Foreword

Dickens, Landscape and Memory

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We start by quoting from the opening lines of one of Dickens's early sketches, "A Little Talk about Spring, and the Sweeps," first published in May 1836 in Chapman and Hall's monthly periodical *The Library of Fiction*, and later collected in *Sketches by Boz* under a new title, "The First of May." It contains the first recorded instance of Dickens's use of the word "landscape":

> THE first of May! There is a merry freshness in the sound, calling to our minds a thousand thoughts of all that is pleasant and beautiful in nature, in her sweetest and most delightful form. What man is there, over whose mind a bright spring morning does not exercise a magic influence? carrying him back to the days of his childish sports, and conjuring up before him the old green field, with its gently-waving trees, where the birds sang as he has never heard them since—where the butterfly fluttered far more gaily than he ever sees him now in all his ramblings—where the sky seemed bluer, and the sun shone more brightly—where the air blew more freshly over greener grass, and sweeter smelling flowers—where every thing wore a richer and more brilliant hue than it is ever dressed in now! Such are the deep feelings of childhood, and such are the impressions which every lovely object stamps upon its heart. The hardy traveller wanders through the maze of thick and pathless woods, where the sun's rays never shone, and heaven's pure air never played: he stands on the brink of the roaring waterfall, and, giddy and bewildered, watches the foaming mass as it leaps from stone to stone, and from crag to crag; he lingers in the fertile plains of a land of perpetual sunshine, and revels in the luxury of their balmy breath. But what are the deep forests, or the

> thundering waters, or the richest landscapes that bounteous nature ever spread, to charm the eyes and captivate the senses of man, compared with the recollection of the old scenes of his early youth—magic scenes indeed; for the fairy thoughts of infancy dressed them in colours brighter than the rainbow, and almost as fleeting: colours which are the reflection only of the sparkling sunbeams of childhood, and can never be called into existence, in the dark and cloudy days of after-life! ("A Little Talk", 113)

Dickens distinguishes here—conventionally enough—between the picturesque and sublime, comparing the "green field," the "gently-waving trees," the singing birds and fluttering butterfly, with the deep forests and thundering waters. A second conventional contrast, between country and city, is implicit in the context of the passage, which introduces one of a series of urban sketches—the more emphatic after this essay was collected among those in *Sketches by Boz*. Not only does the passage contrast the tranquillity of rural beauty with the bustle and turmoil of city life, but in particular it contrasts the celebration of springtime with the horrors of chimney sweeping. Dickens proceeds to evoke the mythical romance of the sweeps, and to describe the translation of pastoral imagery into the city street in the annual May-Day festivities, in which the traditional figure of the "Jack in the Green," clad entirely in leaves, parades through the streets with a "Lord" and a "Lady" while other costumed revellers dance round a May pole.

But the distinctively Dickensian touch here, and one which (we will argue) is characteristic of his evocation of landscape throughout his work, is his association of it with memories of childhood. Pastoral scenery for him is neither merely the picturesque in contrast with the sublime, nor retreat from the city into the countryside, but an idealised escape back into the "magic scenes" and "sparkling sunbeams of childhood." Dickens is explicit that memory is crucial to his valuation of landscape:

> What [he asks] are the deep forests, or the thundering waters, or the richest landscapes that bounteous nature ever spread, to charm the eyes and captivate the senses of man, compared with the recollection of the old scenes of his early youth [?] ("A Little Talk, 113)

This retreat into the past is, however, invariably fraught either with danger or disillusionment. Later in his career memory is generally bittersweet nostalgia tinged with regret. Here it is simply recognition that the present does not retain the ideal image of the past. The sketch ends:

> We passed the same group accidentally, in the evening. We never saw a green so drunk, a lord so quarrelsome (except in the house of peers after dinner), a pair of clowns so melancholy, a lady so muddy, or a party so miserable. (“A Little Talk”, 119)

Dickens spent the happiest days of his childhood in rural Kent. The family home in Chatham was described at the time as “[a] DWELLING HOUSE, with yard and garden, beautifully situated at Ordnance Place, fronting the road to Fort Pitt, commanding beautiful views of the surrounding countryside, and fit for the residence of a gentleman” (*Kentish Chronicle* 1817 quoted in Allen 40).

