

## Journeys *through* Nature:

### Dickens, Anti-Pastoralism and the Country

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**Keywords:** pastoral, anti-pastoral, Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, landscape, rural, elegy, idyll, environment, Victorian, fiction, nature writing

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In appropriately pastoral terms, Malcolm Andrews observes that after *Pickwick Papers*, “the countryside slips away from [Dickens’s] novels and the city crowds into his pages, as surely as industrialisation spreads through mid-nineteenth century England” (xviii). While Dickens’s characters often follow Pickwick in travelling through Britain, the primary focus of Dickens’s world is of course London. It is not merely that Dickens overwhelmingly concentrates his vision on urban scenes, however, but that the driven investigator of the city rarely directs the same intense gaze to rural life. When we encounter Mr Grinder and his stilt-walking children in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–1), he informs us that travelling on stilts is “wery pleasant for the prospects” (ch. 17, 132), but Dickens is largely disinclined to expend effort in describing such rural prospects, often doing so in decidedly lacklustre fashion.

Paying close attention to Dickens’s responses to the rural is nonetheless highly instructive. In travelling *through* the countryside Dickens and his characters rarely glance out of the windows of their carriages or trains. Carrying the city with them wherever they go, they often find the countryside worthy only of cursory glance, passing remark, or formulaic response. Because the purpose of travel is always to get from one urban location to another, Dickens’s countryside functions, in economic and narrative terms, as a conduit connecting the main centres of action, but is also

revealed as an integral part of the modern Victorian world that Dickens seeks to critique. A fascinating feature of Dickens's essentially urban gaze is how it affects those rarer moments of rural vision, simultaneously blanking out the country while re-presenting it, economically and socially, as an extension of the city.

*The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens's most persistent engagement with the countryside, is especially revealing when one pays attention to the ambivalence of his responses to the pastoral tradition. I would like to develop Lynn Pykett's brief observation that in *The Old Curiosity Shop* "both Nell and the narrative make a move from the urban nightmare towards pastoral, and both moves are problematical and compromised" (62), and to endorse Steven Marcus's suggestion that the novel is "a frustrated or failed idyll" (135). Developing the work of Pykett and Marcus will involve situating Dickens's anti-pastoral position within his broader analysis of national economics and social relations. I will do so by contending that while the novel seeks a pastoral idyll (a site of peaceful retreat and natural plenty, in which humans engage harmoniously with their environment, providing an effective alternative to debased urban existence) this quest's failure leads the novel into the territory of pastoral elegy (in which the lost idyll is recalled with regret) and anti-pastoralism (in which scepticism about the possibility of idylls dominates).<sup>1</sup>

## 1. A Thoroughly Cockney Gaze: Dickens and the Picturesque Tradition

Dickens's engagements with the environment were constructed by a mind largely immersed in and shaped by the task of reflecting urban experience. This is partly a result of the intense pace at which Dickens's life was lived, and of the enormous energy propelling him through it. As a young reporter and correspondent, Dickens often needed to relay parliamentary stories from the provinces back to the capital in competition with rival journalists, and his letters record many lengthy, exhausting journeys as well as disparaging reports of feeling trapped in dull provincial towns.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Auden (1962), Marcus (1971), and Andrews (1979) provide readings of pastoral in Dickens, but direct engagements with this subject are relatively rare thereafter. Because of its gender focus, Johnson's *Dickens and Pastoral* is less useful in the present context than its title suggests. The study offers valuable readings of Dickens's engagement with environment, but his thesis primarily concerns "the way in which Dickens tends to transfer some of the attributes of romantic Nature to his female protagonists" (4). Johnson posits as an emerging phenomenon in Dickens's post-*David Copperfield* career the simultaneous presence of "two perhaps not fully contradictory but imperfectly imbricated myths" of pastoral and femininity (4, 28). Rae Greiner's interesting account of pastoral in *Bleak House* offers an inventive reading that in bypassing some key features of the pastoral focuses instead, in Empsonian fashion, on its relation to simplicity, stupidity and limited lives.

