Afterword
Dickens and the Landscapes of the New World

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In late 1841 Dickens was, he wrote to Forster, being "haunted by visions of America night and day" (*Letters* 2: 380). He was looking forward with the keenest anticipation to his first visit to the New World and was doing so for many reasons. Not the least of these were the great expectations that he had of experiencing the celebrated sublimity of so much American landscape. This would, he believed, surpass even that of the Scottish Highlands and the wild and gloomy valley of Glencoe which had so thrilled him earlier in the year. His imagination was fed in this respect by the origin of the many moving letters he had received from American readers about Little Nell and her poignant history during the serial publication of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. These letters had come to him from cabin-dwellers in the "vast solitudes" and "remote wilds" of America, from settlers living in the "green forests on the banks of the Mississippi" (*Letters* 2: 218), or, as he recalled in his first public speech in America, from others dwelling in the "densest forests and deepest solitudes of the Far West" (*Speeches* 20).

Dickens's imagination would have been further stimulated, and his expectations heightened, by what he would have found in many of those books about America that a visitor to his home in Devonshire Terrace in 1841 saw "piled high" in his study (*Interviews* 1: 45). Among them were, for example, the two volumes of W. H. Bartlett's *American Scenery* (1841) which feature many spectacular views with

accompanying text provided by a leading American journalist Nathaniel Parker Willis. There was to be found in the New World, Willis wrote in his preface, "a lavish and large-featured sublimity […] quite dissimilar to the picturesque of all other countries". Another volume that we know Dickens possessed was W. Gallagher's *Selections from the Poetical Literature of the West* (1841) which featured a number of poems celebrating the grandeur of New World scenery, as, for example, Lewis Ring's "The Kanawha":

> All is fresh, sublime and wild
> As when first by Nature piled
> Ere the while man wandered here
> Or the red man chased the deer.
> […]
> Nature in her wildest mood
> Mid her grandest solitude
> With her mountains thronged around
> Listening to the torrent's sound.

Such pictures and poems as these must have worked strongly on Dickens's imagination as he prepared for his first-ever American tour and it was perhaps inevitable that he should experience some disillusion when he was in due course confronted with the reality.

"My notion," he wrote to a correspondent in 1841, "is that in going to the New World one must for the time being utterly forget and put out of sight the Old one" (*Letters* 2: 402). It was something, he might have added, that Mrs. Trollope, among others, had very much failed to do in her notorious *Domestic Life and Manners of the Americans* (1832). When praising the beautiful scenery to be seen on the banks of the Ohio River in her fourth chapter, for example, she adds a comment: "were there occasionally a ruined abbey, or feudal castle, to mix the romance of real life with that of nature, the Ohio would be perfect." In the event, however, Dickens himself did not wholly avoid this sort of thing. In *American Notes*, Chapter 5, for example, he praises the townscape of Worcester, New England, as "very neat and attractive" but adds that it "would have been the better for an old church," such as would have featured in any English village.

Once actually in the country Dickens was more often disconcerted and wearied by the sheer scale of American scenery rather than exhilarated or awestruck by it. Its tendency was, he found, to produce the effect of sheer monotony rather than that of

sublimity. Travelling by rail from Boston to Lowell, for example, he finds that "the character of the scenery is always the same" (*AN* ch. 4). Later, writing to Daniel Maclise from Baltimore, he says: "As to Scenery, we really have seen very little as yet. It is the same thing over and over again […] all one eternal forest, with fallen trees mouldering away in stagnant water" (*Letters* 2: 154). Even the scenery on the banks of the Ohio River that had enchanted Mrs. Trollope fails to please him. He wearies of looking at "the same, eternal foreground" (*AN* ch. 11). When Dickens returned home it was the familiar small scale and domestic nature of the English landscape that so charmed him as he and Catherine travelled by train from Liverpool to London: "the beauty of the fields (so small they looked!), the hedge-rows and the trees; the pretty cottages, the beds of flowers, the old churchyards […] the exquisite delights of that one journey" (*AN* ch. 16). Closer acquaintance with those stupendous forests of America of which he had dreamed had shown him that one of their most prominent features were stunted and decaying trees. Between Boston and Lowell he saw "mile after mile of stunted trees: some hewn down by the axe, some blown down by the wind, some half fallen and resting on their neighbours" (*AN* ch. 4). It was the same with the great forests he saw subsequently and these degraded trees become something of a leitmotif in *American Notes*. In Chapter 11, seen from the canal boat as it travels from Pittsburgh to Cincinnati, they seem to have become positively malign: "some were drowned so long ago, that their bleached arms start out from the middle of the current, and seem to try to grasp the boat, and drag it under water". They subsequently reappear in *Martin Chuzzlewit* when Martin and Mark find that the plot of land on the banks of the Mississippi which they have been swindled into buying turns out to be "mere forest." Here the trees have grown so thick that "they shouldered one another out of their places, and the weakest […] languished like cripples" while "the best were stunted, from the pressure and the want of room" *(MC* ch. 23).

