If we begin the novel as spectators to the ongoing Chancery suit, by the novel's final instalment we are in a position resembling Miss Flite's caged birds to be released on the day of judgment—whether human or divine remains in question as the case persists. While numerous Victorian novels came out in monthly parts (Dickens alone published nine novels in this format), literary critics have only recently begun to consider how this intermittent publication schedule would have affected understanding of individual narratives.² The following discussion asks how the sheer length of time involved in serial publication potentially influenced reception by examining time inside and outside the pages of *Bleak House*. The slow passage of time in between monthly instalments—"real time" as opposed to fictional time—is particularly relevant to a forum on time and reading for the manner in which serial publication intertwined the fictional narrative with the reader's life to a degree not possible with volume formats read in their entirety over a span of days rather than years.

We are accustomed to thinking of Victorian three-volume novels in terms of length rather than duration. Since novels are usually read in complete volumes instead of discrete installments today, there is a lack of reading techniques capable of recovering the very different rhythm of serialization in order to gauge the effects of enforced interruption over a narrative's reception. Many of our metaphors for reading are spatial—"close reading" is the most obvious of these—whereas temporal metaphors are more appropriate in the case of the serial. Not "fast" or "slow," for the actual pace of reading may remain the same in either format, but rather "long" and "short" to account for an activity taking place over a span of days, months, or even years. This notion of "long reading" restores the temporal dimension to the activity of reading in a number of ways. For *Bleak House* in particular, the term "long" has multiple connotations of length (Mr. Tulkinghorn's "long effusions"), duration (the

court's "long vacation"), and even desire (Guppy's "longing" to make Esther his wife). Each of these meanings poses a particular set of challenges to the reader of long narratives or, as the case may be, narratives read over a long period of time. Only by taking into account the long duration entailed by serial reading can we understand Victorian reading habits apart from retrospective privileging of the epiphanic moment inherited from the modernist literature of a subsequent era.

Many of Dickens's original readers encountered his novels in a form very different from the volume format familiar to today's audiences. *Bleak House* first appeared in nineteen monthly instalments between March 1852 and September 1853. Each of these instalments were sold in one-shilling parts (though some of Dickens's other narratives appeared serially in magazines) enclosed in a colored wrapper whose design incorporated the book's characters and themes. Every part contained thirty-two pages and two illustrations except for the last one, which was a double issue released at the same time as the complete volume.³ Serial readers looked forward between issues to "Magazine Day," the first day of each month when new instalments would appear. Whereas the first page of a triple-decker may be a daunting prospect, the comparatively slim instalment was met with great expectations. As one reviewer announced after the first instalment of *Bleak House*: "The first day of each of the next twenty months will be welcomed—*albâ oretâ notanda*—by the admirers of Mr. Charles Dickens."⁴ What might seem an extravagant time commitment to modern readers was viewed instead as a welcome diversion, or, as another reviewer described the occasion, "the coming of a friend."⁵ This personified image was hardly exaggerated considering the length of time over which the serial would be part of a reader's life.

The continuing relevance of serial publication is easy to see in Andrew Davies's 2005 BBC adaptation, which translated the novel's original serial format to television by showing fifteen episodes immediately after *EastEnders*, the BBC's long-running soap opera. After an initial hour-long episode, each of the remaining thirty-minute episodes emulated the soaps in terms of pace, multiple story lines, and cliff-hanger endings. The television serial was a literalization of the old adage about Dickens writing soap opera, or, as Davies rephrased it, "If Dickens was alive today, he'd be writing for *EastEnders*."⁶ The experiment was highly successful in resurrecting the sense of anticipation between episodes of the original serial. It is easy to overlook the sheer length of the novel when exposed to short, twice-weekly instalments that leave the audience wanting more (not the response of many readers of the novel, I hasten to add). But if Davies's adaptation succeeds in converting a Victorian novel into the serial format with which we are most comfortable today, it does so at the cost of sacrificing the rewards of deferred gratification felt by the serial's original readers. In the end, the television format is much closer in its compression to the modern experience of reading the novel in weeks rather than years. After all, Davies's version is as much abridgement as adaptation. This is apparent in the final television episode's segue from Richard Carstone's death to Esther's marriage in the space of minutes. This unsettlingly abrupt transition from grief to joy is the sort rarely found in the prolonged serial narrative. The abrupt

conclusion to the television series illustrates why Victorian serials with such a large cast typically concluded with a double-installment in order to tie up all of the loose ends accumulated over the preceding months.