<sup>2</sup> Early entries in House and Storey's Pilgrim edition of Dickens's letters describe the difficulties of an 1835 parliamentary reporting trip to Chelmsford, which Dickens describes as "the dullest and most stupid spot on the face of the earth" (1.53). The letters record variously trying journeys during 1835–6 to Wincanton, Kettering,

In his narratives, as in life, the guiding motivation is often a need to pass through the countryside at speed, and to convey characters and the narrative to the urban centre of action.<sup>3</sup> The countryside principally functions as a space through which characters pass in order to reach somewhere more important. In *The Pickwick Papers*, the countryside is, with rare exceptions, including the pastoral idyll of Dingley Dell, a rather blank series of passages connecting the novel's predominately urban adventures.<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Nickleby and David Copperfield briefly escape the travails of the city, but country travels have little impact upon them, and solutions to their plights can be found only by reaching other urban spaces.

Country journeys in Dickens bring to mind the opening of George Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866), in which the narrator suggests that modern railway travel is akin to being "shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure, from Winchester to Newcastle". The "tube-journey", we are told, "can never lend much to picture and narrative", while "the happy outside passenger, seated on the box [of a carriage] from the dawn to the gloaming, gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labours in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern Odyssey" (75–6). For Eliot, observers glean more of country life by slow travelling, but whichever form of transport conveys Dickens's characters to their destinations, they are rarely inclined to closely engage with English rural existence as Eliot's novels do. Only on foot, perhaps, are Dickens's characters forced to peer more attentively at rural landscapes, communities, and travellers.

Even including *The Pickwick Papers* (1837–8), *The Old Curiosity Shop* is the first of Dickens's works to spend extended time in the countryside, a fact not lost on some early readers. In June 1841, Ruskin complained to W. H. Harrison of his disappointment with the novel, going against the prevailing mania for the novel by

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Northampton, and Ipswich (1.57–9, 108–10, 151). In an 1865 speech, Dickens underlined the sense of urgency and rapid motion behind his travels: "I have pursued the calling of a reporter under circumstances of which many of my brethren at home in England here, many of my modern successors, can form no adequate conception. I have often transcribed for the printer from my shorthand notes, important public speeches in which the strictest accuracy was required, and a mistake in which would have been to a young man severely compromising, writing on the palm of my hand, by the light of a dark lantern, in a post chaise and four, galloping through a wild country, all through the dead of night, at the then surprising rate of fifteen miles an hour [...] I have been, in my time, belated on miry by-roads, towards the small hours, in a wheelless carriage, with exhausted horses and drunken postboys, and have got back in time for publication" (Fielding 346–7).

<sup>3</sup> See Jonathan Grossman's account of Dickens's engagements with Victorian transport and the resulting proliferation of networks in his writing.

<sup>4</sup> See W. H. Auden's reading of Dingley Dell, Edens, and Utopianism (408–17). Malcolm Andrews positions *Pickwick Papers* as the last manifestation of Dickensian Arcadianism, seeing the rest of his career as "poised between his fondness for the fading, softly-focussed Pickwickian idyll and his recognition of the hard-edged, brutal contemporary world" (xviii).

asking “can it be possible that this man is so soon run dry as the strained caricature and laborious imitation of his former self in the last chapters [...] seem almost to prove?” Conceding that “it is still what no one else could do”, he complained of “a want of his former clear truth [and] a sense of failing power” (Cook and Wedderburn, 36. 25–26). He especially objected to Dickens’s extending of his purview to the countryside:

It is evident the man is a thorough cockney, from his way of talking about hedgerows, and honeysuckles, and village spires; and in London, and to his present fields of knowledge, he ought strictly to keep for some time. There are subjects enough in the *Sketches [By Boz]* which might be worked up into something of real excellence. And when he has exhausted that particular field of London life with which he is familiar, he ought to keep quiet for a long time, and raise his mind as far as in him lies, to a far higher standard, giving up that turn for the *picturesque* which leads him into perpetual mannerism (Cook and Wedderburn, 36. 26).

