SUSANNE PETERS

Entropy of Sense Perception and the Issue of Observation in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*:
The Strange Case of Spontaneous Human Combustion

Abstract: This paper deals with the narrative treatment of the naturally impossible phenomenon of Spontaneous Human Combustion (SHC). Taking the popularity of scientific issues such as the sudden exchange of heat energy and notions of entropy in Dickens’s own life time as a point of departure, it traces and seeks to explain an extraordinary visual bias in Dickens’s approach to the matter of SHC, which seems in disaccord with (allegedly) accurate reports of such deaths where an eye witness is almost never present. While Dickens’s well-known statement of his belief in the real possibility of SHC is read as an attempt to forestall criticism of his idiosyncratically constructed notion of reality, the narrative procedure he adopted is discussed as a captivating rhetoric of visual as well as physical proximity and distance, and related to the most persistent metaphor of *Bleak House*: that of impaired and distorted, entropic vision.

The sudden burning of a human body without an apparent or identifiable external source of ignition is referred to as the obscure phenomenon of Spontaneous Combustion. Since a first (alleged) casualty took place in 17th century France and was some hundred years later included in Jonas Dupont’s notable dissertation on the subject (*Specimen de Incendiis Corporis Humani Spontaneitu*, Lyon 1763), the actual possibility of this spectacular occurrence has been an issue of occasionally heated debate. The mysterious accompanying circumstances of these cases, such as their exclusive happening indoors, the notorious lack of eye witnesses, the dubious contribution of high levels of alcohol in the victim’s body, its burning without visibly affecting the immediate environment, and not least the smelly deposit of grease and soot on walls and ceilings, have well fuelled the dispute. Considerable voyeuristic pleasure seems to be involved, offering late-coming onlookers a chance to pose as conscientious eye witnesses. Irrespective of its physical, chemical and mathematical improbabilities, Spontaneous Human Combustion (hereafter referred to as SHC) still seems to retain an abode in (pseudo-) scientific thinking: As late as 1999, the BBC broadcast a film involving an actual experiment (the burning of a pig’s body) to simulate the effects of spontaneous combustion, the camera replacing an eye witness. However, the desired effects could not be (re-) produced, resulting in the common view that SHC is not a proven natural occurrence; in other words: nonsense.
The cultural climate of Victorian England and 19th century continental Europe, however, proved a more fertile ground for the controversy over the real possibility of SHC. Numerous popular scientific journals, among them the brochures of the commonsensical Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge or the publications of the famous Royal Society of London, were produced in that era, bespeaking a seemingly boundless spectrum of interests in all matters and manners of observation and theory, fact and fancy, science and imagination. Accordingly, the century saw many inventions in all fields of human interest, foremost in those of science, technology, manufacturing, economy and medicine. The discovery of the laws of thermodynamics in France and in Germany, for example, concerned with the relation between heat energy and power, the possibility of energy conservation and the consequences of its loss, is perhaps an interesting case in point here. The first insight into what was later to be called thermodynamics was formulated by Lazare Carnot in 1803 (Géometrie de Position; in English, Fundamental Principles of Equilibrium and Movement). The author’s son, Sadi Carnot, continued his father’s research and in 1824 published a pamphlet (soon to be out of print) titled Réflexions sur les puissance motrice du feu (translated into English as late as 1890 as Reflections on the motive Power of Fire). It analysed the inherent tendency of heat energy to move from hot to cold bodies. Building upon these early findings about the processes involved in the dissipation of energy, German physicist Robert Clausius eventually discovered the momentous Second Law of Thermodynamics in the 1850s and 60s. He developed the intriguing concept of entropy, a measure that describes how, within a closed system, spontaneous changes in energy levels tend to smooth out differences in temperature, pressure, or density in an irreversible process. In the socio-cultural matrix of a time fascinated by the production and management of power, energy seems to have emerged as an exciting topic. Formulated in much broader terms, such processes could easily be associated with decline, and even death. Moreover, and applied to the general way of the observable world, one could envisage the ultimate heat-death of the universe following the eventual decline of all global energy levels.