A dilatory publication format is appropriate to a novel whose organizing metaphor is the Court of Chancery, in which the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit languishes for decades with little or no progress. The unresolved case lies in the background to the entire narrative: "Jarndyce and Jarndyce drones on" (16). The relevant parties have long since passed away, the infant wards aged into grandparents, and the young plaintiff promised a rocking-horse upon settlement grown up to buy a real horse without receiving a judgment. The phrase "when Jarndyce and Jarndyce is finished" has become a punch line synonymous with "when hell freezes over." Many readers have taken Mr. Jarndyce's complaint against Chancery that "nothing ever ends" to be an appropriate one for the experience of reading the novel itself, which is approximately one thousand pages in modern paperback editions (119). This is not simply a cheeky observation, for the novel manages to convey the sheer length of this interminable suit by conscripting the reader to its delays over the entire run of instalments. A reader introduced to the lawsuit during the first instalment in March 1852 would not witness its resolution until the final instalment in September 1853. What better way to convey its magnitude to readers than by literally making them wait for a judgement for eighteen months? It is one thing to empathize with the characters caught up in its delays. It is another thing altogether to become a *de facto* party to the suit as a result of the publication format.

The extent to which time passing in the reader's own life influenced the reception of a fictional narrative may be difficult to measure, but it is a worthwhile thought experiment nonetheless if only to disrupt the notion of a static reader. Most theoretical considerations of "the reader" presume an entity unchanged from the first to the last page of the narrative. By contrast, the serial's duration over an extended period of time ensured the reader's development outside the narrative. This is a key point in thinking about the relationship between time and reading: the serial reader developed alongside the characters to a far greater extent than a volume reader digesting the identical contents over a shorter time span. It strikes me just how long a period of time the commitment to reading a serial novel would be considered today. The crucial life events—birth, adolescence, education, career, courtship, marriage, death, and so forth—depicted in the novel would in many cases mirror those in the reader's life by the time of the novel's conclusion. The very concept of the *bildungsroman* takes on additional significance when read in tandem with the reader's own development over time. Whereas the narrative remains the same in either case, the time scale of its reception enables the serial narrative to become interwoven with the reader's life to a greater extent. Each installment would find its reader a month older, if not wiser, than the previous encounter. A key difference between serial and volume reception, then, arises during the passage of time *in between* installments when the efforts of interpretation often continued apace in the form of private reflection and public criticism. At least one

reviewer in 1852 observed how the digestion and debate of the narrative was central to the appeal of Dickens's serial after its first installment:

On the 1st of April there will be another greedy devouring up of his discourse, and a month for its digestion, and so—on we go again—with a fresh subject for dinner parties, and a new question for young people at balls—“Have you read ‘Bleak House’?”?

The image of the dinner party encapsulates both the public and private dimensions to serial reading. The “digestion” of the serial's contents emphasizes the individual act of rumination during the interval in between instalments, whereas the table talk underscores the communal experience of serial reading made possible by its simultaneous reception among disparate readers in a way associated with television serials today.

The influence of the slow passage of time outside *Bleak House* over the reception of its story is especially prominent in two events unfolding over time: illness and courtship. Whereas serial publication replicates at a formal level the thematic delays of Chancery, it is through the reader's relationship with individual characters sustained over time that we see the most profound difference between serial and non-serial reading. Some of the most significant relationships in my life have lasted for a shorter period of time than that of the serial reader's relationship with Esther Summerson, one of the novel's two narrators. If the first narrator is anonymous and disembodied, Esther is a named individual who speaks directly to the audience in a familiar first-person voice. More importantly, she is subject to time in a way that the disembodied narrator is not: she ages, she falls in love, she can even die. Dickens's novel brings out this last risk through its representation of Esther's illness as well as the corresponding passage of time outside the narrative—what might be thought of as reverse mimesis, a process by which life imitates aspects of the narrative rather than the other way around. As Esther complains after the first symptoms of illness separate her from Ada Clare: “Ah! it was a long, long time, before my darling girl and I were companions again” (499). In fact, the interval between installments corresponds almost exactly with the time spent by Esther in her sickbed. It has been a month between installments since Esther's sudden blindness in December 1852 and the announcement of her recovery the following January, when the next installment begins with the announcement: “I lay ill through several weeks, and the usual tenor of my life became like an old remembrance” (555). The phrase “old remembrance” is an appropriate one at this point in the publication cycle for our own recollection of Esther's former routine. Hence the time between installments is not lost time but corresponds both to the gap in Esther's consciousness and to our own prolonged concern for her well-being. This interval enacts the length of time potentially spent worrying about the health of a patient in the world outside the novel. Just how intense this distress felt for a fictional character between installments could be is obvious in the tale of American readers greeting British ships bringing over the latest installment of *The Old Curiosity Shop* with cries of “Is Little Nell dead?”

