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This semester, I will look at the two-narrator structure of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* through the lens of the then current debate about the mechanism by which disease spreads. The nineteenth century was marked by a vigorous controversy between contagionists and proponents of miasma. Contagionists, or germ theorists, believed disease was spread through contact with a sick body—a position strengthened by rise of bacteriology in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By contrast, miasmists held that disease was contracted in a sick place, from contact with the miasma in the air. Debates between these two factions were not only well-publicized, they also had real world implications for public health policy.

In miasmatic thinking, illness stems from a sick place, whereas in germ theory, illness is spread by sick people independent of their location. These beliefs give rise to strikingly different implications for how to think about spaces and bodies. The third-person narrator, for example, treats spaces and bodies from a miasmatic perspective, whereas Esther's discussion of disease is focused on transmission between bodies. This month I will focus on the miasmatic style of thought employed by the third-person narrator and next month I will address Esther's opposing viewpoint.

Miasma was thought to remain stagnant in the air of particular locations, and therefore, in miasmatic thinking there are contained, delineated spaces of pathology. The third-person narrator's description of Tom-all-Alone's reveals just such a spatialized understanding of disease. The narrator tells us,

Jo lives—that is to say, Jo has not yet died—in a ruinous place, known to the like of him by the name of Tom-all-Alone's. It is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people; where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants, who, after establishing their own possession, took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years. (197)

In Tom-all-Alone's, the sick body and the sick place are continuous, even equivalent. Indeed, the "ruined human wretch" has been "bred" by the "ruined shelters," a parentless creation (unlike

Frankenstein's monster!) defined solely by his contamination as a "foul existence." Furthermore, illness ("fever") is at once separate from any specific inhabitant and yet still localized to the specific place. By "sowing" or planting illness in this location, it becomes contained to that location. Within Tom-all-Alone's' geographic boundaries, bodies simply "[have] not yet died." While death may be inevitable for the slum's inhabitants, it is equally unlikely to afflict outsiders because Tom-all-Alone's is "avoided by all decent people." By avoiding the slum, they avoid the contagion of the slum. This then is the corollary of a spatialized understanding of disease: a spatialized understanding of health. Those who are not in sick places necessarily are in healthy places.

We see this separation of sick and healthy places in the narrator's description of the graveyard where Nemo is buried. Nemo's body is taken to

a hemmed-in churchyard, pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed; while our dear brothers and sisters who hang about official backstairs—would to Heaven they *had* departed!—are very complacent and agreeable...With houses looking on, on every side, save where a reeking little tunnel of a court gives access to the iron gate—with every villainy of life in action close on death, and every poisonous element of death in action close on life—here, they lower our dear brother down a foot or two: here, sow him in corruption, to be raised in corruption: an avenging ghost at many a sick-bedside. (137)

The decomposing body of Nemo, planted in the already miasmatically corrupt land, in turn gives rise to more "corruption," more of the rotted organic matter believed to cause miasma. The diseases of the churchyard will spread to the inhabitants of the "houses looking on," but the narrator's fantasy of the death of "decent people" (those "who hang about official backstairs" and who are ultimately responsible for the overrun and insalubrious slums) is empty, for precisely because these people avoid the place of pathology, they remain "very complacent and agreeable." In other words, by staying out of these confined, delineated sick places, "decent people" remain well.

But the health of "decent people" depends on not entering the place of contagion. When Mr. Snagsby ventures into Tom-all-Alone's, the narrator says, "Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water—though the roads are dry elsewhere—and reeking with such smells and sights...that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind" (277).

In a spatialized framework, once a body crosses into a place of pathology, sickness can take effect; but if the body stays out of the sick place, the body cannot become ill. A spatialized understanding of contagion thus produces intense physical boundaries between health and illness, leaving those outside of the infectious space "very complacent and agreeable."

Many of the places described by the third-person narrator using this spatialized framework are also visited and described by Esther as well. It is in these moments of narrative overlap when both narrators address the same place that we most clearly see how differently they think. Next time,

we will examine Esther's understanding of disease transmission and its emphasis on sick, but traveling, bodies.

Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. Penguin, 2007.