The discovery and accurate description of processes such as the spontaneous dissipation of excessive amounts of heat energy — and here we return to our phenomenon of the spontaneous ignition of a human body — may have appeared most interesting indeed, not only to scientists and the scholarly elite, but to the general public, and of course to authors of fiction as well. The literary attraction of the issue may be attested by a substantial number of novels from the 18th century onwards that feature cases of SHC, e.g. Charles Brockden Brown’s Wieland, or the Transformation (1798), Nicolai Gogol’s Dead Souls (1842), Hermann Melville’s Redburn (1849), Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 (1966), or John Banville’s Birchwood (1973), to name but a few. Conceding an inherent appeal of SHC...
and its accompanying discourse on the interrelations between observation and theory, we turn to the classic example of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, serialised in 1852, and published a year later in a one-volume version. Here, we find several “references” to thermodynamic issues. The first is found in the famous opening paragraph of the novel, of which Freese writes that Dickens “might very well have offered a kind of intuitively conceived artistic equivalent of the ongoing paradigm shift from mechanistic certainty to thermodynamic probability, which would soon explode the Victorian belief in unending progress” (Freese 1997, 144-5).

1. Vision and Entropic Decline

The irreversible movement towards disorder and decline seems indeed to be the reigning metaphor of *Bleak House*, where the foggy weather conditions reflect the general decay of, and Dickens’s own growing dissipation with, the metropolis London, and particularly the Courts of Law in Chancery. There are further examples in the novel which can also be related to such entropic decline. The first is the notorious Jarndyce and Jarndyce court case, this “scarecrow of a suit” (BH 52), which has become

so complicated that no man alive knows what it means. The parties to it understand it least; but it has been observed that no two Chancery lawyers can talk about it for five minutes without coming to a total disagreement as to all the premises. (BH 52)

The case is presented as having caused such confusion among its participants that it seems to have long spent its potential for a satisfactory solution:

[...] no crumb of amusement ever falls from JARDYCE AND JARNDYCE [...]. The short-hand writers, the reporters of the court, and the reporters of the newspapers, invariably decamp with the rest of the regulars when Jarndyce and Jarndyce comes on. Their places are blank. (BH 51)

In what can also be read as an ironical reversal of Aristotelian anagnorisis, in which nothing of significance is discovered, the near end of the novel displays the total deflation of once-antagonistic forces. Such an anticlimactic dissolution of the famous dispute results in a rather illustrative depiction of what, more than a hundred years later, could well be discussed under the term of information entropy. Jarndyce and Jarndyce, stripped of its energy and meaning, its once heated court debates having ceased to stir public attention, now simply signifies its own void, symbolised in huge bundles of paper containing now utterly redundant information:

[...] presently great bundles of paper began to be carried out – bundles in bags, bundles too large to be got into any bags, immense masses of papers of all shapes and no shapes, which the bearers staggered under, and threw down for the time being, anyhow, on the Hall pavement, while they went back to out more. (BH 922)

the development begins with the registering of some peculiar evidence and instantly leads to scientific conviction.

2 All page references in the text are to the Penguin Classics edition of 1986, edited and introduced by J. Hillis Miller; abbreviated as BH hereafter.
The once energetic exchange of opinions, which must have reached its climax long before the two narrators begin to tell their stories, has at last come to an end. It is not surprising that the unexpected, sudden termination of the court case also incurs the utter consummation of the riches it formerly promised to generations of plaintiffs and defendants alike. It is only a matter of consequence then, that Richard Carstone, who pitched his whole existence into the case, dies at the hearing of its having at last come to a finis.

Remaining at the end of the novel, one may also discover certain entropic qualities of Bleak House in the ample distribution of contentedness among its surviving protagonists. Sir Leicester Dedlock at Chesney Wold, for example, is seen to manage for himself sufficiently well, yet the atmosphere prevalent in his large country seat is embellished with a looming sense of death. Particularly noteworthy are the abounding references to visual perception:

The greater part of the house is shut up, and it is a showhouse no longer; yet Sir Leicester holds his shrunken state in the long drawing-room for all that, and reposes in his old place before my Lady’s picture. Closed in by night with broad screens, and illumined only in that part, the light of the drawing-room seems gradually contracting and dwindling until it shall be no more. A little more, in truth, and it will be all extinguished for Sir Leicester, and the damp door in the mausoleum which shuts so tight, and looks so obdurate, will have opened and relieved him. (BH 930)

Here, entropic closure may not have reached its final stage just yet, but this is literally envisaged, as is suggested by the narrative’s sparse and faint illumination of the interior. The novel’s second narrator, Esther Summerson, ends her narrative whole seven years after the main events of the story: Complementing the gradual extinction of light at the Deadlocks’ stately home, the considerable time stretch between the once all-too-exciting events and the serene termination of Esther’s narrative may equally hint at some entropic dissipation of (narrative) energy. Bleak House thus seems indeed to have taken up popular scientific notions in its idiosyncratic reconstruction of a world of light in decline, contained within the closed system of a novel with a title that already alludes to the lasting impairment of visual prospect.