The passage of time in between installments likewise shapes responses to the extended courtship between Esther and Dr. Woodcourt. This is evident in Woodcourt's absence while working abroad as a ship's surgeon in order to support himself as he is unable to do in London. Woodcourt's self-denial presents a stark contrast to Richard Carstone's impulsiveness in moving from one profession to another with little foresight. While Woodcourt's discipline is ultimately rewarded by the novel, the high cost is apparent in the emotional toll taken on Esther's affections during his absence: "He was to be away a long, long time" (277). The hero's departure to make his fortune is a familiar convention of Victorian literature; however, in this case the fictional departure is reflected by Woodcourt's literal absence from the narrative. His ship departs from the August 1852 instalment before returning again in April 1853; in other words, his figurative absence from the narrative corresponds to his literal absence from the lives of readers for eight entire months. Esther's physical transformation—her face has been scarred by the unspecified illness—during his absence registers the dramatic changes possible in our lives during such a long interval. Her face may be unrecognizable to former acquaintances, but, for us, the novel's audience, Woodcourt's tanned face is the one unrecognizable after months at sea. He returns a stranger to us, as Esther is not, for we have had the company of her internal narration despite the outward transformation. Woodcourt's departure offers a vivid example of the difficulty of separation for all parties as well as evidence of the steadfastness of Esther's affections. In this case, the absence has the opposite effect of Esther's illness since, instead of a character remaining constantly in our thoughts, we are made to realize just how easy it is to forget a character who is not present on a regular basis. If nothing else, Woodcourt's absence emphasizes the degree to which the novel's other characters have become an everyday presence in our lives.

A final consequence of investing years in a fictional narrative is a profound sense of loss upon its completion. Characters who have been a monthly, if not daily, presence in the reader's life for such a long period of time cannot be parted from without a sense of loss comparable in its intensity to a state of mourning. This may be true of any great novel, but it is felt on a different scale with the monthly serial, intertwined as it is with daily life over such an extended period of time. Anthony Trollope's advice to aspiring novelists shows just how seriously the passage of time was taken by many Victorian authors: "On the last day of each month recorded, every person in his novel should be a month older than on the first."⁸ It is no accident that the phrase "long, long time" occurs in three of the illustrations chosen by this discussion to emphasize the need for "long reading," a practice capable of taking into account the passage of time within and without the narrative. As we have seen, the novel in parts requires an approach more temporal than spatial in order to comprehend the "long, long time" endured by the serial reader. Long reading is necessary to recapture how the intervals between installments allowed the serial reader to experience narrative events according to a different time scale than might be the case for the volume reader. The serial reader enduring the plot over this span of time finds a reassuring model in Mr. Jarndyce's tolerance of Richard Carstone: "Next week, next month, next year, sooner or later, he will

see me with clearer eyes. I can wait" (918). Jarndyce is not the only one waiting. We likewise are left waiting until next week, next month, next year for Richard Carstone to relinquish hostility toward his former guardian in the final installment. With the serial novel such happy endings are worth the wait. Yet, as our relationship with these characters comes to a close, we know the final installment of the serial novel provides the very thing postponed for so long by the previous eighteen installments: an ending.

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NOTES

¹ Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*. Penguin Classics Edn. Ed. Nicola Bradbury (Penguin Books, 2003) 67. Subsequent references are given parenthetically in the text.

² The most influential study of serial publication in the nineteenth century is Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund's *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville and London: UP of Virginia, 1991). Hughes and Lund examine the dynamics of serial reading in relation to a number of Victorian narratives first published in installments by Dickens and other authors.

³ For more on Dickens's relationship to serial publication and modern attempts to replicate its features, see Robert L. Patten's "Publishing in Parts," in *Palgrave Advances in Charles Dickens Studies*, ed. John Bowen and Patten (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006): 11–47.

⁴ "Mr. Dickens's New Serial," *The Morning Chronicle* (2 Mar. 1852) 6e.

⁵ [Untitled Review], *The Examiner* (6 Mar. 1852) 150a.

⁶ Quoted in Robert Giddings, "Soft Soaping Dickens: Andrew Davies, BBC-1, and *Bleak House*" 25 Feb. 2008 <www.fidnet.com/~dap1955/dickens/Soft_Soaping_Dickens.html>.

⁷ "Literature," *The Era* (14 Mar. 1852) 10a.

⁸ Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, Oxford World's Classics Edn, Ed. Michael Sadleir and Frederick Page (Oxford: Oxford UP) 233.