"The Sickness of Hope Deferred": Infrastructure and Temporality in *Bleak House*

GOVIND NARAYAN
Northwestern University, Illinois, United States

IN Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), the law manipulates space. Miss Flite, a character who floats around Chancery, describes the court's extractive operations on people who encounter it. She says to Esther that Chancery draws

> people on, my dear. Draw peace out of them. Sense out of them. Good looks out of them. Good qualities out of them. I have felt them even drawing my rest away in the night. . . . Our father and our brother had a builder's business. We all lived together. Ve-ry respectably, my dear! First our father was drawn—slowly. Home was drawn with him. In a few years, he was a fierce, sour, angry bankrupt without a kind word or a kind look for anyone. . . . He was drawn to a debtors prison. There he died. Then our brother was drawn—swiftly—to drunkenness. And rags. And death. Then my sister was drawn. Hush! Never ask to what![1]

Chancery moves bodies, redrawing subjects into new trajectories. Miss Flite's father is drawn toward the court and is redirected from financial comfort into a "fierce, sour, and angry" bankruptcy, just as her brother and sister are drawn by the court from respectability toward drunkenness and destitution. *Bleak House* explores the law's functioning as a modern infrastructure insofar as Chancery becomes a pathway across which characters are relocated to radically and often adversely altered prospects.

In addition to this spatial reallocation, however, the law also exerts a temporal force in *Bleak House*—it forecloses futurity for Miss Flite's relatives and accelerates their movement toward death. Acknowledging the spatial nature of infrastructures as well as the predominance of spatially distributed social networks in Dickens's massive novel,[2] this essay argues that infrastructures in *Bleak House* effect temporal accelerations and

Govind Narayan is a PhD candidate in English at Northwestern University. His work compares Victorian and contemporary anglophone Indian literatures through questions of energy, empire, postcolonialism, developmentalism, and literary form. He is currently working on a dissertation that explores how nineteenth-century thermodynamics inaugurated a poetics that both governed the British Empire and continues to circumscribes possibilities for India since decolonization.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 52, No. 2, pp. 393–398.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000906

protractions. I examine two particular instances: the law and the British Empire's maritime networks. As the law exhausts and "decays" Richard Carstone, Allan Woodcourt becomes more important to the plot (977). Having traveled to India, he suffers a shipwreck and emerges a hero among purported savages, taking advantage of a colonial setting to enact his progressive and civilizing agency. The novel's infrastructures cause the law's delays, denials of coevalness to colonial and subaltern subjects, and Richard Carstone's demise. In doing so, they determine perpetual pasts and impossible futures even as they inhabit the uniform, linear time of realism.

In *The Promise of Infrastructure*, Nikhil Anand, Akhil Gupta, and Hanna Appel argue that states use infrastructure to "differentiate populations and subject some to premature death"[3]—uses that resemble Miss Flite's description of Chancery as a system that also deals out "differential provisioning" and discriminates among populations while dealing accelerated death to some.[4] However, Chancery also exhibits a salient temporal characteristic of modern infrastructures—what Esther Summerson calls the "sickness of hope deferred" (396). As Gupta elaborates later in *The Promise of Infrastructure*, deferred hope, or a perpetual state of anticipation, is endemic to the temporality inaugurated by modern infrastructures. Writing on the sight of pillars belonging to an abandoned highway project, Gupta exhorts us to think of "suspension, rather, as a condition in its own right, not a transient property on the way to becoming something else."[5] Infrastructure's commingling of promise and perpetual suspension also accompanies the pursuit of "justice" in *Bleak House*.

Many characters in this novel perform the futile anticipation of justice, and none more so than Miss Flite who has the peculiar habit of keeping birds with the view to releasing them when a judgment finally arrives. The birds suffer dismally. "Their lives," she says, "poor silly things, are so short in comparison with Chancery proceedings, that, one by one, the whole collection has died over and over again" (74). Other events in the novel direct us to read these birds as a figure for anyone—like Jo, Mr. Gridley, Richard Carstone, the spontaneously combusting Krook, and even the landed, wealthy Mrs. Dedlock—who encounters an institution that exceeds and claims their lives. Surpassing human duration, the law in *Bleak House* inhabits and imposes a temporal schema belonging distinctly to modern infrastructures—it withholds promise and expedites destitution in the name of delivering justice.

Richard Carstone's relationship with the court is described in symptomatic terms throughout the novel as his mental and physical health

deteriorate toward an infrastructurally ordained premature death. When the interminable "Jarndyce and Jarndyce" case finally ends, we learn that all the proceeds of the settlement, Richard's potential inheritance, have been "absorbed in costs" (975). Mirroring the exhaustion of the case and these funds is Richard's own exhaustion, implicating the court in "drawing" both his financial stores and his physical and mental energies. Seeing him on his deathbed, Esther says:

> There were restoratives on the table; the room was made as airy as possible, and was darkened, and was very orderly and quiet. Allan [Dr. Woodcourt, the physician and Richard's friend] stood behind him, watching him gravely. His face appeared to me to be quite destitute of colour, and, now that I saw him without his seeing me, I fully saw, for the first time, how worn away he was. (976)

The still young Richard's being "worn away" suggests that he has been progressively exhausted, and the "restoratives" chronicle futile attempts to impede what Esther later calls his "decay." Chancery becomes the sink into which all of Richard's restless energy is drained, leaving a character who cannot work, cannot perform his roles as husband, nephew, and friend, and cannot outlive the case that was the end of his life—both his goal and his termination. By the time of the promise of infrastructure's nominal-juridical fulfillment, Richard's life is extinguished. Acting as an infrastructure, Chancery holds together the divergent temporalities of slow justice and accelerated death. While readers perceive the novel's passage of time in the expected register of quotidian realism—advancing regularly in a chronologically serialized fashion—attention to infrastructure reveals that this ostensibly uniform time is really a suturing of widely variant temporalities.