We also identify attempts in the narrative to make up for such impairment (or lack) of vision with an attitude of astonishment and teaming that with bare testimonies of “fact,” particularly emphasised in the episode dealing with the peculiar death of Mr Krook. Known to have encouraged rather than obscured scientific thought (if only by including articles on scientific themes in his journals), Dickens fuelled the debate on SHC to a new pitch by referring to thermodynamic processes by letting Krook, the filthy and illiterate shop owner in Chancery Lane who accumulates but never sells, die a lonely and mysterious death by spontaneous combustion. With this episode, Dickens may certainly have incurred general interest in scientific matters of observation, theory, and imagination, but instead of being lauded for courting the general public’s taste, he was both privately and publicly reproached for the inclusion of a paranormal death in Bleak House. These allegations were, however, less concerned with the factual occurrence of
SHC than directed at the author’s stubborn insistence on its real possibility, a trend that has continued into our own time. The spontaneous dissipation of high energy levels and the possibility of its observation were given fascinating narrative attention by Dickens in the episode concerned with the production of scandalous effect and a less than willing suspension of disbelief on the side of the narrator. It seems that, in the process of narration, the authorial narrator of Bleak House is by degrees brought to observe closely, almost against his will, then to suspend his disbelief in the matter, reflecting (possibly mimicking) Dickens’s own attitude to SHC. Obviously, the level of parody involved here must not be overlooked, pertaining to the symbolic value of the vehicle of SHC to represent the combustion of the British legal system as wishful thinking.

2. The Bone of Contention

Dickens’s professed belief in SHC has always been a bone of contention for his readers. That Dickens had one of his characters die of SHC drew forth a number of immediate responses, the most sustained being those of George Henry Lewes (Gordon S. Haight’s 1955 expostulation of that controversy is still the most lucid to date). Another compelling facet of Dickens’s and Lewes’s controversy over SHC is its spanning of both public and private spheres of author and critic, a pattern that appears to almost mimic the isolated death of SHC plus ensuing public scandal. Their dispute was initiated by an address in a popular magazine (The Leader) of which Lewes was the literary editor, followed by a narrative response from Dickens in the next chapter of his novel (as yet published in monthly instalments), then argued over in their private correspondence, and concluded with another proof of Dickens’s still unshaken belief in the phenomenon in the preface to the one-volume edition of his novel and some final urges printed in The Leader. This almost

3 Dickens’s insistence on the reality of SHC is still under debate. Occasionally, critics find it strenuous to explain it away: “[t]he load of symbolical significance he wanted to put on the metaphor was only relevant if it was an attested fact,” Blount opaquely wrote in 1970 (186). Gaskell, on the other hand, and in defence of Dickens, points out that “in fairness to him we should remember that his sometimes grossly mistaken opinions were often shared [...] by his scientific peers” (1973, 25-6). This is argued in consideration of what was in the public’s realm at Dickens’s time, but with little informative value regarding the narrative itself. The ironic title of Denman’s 1986 article “Krook’s Death and Dickens’s Authorities,” already points towards an assumed fictionality of both. The question “[w]hat could have caused Dickens to believe so strongly in spontaneous combustion?” is the main focus in Gamble’s contribution to the issue in 1999 (15). To my knowledge the most recent addendum to the issue is Loesberg’s, which sums up the problem with Dickens’s obstinacy: “while virtually all contemporary critics agree that the symbol’s value does not rest on the reality of spontaneous combustion, they have to posit their position either in the face of Dickens’s insistence on its reality or, with a greater than usual effort, to engage in the willing suspension of disbelief” (2002, 60). The question whether a symbol is real or not must not be considered, as Loesberg also argued; however, it is contestable that he offers to treat the insistence of the narrator on the possibility of SHC on the same footing as the statements of the author. In an attempt to gain a more profound understanding of Dickens’s narrative idiosyncratic notion of reality, one could also argue that the narrative voice mirrors Dickens’s own insecurity with regard to the matter.
magnetic mélange of private and public correspondence also serves as a reminder of the advantages and serious consequences of publishing in serial form: it gives the author an opportunity to check with his readership whether something would be feasible or not, and then, should he so wish, to set it right in the next instalment. This, however, was not what Dickens chose to do. Although the cultural-historical (and biographical) interest in this matter seems indeed compelling, it is equally rewarding to elucidate its function within the narrative make-up of the novel: the fictional visualisation of excessive thermodynamic processes (impossible though they are in this instance) and its frightful impact on naive bystanders.