Dickens told Forster “very often” of walks he took in those days with his father, during which he saw Gad’s Hill Place, the mansion in nearby Higham, his childhood dream which became his home for the last decade of his life (Forster, 1.2.2). Many of his later occasional essays evoke the beauties of rural Kent, recollected from childhood: the “beautiful hawthorn trees, the hedge, the turf and all those buttercups and daisies” across the street from Ordnance Terrace (“Dullborough Town”, 274), the “white-sailed ships” visible on the river (“Travelling Abroad”, 557), the “golden fields” by the dockyard (“Chatham Dockyard”, 13). These idealised images, bathed in nostalgia, record his earliest memories, the more precious because irrecoverably wrenched from him at the age of ten by his removal to London, his father’s subsequent incarceration in debtors’ prison, and his own relegation to the blacking warehouse.

Dickens spent the rest of his life trying to recapture the blissfulness of these memories, again and again offering his characters escape into an idealised countryside, but invariably with less than perfect results. The very first adventure in his first novel sends Mr. Pickwick and his companions back to the scenes of Dickens’s childhood, and the hospitality of Mr. Wardle and the good fellowship of the cricket game evoke the pleasures of pastoral existence, images later reinforced by the skating party and the Christmas festivities at Dingley Dell. But even in this early venture into the countryside (Dickens was then twenty-four) there is a snake in the grass. Jingle sabotages Tupman’s wooing of Miss Rachel, eloping with her and demanding ransom in order to allow her release. The deflation is comic misadventure, with damage only to Mr. Pickwick’s dignity and pocketbook, but it serves to indicate that even in this sunny book, country pleasures are not unalloyed.

Oliver Twist, which Dickens began writing when scarcely halfway through *Pickwick*, was in an entirely different register. Its trenchant satire on the Poor Law regime and lurid depiction of the criminal underworld are wonderfully powerful, but the evocation of picturesque landscape is as unsatisfactory as anything that Dickens ever wrote. Having commenced the story before he had determined how it would end, he sent Oliver off with the Maylies to a cottage "some distance in the country" (ch. 32, 210) while he deliberated what to do with Fagin. With its "foretaste of heaven," here the "glimpse of Nature's face" is utterly conventional and banal. Dickens reveals more than he intends when he notes that the scene is "not of this world." He situates the child Oliver in this landscape, but whereas the hungry boy asking for more evokes Dickens's own anguished memories of deprivation as he stared at the pastries in shop windows and the pineapples in Covent Garden (Forster, 1.2.28), and the rats in Fagin's den recall the degradation of the blacking warehouse, the pastoral scenes in *Oliver Twist* show no engagement with anything Dickens ever observed or felt and are entirely unconvincing. They pay lip service to literary precedent, and that is all.

Dickens characteristically associates the pastoral with childhood, nevertheless. Rarely does it provide the refuge sought. Fagin leaves no footprints when he appears with Monks outside a window while Oliver is half asleep—clear signal, of course, that Fagin is the devil incarnate, but also evidence of the unreality of the setting. Everywhere thereafter in Dickens's writing, the devil leaves footprints. The happily-ever-after ending of his next novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*, sees Nicholas return to the scene of his happiest childhood memories, purchasing his father's country house, but the final paragraph of the novel points to the green grass over the grave of Smike and reminds us of "their poor dead cousin" (ch. 65, 624). Next, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell, constantly referred to as "the child," flees from the terrors of the city and seeks refuge in the countryside, but Quilp pursues her there. Everywhere she turns she is confronted with exploitation and death, and even in the security of Mrs Jarley's caravan visions of "a legion of Quilps" torment her (ch. 27, 216). In *Barnaby Rudge*, the peacefulness which Nell had so ardently sought is moribund. Joe Willett is not allowed by his father to enter into adulthood and has to flee from the Maypole to have any sort of life at all. His flight to the new world of America results in the loss of an arm fighting as a soldier, and in the final scene of the novel, Haredale meets and kills Sir John Chester in the field beside the ruins of the Warren.

The two novels in which Dickens most overtly returns to his own childhood are *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations*, both of which involve considerable engagement with the countryside. As is well known, *Copperfield* followed after Dickens's failed attempt at autobiography, and large chunks of the early scenes draw directly on what he wrote in depicting his own childhood. It is the novel in which Dickens retreats into his past in order to take stock, and the opening chapters, based on his days in rural Kent, lovingly evoke David's idyllic days in a country cottage with his pretty mother and his beloved Peggotty. Their joyful existence takes on added poignancy when it is irretrievably wrenched away by his mother's remarriage, which turns the happy home into a nightmare. The plot turns on David's escapes into the countryside. When Murdstone looms, David is sent to Yarmouth; when life at Murdstone and Grinby becomes intolerable, David runs away to Dover, then is sent to Canterbury; when Dora dies, he retreats into the Alps. In each case, the rural setting provides temporary relief, but always with undercurrents: in Yarmouth there are premonitions of Emily's elopement; in Dover Aunt Betsey has a skeleton in her closet, and Jack Maldon and Uriah Heep sour the tranquillity of Canterbury; the Alps are a scene of mourning. Finally in the book's denouement the Micawbers and Peggottys are sent to the never-never-land of Australia and David lives happily ever after with Agnes. But as our late colleague Robin Gilmour has argued, the novel ends less with the growth into maturity typical of a *Bildungsroman* than with the hero's persistent determination to hold on to childhood memories: at the end of the day the novel is less about David's growing up than about his efforts to recapture his lost pastoral childhood, marrying as his child-bride the re-embodiment of his mother, and taking leave of Steerforth not as the seducer of Emily but as the cherished companion of his youth (ch. 55, 681).

