

# *Dickens as Modernist Poet*

*a talk given to*

*The Melbourne Dickens Fellowship*

*on the occasion of Dickens' 211<sup>th</sup> birthday,*

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## The Modern City: Alienation

(Wordsworth, from *The Prelude*, 1806, 7.636-724)

How often in the overflowing streets  
Have I gone forwards with the crowd, and said  
Unto myself **‘The face of everyone  
That passes by me is a mystery!’**  
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed  
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,  
Until **the shapes before my eyes became  
A second-sight procession such as glides  
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams,**  
And all the ballast of familiar life ...  
Went from me, neither knowing me, nor known.



## *Bleak House*, §1: avoidance of main/finite verbs

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, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. 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 (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

# *Bleak House*, §1: present participles

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, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, **waddling** like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke **lowering** down from chimney-pots, **making** a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. 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 (if this day ever broke), **adding** new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, **sticking** at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and **accumulating** at compound interest.

# *Bleak House*, §2: avoidance of anaphoric pronouns

**Fog** everywhere. **Fog** up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; **fog** down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. **Fog** on the Essex marshes, **fog** on the Kentish heights. **Fog** creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; **fog** lying out on the yards and hovering in the rigging of great ships; **fog** drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. **Fog** in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; **fog** in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; **fog** cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of **fog**, with **fog** all round them, as if they were up in a balloon and hanging in the misty clouds.

# Bleak House, §2

## Agency: *subjects* + (non-main) verbs

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## *Bleak House*, §§ 3 & 4: parisonic tricolon (rhetoric suggesting the return to order)

**Gas looming** through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time--**as the gas seems to know**, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.



# *Bleak House, §§ 3 & 4*

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and the *dense* fog **is** *densest*,  
and the *muddy* streets **are** *muddiest*

near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation, Temple Bar.

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# *Bleak House*, §§ 3 & 4: violation of principle of endweight

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# *Bleak House*, §§ 3 & 4: emergence of orderly rhythm

The *raw* afternoon **is** *rawest*, and the *dense* fog **is** *densest*, and the *muddy* streets **are** *muddiest* near [that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation] Temple Bar.

**And** hárd by Témple Bár,  
in Líncoln's Ínn Háll,  
at the véry héart of the fóg,  
**sits**  
the Lórd Hích Cháncellor  
in his Hích Cóurt of Cháncery.

# *Bleak House*, §§ 3 & 4: chiasmus of long stressed vowels

The raw afternoon **is** rawest, and the dense fog **is** densest, and the muddy streets **are** muddiest near [that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation] Temple Bar. **And** hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, **sits**

the LORd HIgh ChANcellor  
in his HIgh COURt of ChANcery.

# *Dombey*, Ch.20: Dombey's train-journey

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from the town, **burrowing** among the dwellings of men and making the streets hum, **flashing** out into the meadows for a moment, **mining** in through the damp earth, **booming** on in darkness and heavy air, **bursting** out again into the sunny day so bright and wide; **away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle**, through the fields, through the woods, through the corn, through the hay, through the chalk, through the mould, through the clay, through the rock, among objects close at hand and almost in the grasp, ever **flying** from the traveller, and a deceitful distance ever **moving** slowly within him: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death! Through the hollow, on the height, by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river, where the sheep are **feeding**, where the mill is **going**, where the barge is **floating**, where the dead are **lying**, where the factory is **smoking**, where the stream is **running**, where the village clusters, where the great cathedral rises, where the bleak moor lies, and the wild breeze smooths or ruffles it at its inconstant will; **away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle**, and no trace to leave behind but dust and vapour: like as in the track of the remorseless monster, Death!

## *Dombey*, Ch.55: Carker's flight

Of sunset once again, and nightfall. Of long roads again, and dead of night, and feeble lights in windows by the roadside; and still the old monotony of bells and wheels, and horses' feet, and no rest. Of dawn, and daybreak, and the rising of the sun. Of tolling slowly up a hill, and feeling on its top the fresh sea-breeze; and seeing the morning light upon the edges of the distant waves. Of coming down into a harbour when the tide was at its full, and seeing fishing-boats float on, and glad women and children waiting for them. Of nets and seamen's clothes spread out to dry upon the shore; of busy sailors, and their voices high among ships' masts and rigging; of the buoyancy and brightness of the water, and the universal sparkling. Of receding from the coast, and looking back upon it from the deck when it was a haze upon the water, with here and there a little opening of bright land where the Sun struck. Of the swell, and flash, and murmur of the calm sea. Of another grey line on the ocean, on the vessel's track, fast growing clearer and higher. Of cliffs and buildings, and a windmill, and a church, becoming more and more visible upon it. Of steaming on at last into smooth water, and mooring to a pier whence groups of people looked down, greeting friends on board. Of disembarking, passing among them quickly, shunning every one; and of being at last again in England.