In order to relate Dickens’s contested opinion on the matter of SHC to his narrative, one could note his almost obsessive use of the verb “to observe” in the introduction to the one-volume edition of *Bleak House*, where the writer famously defends his sources:

> The possibility of what is called Spontaneous Combustion has been denied since the death of Mr Krook; and my good friend MR LEWES (quite mistaken, as he soon found, in supposing the thing to have been abandoned by all authorities) published some ingenious letters to me at the time when that event was chronicled, arguing that Spontaneous Combustion could not possibly be. I have no need to observe that I do not wilfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject. There are about thirty cases on record, of which the most famous, that of the Countess Cornelia de Bandi Cesenate, was minutely investigated and described by Giuseppe Bianchini, a prebendary of Verona, otherwise distinguished in letters, who published an account of it at Verona, in 1731, which he afterwards republished at Rome. The appearances beyond all rational doubt observed in that case, are the appearances observed in Mr Krook’s case. [...] Contenting myself with observing, that I shall not abandon the facts until there shall have been a considerable Spontaneous Combustion of the testimony on which human occurrences are usually received. In *Bleak House* I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things. (Dickens’s preface to the first edition of *Bleak House*, 1853)

The multiple use of one and the same verb of visual perception appears as an attempt to resolutely make up for the characteristic lack of direct observation wherever SHC is concerned. This we may read as a return of the repressed. The first use of the verb seems to parade its illocutionary force: “I have no need to observe,” Dickens writes, and yet he does so; the second refers to purely circumstantial evidence: “[t]he appearances beyond all rational doubt observed in that case” has an ambiguous (if not dubious) literal meaning of the adjective “beyond,” which could well point to the irrationality of the said appearances; the third instance, “the appearances observed in Mr Krook’s case,” has a questionable referent, i.e., appearances can be read as adhered to by the author or indeed the character Mr (sic!) Krook. By re-inscribing the singularly most contested detail concerning SHC into the case — direct observation as proper testimony — Dickens deliberately muddles perception and judgment, obviously favouring some kind of naive (certainly pre-intellectual) sensation over sound critical judgment, an attitude that he himself termed as dwelling on “the romantic side of things” in his preface.

It is perhaps conducive to this argument that we remember what Dickens wrote in the preface to his earlier novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*: “What is exaggeration
to one class of minds and perceptions, is plain truth to another. That which is commonly called a long-sight, perceives in a prospect innumerable features and bearings non-existent to a short-sighted person.” (1986b, 41) As in the instance discussed above, here, too, Dickens’s notion of “truth” seems to oscillate, depending on point of view: the closer you look, the less you see things in proportion. On the other hand, a short-sighted person’s remedy would be to look closer and to pay even greater attention to detail. Both long- and short-sighted at the same time, Dickens’s metaphorical word play on long- and short-sightedness does not pay off in his treatment of SHC: had he narrated the events from a more distant, i.e. critical position, its absurdity might have come into full view. His narrator’s proximity, however, only allows for attention to detail, the registering of frightful circumstantial evidence. Thus, Dickens’s narrator (and perhaps Dickens himself, for that matter) appear to have been easily tricked — at the cost of clarity of vision, at which point we re-arrive at the all-permeating metaphor of the whole of Bleak House, impaired and distorted vision.

If one were to reconcile the novelist’s treatment of SHC with common sense, the parody that the entire episode contains would have to be stressed by reading it as an extravagant re-enactment of the whole controversy over the case, although this results in a partly anti-chronological reading, as the debate over SHC only started after Dickens wrote about it in the chapter “The appointed Hour.” In this vein, Dickens’s own prefatory comments merely document his unlimited interest in observations without feeling the need to burden them with critical evaluation.4 Indeed, Dickens had often satirised and challenged so-called profound views on scientific matters as an “airy-fairy unweaving of rainbows,” as he did in satirising the British Association for the Advancement of Science by naming it “The Mudfog Association for the Advancement of Everything” in a short story of that title he wrote a few years earlier. There, he also paraded a number of fictitious academics, reminiscent of the deranged professors of Laputa in Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels: men who busy themselves with largely preposterous scholarly projects.