Two years after the completion of *David Copperfield*, Dickens wrote one of his most explicit linkages of childhood experience and pastoral setting, for the 1852 Christmas number of *Household Words*. "The Child's Story" is an allegorical depiction of the ages of man, once more drawn very closely on his own life. The protagonist, called the Traveller, meets one by one the embodiments of himself at various stages of his life. In the opening scene he comes upon "a beautiful child." The sketch continues:

> So, he played with that child, the whole day long, and they were very merry. The sky was so blue, the sun was so bright, the water was so sparking, the leaves were so green, the flowers were so lovely, and they heard such singing-birds and saw so many butterflies, that everything was beautiful. This was in fine weather. When it rained, they loved to watch the falling drops, and to smell the fresh scents. When it blew, it was delightful to listen to the wind, and fancy what it said, as it came rushing from its home—where was that, they wondered!—whistling and howling, driving the clouds before it, bending the trees, rumbling in the chimnies, shaking the house, and making the sea roar in fury. But, when it snowed, that was best of all; for, they liked nothing so well as to look up at the white flakes falling fast and thick, like down from the breasts of millions of white birds, and to see how smooth and deep the drift was, and to listen to the hush upon the paths and roads. […]
>
> But one day, of a sudden, the traveller lost the child. He called to him over and over again, but got no answer. ("The Child's Story" 5)

Childhood, in short, is a time interfused with idealised pastoral landscape, beautiful and idyllic, but also fleeting and irrecoverable.

Even when such a setting is not overtly associated with childhood, for Dickens it is invariably a scene of disaster, falsity or disillusion. In *Chuzzlewit* the Salisbury plain is setting for Peckniff's hypocrisy and later for Jonas's murder of Tigg; the settlement of Eden in America is a disease-ridden swamp. In *Dombey*, landscape is associated first with Edith's watercolours, part of Mrs. Skewton's strategy for ensnaring a husband, and then with Carker's flight to a horrific death. In *Bleak House* pastoral is linked with the decayed gentility of Chesney Wold and the duplicity of the bogus child Skimpole. In *Hard Times* the northern countryside has been blighted by industry and proves fatal to Stephen Blackpool. In *Little Dorrit* a rural setting is evoked for Clennam's romantic failure with Pet Meagles and the comic absurdity of Mrs. Plornish's happy cottage; it also serves in the heroine's letters as a sorry backdrop to her family's attempts to escape the blight of prison. In *A Tale of Two Cities* rural France is the setting for exploitation and murder; in England, for grave-robbing. We skip over *Great Expectations* for the moment; in *Our Mutual Friend* Lizzy and Jenny retreat from the city to a rooftop where they can "come up and be dead" (bk. 2, ch. 5, 182); when Lizzy flees from the threats of her lovers to "the ever-widening beauty of the landscape," (bk. 4, ch. 6, 689) the murderous attack there on Eugene is followed swiftly by the fatal confrontation of Riderhood and Headstone. And in Dickens's last, uncompleted novel, sleepy Cloisterham is the scene of lust, violence and murder.

In life, too, Dickens found landscape less than idyllic. When he travelled to America he was soon appalled by its rawness, and even the majesty of Niagara Falls failed to impress him (*Letters*, 3:211). When he took his family to Italy they climbed Mount Vesuvius, where the erupting ash from the volcano burned their clothes and endangered their lives (*Letters*, 4:267–71). When he went on his "Lazy Tour" with Wilkie Collins, his companion promptly stumbled heavily on Carrock Fell and was incapacitated for the rest of the journey (318). In the last decade of his life Dickens returned to his childhood dream at Gad's Hill Place, but there he took leave of his past by burning the accumulated correspondence of a lifetime (*Letter*s, 11:21) and commuted restlessly to a secret life with Ellen Ternan. Eventually, even rural Kent was not sufficiently distant from the streets of London, and he fled repeatedly to provincial France where, rumour has it, he and Ellen had a child which died.