Empire is another one of *Bleak House*'s concerns where simultaneous progressions and regressions of time are held together by infrastructures under the veneer of a uniform and linear diegesis. It is no coincidence that Allan Woodcourt's significance grows as Chancery's parasitic infrastructure draws increasing amounts of energy from Richard. The doctor's presence around Richard during the latter's demise is understandable. However, Woodcourt also brings with him a history of colonial adventure that links the happenings of *Bleak House*'s ostensibly enclosed London with the British Empire's maritime activities on a global scale. Woodcourt the colonial migrant returns with news of a shipwreck, and stories of his heroism circulate through the novel's networks. Immediately following the conversation in which Miss Flite talks about

the "drawing" power of Chancery's infrastructure, she also tells the story of Woodcourt's shipwreck, saying:

> There has been a terrible shipwreck over in those East-Indian seas. . . . An awful scene. Death in all shapes. Hundreds of dead and dying. Fire, storm, and darkness. Numbers of the drowning thrown upon a rock. There, and through it all, my dear physician was a hero. Calm and brave, through everything. Saved many lives, never complained in hunger and thirst, wrapped naked people in his spare clothes, took the lead, showed them what to do, governed them, tended the sick, buried the dead, and brought the poor survivors safely off at last! My dear, the poor emaciated creatures all but worshipped him. They fell down at his feet, when they got to the land, and blessed him. (569)

In Miss Flite's vivid description, it is not clear whether the people that Woodcourt saves and governs, and whose dead he buries, are white British colonizers or the colonized populations of "the East-Indies"—whether the beacon of civilization that Woodcourt brings to his shipwreck shines within a white British circle or blindingly illuminates colonized communities with the white man's burden. We cannot tell whether this is heroism pure and simple or an imperialist denial of coevalness to subjects who need temporal accelerations in order to achieve progress and civilization. If the phrase "poor emaciated creatures" does refer to colonized subjects, which it likely does given that Miss Flite's lexicon of "naked creatures" and "hunger and thirst" could just as well be used to describe the inhabitants of "Booriobolo Gha" and "Tockahoopoo Indians" that populate the textual and geographical fringes of *Bleak House*, then the "death in all shapes" is really death delivered to colonized bodies by the British Empire through its maritime infrastructure. In Miss Flite's description of Woodcourt's shipwreck, we see the British Empire act as the stage on which East-Indian subjects are promised progress, denied coevalness, and dealt death. Indeed, Miss Flite's present perfect phrasing—"there *has been* a shipwreck"—refers to an event that took place in the past but is kept alive in the present. Her speech, embodying the novel's infrastructural schema, fixes the East Indies firmly in a past that provides a stage for Woodcourt's ostensibly well-intentioned heroics that in their turn drive the plot forward through his return to London. Woodcourt is the heir of a family that has declined from nobility and eventually becomes a husband to Esther. His character tells us very little about empire despite his

adventure, but quite a bit about the linearly serialized themes of aristocratic decline and the marriage plot—generic expectations that create an impression of time passing in a uniform, linear fashion.

I argue that paying attention to infrastructures like the law and maritime networks, however, undoes the uniformity of time and reveals the varying temporalities that are simultaneously separated and sutured in *Bleak House*. Indeed, this simultaneous separation and suturing is what I would call *Bleak House*'s literary infrastructure—a set of rhetorical and narrative strategies that not only compress the globe and claim to represent it within the confines of London but also create an experience of everydayness while holding together temporal antipodes such as past, present, and future, urban and rural, central and peripheral, contemporary and colonial, progressive and prehistoric.

Bleak House's infrastructures are expansive, spanning from within Richard's body to the peripheries of the British Empire, and polyrhythmic, accelerating and protracting time differently for different characters. While they hold colonies in a perpetual past and the promise of justice in a perpetual future, they also effect collapses of their own boundaries. For instance, the same infrastructures that fix the East Indies in a perpetual past in need of Western progress also indicate, through Woodcourt's return, his administration of restoratives to Richard, and his eventual marriage to Esther, how threateningly close this past is to the diegetic present of *Bleak House*'s London. Attention to infrastructure in *Bleak House* thus enables us to see at least three things. First, that infrastructures connect not only space but also significantly manipulate experiences of time. Second, that infrastructures hold together these varied temporalities and give readers an impression of linear, uniform time corresponding to the rhythms of serialization and realism. And finally, despite manipulations of time, deferrals of justice, and denials of coevalness, infrastructures remain open to contesting voices from the very subaltern subjects whose deaths they ordain: Jo, Mr. Gridley, Miss Flite, George Rouncewell, and the silent inhabitants of "Booriobolo Gha" and the "East-Indies" are a few among the many characters who make implicit and explicit claims against the ravages of law and empire. Reading for infrastructures then reveals how nineteenth-century London's space-time is thoroughly suffused by the presence of empire, and methodologically allegorizing such a reading also provides insight into one possible avenue for undisciplining Victorian studies.

NOTES

[1] Dickens, *Bleak House*, 566. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
[2] On Dickens's spatially distributed social networks, see Levine, "Narrative Networks.".
[3] Anand, Gupta, and Appel, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, 3.
[4] Anand, Gupta, and Appel, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, 4.
[5] Anand, Gupta, and Appel, *The Promise of Infrastructure*, 70.

Works Cited

Anand, Nikhil, Akhil Gupta, and Hannah Appel, eds. *The Promise of Infrastructure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1853. Edited by Nicola Bradbury. Penguin Classics. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Levine, Caroline. "Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42, no. 3 (2009): 517–23, https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-2009-050.