3. From “Fact” to Fiction

The similarity of Krook’s demise in Bleak House to a number of cases published in volumes titled The Terrific Register: or, Record of Crimes, Judgements, Providences, and Calamities that appeared between 1824 and 1825, or Robert Macnish’s The Anatomy of Drunkenness of 1827, has occasionally been pointed out, but scholars have hitherto mostly enlarged upon their likeness.5 However, although Dickens admittedly based his “case” on reports such as these, his own version differs sig-

4 Tore Rem (1999, 305) supports the suggestion that Dickens probably felt cornered by Lewes and felt forced to trade simple astonishment for firm belief.

5 Both sources were popular in their time and known to Dickens, as Trevor Blount documents (1970, 183). Tore Rem, for example, reprehended Dickens for merely “transcribing” Robert Macnish’s report (1999, 304).
Susanne Peters

significantly from them. In *The Terrific Register*, a typical fatal scene is described thus:

At the distance of about four feet from the bed was a heap of ashes, in which could be distinguished the legs and arms untouched. Between the legs lay the head, the brain of which, together with half of the posterior part of the cranium, and the whole chin had been consumed; three fingers were found in the state of a coal; the rest of the body was consumed to ashes, and contained no oil; the tallow of two candles were melted on a table, but the wicks still remained, and the feet of the candlesticks were covered with a certain moisture. The bed was not damaged, the bed-clothes and cover-lid were raised and thrown on one side, as is the case when a person gets up. The furniture and tapestry were covered with a moist kind of soot of the colour of ashes, which had penetrated in to the drawers, and dirtied the linen [...]. The infectious odour had been communicated to other apartments.6

This description rests on rather factual observations. Details, such as bedcovers, candles, or the stench, are meticulously noted. The bare facts alone that constitute the scene obviously convey enough of the horror of the gruesome event; further stress on its impact on an appropriately dismayed investigator does not appear to be called for. Moreover, the report remains impersonal and detached, we can detect neither fear nor compassion for the victim. Thus, the accumulation of bare circumstantial particulars seems to eclipse any kind of involvement on the observer’s side. Contrary to this, Dickens remodelled the original description to render a rather more responsive account in *Bleak House*, attending to the excessiveness and scandal of such an event, and vivifying his description to much greater effect.

As already discussed, this partiality is amply advertised in Dickens’s preface to *Bleak House*, where he re-confirms his preferment of the “romantic side of things;” the dimensions of the personal, the emotional, and the immediate are, to him, of paramount significance. Accordingly, perception, experience and proximity become favoured modes of expression to sustain his idiosyncratically dense type of realism. And yet, we need to note (even stress again) the remarkable absence of proper eye witnesses of cases of SHC. The relation of the events is constructed upon secondary or even tertiary evidence, only. In the novel, Mr Weevle and Mr Guppy arrive at the scene only after the event to see what is left of Mr Krook: a smouldering heap of ashes, the terrifying atmosphere rendering the imaginative re-construction of the occurrence plausible. There is no direct observation of the actual burning of the body, although this could easily have been accomplished in the narrative. The approach Dickens chose instead will be the last focus of our investigation into his narrative treatment of SHC.

4. A Death and a Birth

Krook’s burning to ashes without any observable cause mysteriously happens at the stroke of midnight, highlighting the ghastliness of the incident. From the beginning of the chapter onwards, Dickens puts his reader in an appropriate

6 This passage is quoted from Trevor Blount (184-5).
Spontaneous Human Combustion in Bleak House

frame of mind by carefully distributing an abundance of references to primarily visual (enhanced by auditory) perceptions that culminate in an allusion to the mythological figures of Equity and Argus:

It is night in Lincoln’s Inn – perplexed and troublous valley of the shadow of the law, where suitors generally find but little day – and fat candles are snuffed out in offices, and clerks have rattled down the crazy wooden stairs, and dispersed. The bell that rings at nine o’clock, has ceased its doleful clangour about nothing; the gates are shut; and the night-porter, a solemn warder with a mighty power of sleep, keeps guard at his lodge. From tiers of staircase windows, clogged lamps like the eyes of Equity, bleared Argus with a fathomless pocket for every eye and an eye upon it, dimly blink at the start. (BH 498)