We want to close by looking at two of Dickens's most evocative depictions of landscape in connection with childhood, both written in 1860, after he had moved permanently out of London. Both are set in the region of his own happiest early years. *Great Expectations* opens and frequently returns to the marsh country of Kent, but it is a far from hospitable setting: in the opening episode Pip is terrified when confronted by the escaped convict Magwitch; he undergoes constant torment from his sister, Mrs. Joe, and humiliation from the blustering Pumblechook. Satis House is a scene of grotesque decay, in the town he is taunted by the urchin, Trabb's boy. Late in the story he is nearly murdered by his sister's assassin, Orlick. Frustrated, oppressed, and hoping for a better life when he learns of his great expectations, Pip migrates to London where he tries unsuccessfully to leave all traces of the forge behind him in his effort to become a gentleman. He is haunted by reminders of the violence and criminality of his origins and at the same time oppressed by guilt for abandoning his truest friend and support, Joe Gargery. As the story unfolds he learns to his horror that all his dreams have been based on illusion: his patron is not an eccentric spinster but a transported convict; his beloved Estella is not a fine lady but the daughter of a murderess and a felon. In the book's allegorical dimension, love and wealth are shown to have their origins in crime, deceit, violence and exploitation. Appalled, Pip decides to abandon his dreams by returning to the scene of his childhood, despite all its dissatisfactions. But he finds this retreat closed off to him: his decision to return and marry Biddy is balked by the discovery that Biddy, always true to her origins, has married Joe. In other words, Dickens shows that return to the

past is impossible; sadder but wiser, Pip has learned that he must accept his past and move on with resignation, conditioned by the sophistication he has acquired from his life in the city, to a life based on full understanding and honest endeavour. Landscape associated with childhood, Dickens maintains, can never be recaptured.

Our final example comes from one of Dickens's best-loved *Uncommercial Traveller* sketches, "Dullborough Town."[1] In this story the Traveller returns for the first time to the rural town in which he grew up, only to find change everywhere. The piece has strong autobiographical roots, but the setting differs in detail from Dickens's boyhood home in Chatham, and in real life he had returned many times, not just once after a gap of thirty years. Characteristically, pastoral setting is inextricably associated with the joys of childhood.

> Here, in the haymaking time, had I been delivered from the dungeons of Seringapatam, an immense pile (of haycock), by my countrymen, the victorious British (boy next door and his two cousins), and had been recognised with ecstasy by my affianced one (Miss Green), who had come all the way from England (second house in the terrace) to ransom me and marry me. (275)

The description here focuses on the children, their carefree play and their vivid imaginative lives, but with the realisation that everything is gone: the playing-field has been "swallowed up" by the Station; the trees lost to "an ugly dark monster of a tunnel [which] kept its jaws open"; and Timpson's stagecoach, the Blue-Eyed Maid, replaced by a train "called severely No. 97 […] S.E.R." (274). As the protagonist walks through the town, he comes to recognise that he himself, as much as the town, has changed irrevocably over the years. The phlegmatic greengrocer whom he recognises outside his shop, embodies the unchanging, uncaring past, uncommunicative and divorced from the Traveller, who means nothing to him, while he means everything to the Traveller. But at last he meets his old playmate Joe Specks, now married to Lucy Green: "we spoke of our old selves as though our old selves were dead and gone, and indeed indeed they were – dead and gone as the playing-field that had become a wilderness of rusty iron, and the property of S.E.R." (278).

[1] For the gap between biography and fiction, see Slater's headnote, 38–39. Andrews has thoughtfully explored this sketch in relation to "the relationship between three dualities: the past and the present; childhood and maturity; fancy and reality" (*Dickens and the Grown-Up Child* 41–56; 45). One of the present authors has himself written elsewhere about "Dullborough Town" with focus on the relationship between childhood and entertainment (*Dickens and Popular Entertainment*, 20–27).

Disillusionment is tempered by resignation: “Specks, however, illuminated Dullborough with the rays of interest that I wanted and should otherwise have missed in it, and linked its present to its past, with a highly agreeable chain” (278). The past is irrecoverable, and rural idyll unobtainable by the adult, but the living recollection holds exquisite value.

The prayer which concludes another of Dickens’s writings, *The Haunted Man*, is equally apt in the context of this and every other evocation of pastoral landscape in Dickens: “Lord keep my memory green” (472).

In conclusion, we have tried to show that Dickens routinely associated landscape with memories of childhood, and that he and his characters often sought to escape from life’s vicissitudes in pastoral countryside only to find it a site of danger and disillusionment.

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