Dickens had originally intended to travel as far south as Charleston, South Carolina, but was so disturbed by coming face to face with the reality of the institution of slavery that he changed his plans. Slavery seemed to him to affect the very landscape of the region in which it was institutionalised: "all through the South there is a dull gloomy cloud on which the very word [i.e., "slavery"] seems written" and the country between Washington and Charleston was, he told Forster, "nothing but a

dismal swamp" (*Letters* 2: 126). The furthest south he went was Richmond, Virginia, and he was pleased to observe that the landscape as he approached that city was "little better than a sandy desert overgrown with trees," the grim result of "employing a great amount of slave labour in forcing crops". Consequently Dickens had, he wrote, "greater pleasure in contemplating the withered ground, than the richest and most thriving cultivation in the same place could possibly have afforded me" (*AN* ch. 9). Such landscape certainly did not fulfil his expectations of the sublime, however, and, instead of travelling further south, he decided to seek this experience in another direction, the remoter regions of the Far West. He and Catherine therefore returned to Washington and from there via Baltimore to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. From Harrisburg they travelled west by boat and rail through the Allegheny Mountains to Pittsburgh and from there by canal boat, first on the Ohio and then on the Mississippi, to St Louis, Missouri. The Alleghenies, which Dickens calls "the most gigantic part of this continent" (*Letters* 2: 126), did at last give him some glimpse of that sublimity in nature that he was seeking, even if it did not live up to the Scottish Highlands:

> The scenery, before you reach the mountains, and when you are on them, and after you have left them, is very grand and fine: and the canal winds its way through some deep, sullen gorges, which, seen by moonlight, are very impressive: though immeasurably inferior to Glencoe, to whose terrors I have not seen the smallest *approach.* (*Letters* 2: 171).

But the Far West, after Dickens and Catherine eventually reached St Louis, proved to be a disappointment as regards the sublime, exciting though it was to be "upon the confines of the Indian territory, some two thousand miles or more west of New York" (*Letters* 2: 142). By now Dickens was regularly doing what he had said travellers to the New World should *not* do and was making constant comparisons with the Old World: the "widely-famed" American Far West, he wrote, was "not to be compared with even the tamest portion of Scotland or Wales" (*Letters* 3: 200). What did impress him hugely, but in an entirely negative way, was the mighty Mississippi, "great father of rivers, who (praise be to Heaven) has no young children like him!" (*AN* ch. 12). The paragraph describing the river that follows this in *American Notes* evokes a kind of grotesque or horrific anti-sublime: "an enormous ditch, sometimes two or three miles wide, running liquid mud" with "huge logs and whole forest trees […] now rolling past like monstrous bodies, their tangled roots showing like matted hair […] now writhing round and round in the vortex of some small whirlpool, like wounded snakes" (ch. 12). The whole idea that this mighty river might have an aspect of true sublimity is

ridiculed in *Martin Chuzzlewit* through the grotesquely inflated language of Martin's uninvited correspondent, young Putnam Smif who boasts that he "was raised in those interminable solitudes where our mighty Mississippi (or Father of Waters) rolls his turbid flood […] there is poetry in wildness and every alligator basking in the slime is in himself an Epic" (*MC* ch. 22).