All of these visual perceptions are, however, inhibited: there is only talk of partial and diffuse lighting, of shadows and of things coming to an end, echoing the entropic atmosphere of the opening chapter of the novel. Everything is shut down and turned indoors. A page later, the atmospheric retreat of light is augmented by allusions to sickness, decrepitude, and death. Thus craftily initiated, the scene shifts to Mr Krook’s shop, from where it travels to the room that he has let to a mysterious lodger. Here, Mr Guppy is visiting to await the appointed hour of midnight, when Krook is supposed to hand over a bunch of letters. All of a sudden, Mr Guppy smells something burning. Then the lodger and Mr Guppy perceive soot hanging about the room, which they compare to black fat. Some unidentifiable yellow liquor seeps through the wall and intensifies the nauseating atmosphere:

‘What in the Devil’s name,’ he says, ‘is this! Look at my fingers!’
A thick, yellow liquor defiles them, which is offensive to the touch and sight and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil, with some natural repulsion in it that makes them both shudder.

‘What have you been doing here? What have you been pouring out of window?’
‘I pouring out of window! Nothing, I swear! Never, since I have been here!’ cries the lodger.

And yet look here – and look here! When he brings the candle, here, from the corner of the window-sill, it slowly drips, and creeps away down the bricks; here, lies in a little thick nauseous pool.

‘This is a horrible house,’ says Mr Guppy, shutting down the window. ‘Give me some water, or I shall cut my hand off.’ (BH 509)

There are two major points of significance to be registered in this passage, the absence of oral discourse markers and the many references to olfactory and tactile sense perception, inviting the reader to come and see (and smell) for herself; to take an imaginary look at the frightful sight, in other words: to imagine a perception of sparse lighting, disagreeable smell, and repulsive touch. The shift of the narrative’s deictic centre from the streets outside to interior spaces appears to pre-scribe the reader’s own (imaginary) presence in the room with the characters, near the window sash. But the authorial narrator who usually guides his readers confidently enough through the events of the novel, here is himself infected by fear. The authorial narrative voice comes to resemble the voice of a character in the text; or, more precisely, the narrator himself becomes so affected by what he has to relate that he appears to have discharged himself from
his task of relating events from a distance (anthropomorphism permitted). This peculiar narrative mode is carried over into the next passage, where the narrator briefly seems to have calmed down again and has apparently gained some emotional distance from the horrific scenery, but only for as short a while as it takes to divert his eyes to the cat who keeps arching her back:

They advanced slowly, looking at all these things. The cat remains where they found her, still snarling at the something on the ground, before the fire and between the two chairs. What is it? Hold up the light.

Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper, but not so light as usual, seeming to be steeped in something; and here is – is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or is it coal? O Horror, he is here! and this from which we run away, striking out the light and overturning one another into the street, is all that represents him.

Help, help, help! come into this house for Heaven’s sake! (BH 511)

The narrator’s apparent calm with which he began to relate the events soon gives way to real fear and horror. The tension is increased by the many indexing references noting details of the immediate surroundings (“here” is repeated four times). Krook’s spontaneous combustion is complemented by a climactic paroxysm of narrative style; the spontaneous death enhanced by a sudden birth: the “materialisation” of narrative voice as a third person in the frightened party of protagonists. To consolidate this textual pandemonium, there is an emphatic change of tense from present to future in the following passage, before a return to the usually assertive tone becomes possible again, with which the narrator ends this chapter, now gravely confirming the alleged cause of the event.

It is at this stage that the narrative leads to a symbolically charged level of communication with its reader. The cause of death is used as a metaphor for corruption, false pretences and injustice. Thus the vicious body itself is responsible for its complete and irreversible destruction. The accumulation of the destructive force and corruption of the body’s owner finds its appropriate correlative in the high energy levels involved in SHC. But how can Dickens use SHC as a metaphor and claim it to be a real possibility at the same time?

The Lord Chancellor of that Court, true to his title in his last act, has died the death of all Lord Chancellors in all Courts, and of all authorities in all places under all names soever, where false pretences are made, and where injustice is done. Call the death by any name Your Highness will, attribute it to whom you will, or say it might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally – inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that only – Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died. (BH 511-2)

These switches between authorial superiority and the “materialisation” of narrative voice as character function to obscure Dickens’s contested personal opinion in the truth of the matter. It is only in the parody that follows this incident in the ensuing chapter (notably, the next instalment of the serial publication) that allows us to catch a glimpse of his stance in the matter, namely, that only narrow-minded people would insist on discussing the reality of SHC, and, we may add, inside as well as outside of his text.
Dickens incorporates testimonies of alleged incidents into the fictive scenery and action of his novel. The mixture of alleged facts with illustrative fiction creates a peculiar double-bind effect: while the testimonies in the novel appear fictional, his fiction seems rather realistic. Due to the subtle switches of the deictic centres during the whole episode dealing with SHC and the changes of narrative tense, we may tentatively describe Charles Dickens’s own opinion on the matter to be, at best, oscillating. SHC is used as a metaphor for corruption and viciousness, and a corrupt and vicious body is punished by a horrible death. Yet the overall narrative structure of the episode of Krook’s death must be read as a re-enactment of the controversy over its own narrative of an outrageous, yet fictional event that accompanied the initial publication of the novel, rather than representing a mere testimony of “belief” by its author.

In her book *Towards a Natural Narratology*, Monika Fludernik (1996, 207-11) turns to a different episode of *Bleak House* to describe such chameleon-techniques as have been discussed here. The shot that killed Tulkinghorn, she argues, is heard by a whole range of perceivers, readers, passers-by, and mediators, signified, as in the SHC episode, by a similar lack of discourse markers. But the most significant aspect in Fludernik’s elucidation of Dickens’s technique is the identification of precisely this oscillating movement of the observer’s position, locating it at the same time outside and inside the world of the narrative. Identifying a similar change of deictic centres from the voice of bystanders to the point of view of supreme authorial omniscience, she argues that

> [...] one can therefore observe with great facility how the miming of an observer’s position constitutes a mode of interaction between reflectoral and authorial readings. Verisimilitude, of both a linguistic and thematic kind, regulates what one reads into such passages. Thus it is the content of the questions that suggests this to be bystanders’ words ‘actually’ uttered, even if in a less condensed shape, whereas several of the stylistic features and the speculation about Tulkinghorn’s mindset imply an external and omniscient origin of the discourse. (Fludernik 1996, 210)

Once again, then, the reigning importance of observation over theoretical reflection (for Dickens) is highlighted by the adoption of a *persona*, that is more than a distinguishable voice in the text and emerges out of the author’s emotional rather than intellectual involvement with his story.

The narrative traces a gradual change from an omniscient narrative position to affected “witness,” and from distant observer back to authorial superiority. The parody in the chapter following the discovery of Krook’s demise features a number of understatements and litotes. We also register a disproportionate personal affect-edness and condescending formality that signify the ineptitude of the debate:

> Out of the court, and a long way out of it, there is considerable excitement too; for men of science and philosophy come to look, and carriages set down doctors at the corner who arrive with the same intent, and there is more learned talk about inflammable gases and phosphurretted hydrogen than the court has ever imagined. Some of these authorities (of course the wisest) hold with indignation that the deceased had no business to die in the alleged manner [...]. (BH 523)
The analysis of Dickens’s editorial practice in the light of Lewes’s attacks allows us to assume that the novelist was pushed to take the position of a scientist, which he was not. Dickens’s insistence on the real possibility of such phenomena happening to humans can finally be seen as resulting from the attitude of fearful astonishment depicted in the novel. Here, Dickens appears to be trapped by his own realism.

Registering the inappropriateness of playing off science against fiction, it is obvious that SHC is treated in the novel as an excessive event that nobody can explain, only state its (alleged) truth. Dickens’s own comments in his preface and what we know from his letters must be acknowledged as a writer’s vain attempt to justify what does not need justifying in the first place. In pointing out the matter in his preface, Dickens appropriately coins a Catch-22 phrase: “I shall not abandon the facts until there shall have been a considerable Spontaneous Combustion of the testimony on which human occurrences are usually received.” In other words: he would abandon his belief in the truth of the matter only if it was to become a proven fact.

Works Cited

Blount, Trevor (1970). “Dickens and Mr Krook’s Spontaneous Combustion.” Dickens Studies Annual 1, 183-211.


Denman, Peter (1986). “Krook’s Death and Dickens’s Authorities.” The Dickensian 82, 131-41.