From St Louis Dickens, still in search of the sublime in landscape, made an expedition with a number of companions to the celebrated Looking-Glass Prairie but here again he met disappointment. It was, he wrote to Forster, worth seeing so that one could say afterwards that one had seen it rather "than for any sublimity it possesses in itself." Conceding its vastness which he compared to "a sea without water," he nevertheless found that his actual experience of it fell far short of what he had imagined it would be, as he reported to Forster:

> I felt no such emotions as I do in crossing Salisbury plain. The excessive flatness of the scene makes it dreary, but tame. Grandeur is certainly not its characteristic. […] It was fine. It was worth the ride. But to say (as the fashion is, here) that the sight is a landmark in one's existence, and awakens a new set of sensations, is sheer gammon. I would say to every man who can't see a prairie – go to Salisbury plain, Marlborough downs, or any of the broad, high, open lands near the sea. Many of them are fully as impressive; and Salisbury plain is *decidedly* more so. (*Letters* 2: 201).

In the event, however, Dickens was not to leave North America without that experience of the sublime that he had been so eagerly anticipating. The mighty splendour of Niagara Falls more than fulfilled his highest expectations during "the ten memorable days" that he and Catherine spent at the Falls (on the Canadian side, as he was quick to point out) and in a letter to his brother-in-law Henry Austin (*Letters* 3: 229) and in Chapter 14 of *American Notes* (in which he drew on his letter to Austin) he sought to express something of the experience he had had. Here he is writing to Austin:

> When the Sun is on them [the Falls] they shine and glow like molten gold. When the day is gloomy the water falls like snow – or sometimes it seems to crumble away like the face of a great chalk Cliff – or sometimes again, to roll along the front of a rock like white smoke. But at all seasons […] from the bottom of both falls, there is always rising up a solemn ghostly cloud, which hides the boiling cauldron from human sight, and makes it, in its mystery, a hundred times more grand than if you could see all the secrets that lie hidden in its tremendous depth.

In the same letter he notes with amusement the very different response of Catherine's English maid Anne who accompanied them on their tour: "She objects to Niagara that 'it's nothing but water' and considers that 'there is too much of that'!!!"

Unsurprisingly, the American press reacted with furious hostility to Dickens's report on his American journey in *American Notes*, published shortly after his return. A characteristic response was that of the *New Englander* for January 1843 which commented that the book "has served chiefly to lower our estimate of the man, and to fill us with contempt for such a compound of egotism, coxcombry, and cockneyism". It was the beginning of what Chesterton called, in Chapter 6 of his *Charles Dickens*, Dickens's "great quarrel with America" and Fred Schwarzbach and Leonee Ormond in their Everyman Paperback edition of *American Notes* makes a very interesting comment on Dickens's generally negative response to American scenery and landscape:

> Perhaps […] by now Dickens had begun to mull over the disquieting possibility of some connection between the American national character and the topography of the new nation, a matter he would explore in depth in his next novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*. (8)

The place where this connection is most explicitly made in *Martin Chuzzlewit* occurs in Chapter 34 of the novel where Congressman the Honourable Elijah Pogram extols the character of the violent frontiersman Hannibal Chollop. Pogram declares of Chollop:

> He is a true-born child of this free hemisphere! Verdant as the mountains of our country; bright and flowing as our mineral Licks; unspiled by withering conventionalities as air our broad and boundless Perearers! Rough he may be. So air our Barrs. Wild he may be. So air our Buffalers. But he is a child of Natur', and a child of Freedom; and his boastful answer to the Despot and the Tyrant is, that his bright home is in the Settin Sun.

Dickens's final general comment on the landscapes of the New World thus takes the form of Pogram's grotesque eulogy of Chollop. He visited America again in 1867 – 68 but this was very much a business trip. He performed his celebrated Readings in various cities, and his programme left no time for any revisiting of scenery – with the big exception of Niagara Falls which once again more than fulfilled his expectations of experiencing the sublime. This time he found a particular vantage-point above the river with his back towards the sun and described his experience to Forster:

> The majestic valley below the Falls, so seen through the vast cloud of spray, was made of rainbow. […] nothing in Turner's finest water-colour

> drawings, done in his greatest day, is so ethereal, so imaginative, so gorgeous in colour, as what I then beheld. I seemed to be lifted from the earth and to be looking into Heaven. What I once said to you, as I witnessed this scene five and twenty years ago, all came back at this most affecting and sublime sight. (*Letters* 12: 75)

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