Behind the twenty-two year old’s outrageous condescension is an acute point about the “perpetual mannerism” of the Dickensian picturesque, but Ruskin does not recognise that Dickens shared many of his own suspicions about the tradition. Ruskin’s *Modern Painters* (5 vols., 1843-60) represents an outright rejection of that picturesque orthodoxy rooted in veneration of the composed and idealised landscapes of the Old Masters, and a call for artists to instead follow J. M. W. Turner in attempting to paint faithfully from nature. If the picturesque is at its most basic a predilection for and delight in landscapes that are picture-like, Ruskin effectively seeks to challenge, problematize, and moderate its claim for the absolute primacy of culture (the picture) over nature (that which must conform and submit to the superior pictorial model) by insisting that to be a worthwhile cultural object, the picture must instead take nature as its source.<sup>5</sup>

But for both Ruskin and Dickens there was another abiding reason for suspicion of the picturesque that lay not in its desire to ‘tidy up’ and compose existing landscapes, but in its occlusion or idealisation of the social life of the countryside. As Alexander

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<sup>5</sup> That this claim effectively endorses attempts to physically transform actual landscapes to conform to the pictorial model makes landscape gardening the primary physical exponent of the picturesque urge, manifesting an Enlightenment desire for mastery over nature, a desire by no means new in European history but one that was given powerful impetus by the massively-expanding economic and technological resources available from the eighteenth century onwards. That the picturesque tradition is rendered volatile and unstable by conjoining to its deeply anthropocentric roots in the Enlightenment and Judaeo-Christian tradition some strong and often contrary Romantic impulses is beyond the scope of this paper, as is the task of describing more adequately than I have done here Ruskin’s insistence that modern engagements with the external world should be simultaneously natural, cultural, moral, and religious, valorising nature but recognising the divinely-ordained position of humanity within the environment.

M. Ross points out, Dickens, like many of his literary peers, “found the conventions of the picturesque exceedingly useful for descriptions particularly of place, character, and architecture,” but also felt “deep suspicions about an aesthetic which seemed so indifferent and incongruous whenever its vision included poor and suffering people” (xiv). While Ruskin’s early British and European travels were shaped by the Romantic visions of Turner and Wordsworth, he also took from their work a call for aesthetic experience to be conjoined to social conscience (Hanley 203–7). His earliest experiences of Switzerland had been ecstatic, but weariness crept into later travel diaries, recording failures of expected responses to the sublime and the beautiful. Writing from the continent in 1845 he protested that he “thought the top of St Gothard very dull and stupid” and wanted instead “to study goitres and drainage” because of his recognition of poverty, disease, and flooding disasters in many parts of his beloved Switzerland (Hayman 182). Further south that same year, in Naples, Dickens expressed a similar sentiment, telling John Forster that because “the condition of the common people here is abject and shocking”, prevailing modes of scenic engagement were unsupportable: “I am afraid the conventional idea of the picturesque is so associated with such misery and degradation that a new picturesque will have to be established as the world goes onwards” (quoted in Dexter 658). In tune with Ruskin, who in “The Turnerian Picturesque” (*Modern Painters IV*, 1860) defined a new ‘noble picturesque’ as art concerned with the expression of rural ‘suffering, of poverty, or decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart’ (Cook and Wedderburn, 6. 15), Dickens abjured picturesque celebrations of dilapidated dwellings that expressed little or no interest in their inhabitants. Dickens’s ambivalence towards the picturesque was matched, as we shall see later, by a complex and divided response to the pastoral, that larger and older tradition to which the picturesque belongs as a historically-specific and aesthetically distinctive iteration.

It is unsurprising, then, to find that in those rare instances where Dickens describes hedgerows and honeysuckles, his usage of picturesque conventions lacks vigour, invention, or more than momentary attention. A description of the protagonist’s view over the Medway Estuary in *The Pickwick Papers* is typical:

On either side, the banks of the Medway, covered with cornfields and pastures, with here and there a windmill, or a distant church, stretched away as far as the eye can see, presenting a rich and varied landscape, rendered more beautiful by the changing shadows which passed swiftly

across it, as the thin and half-formed clouds skimmed away in the light of the morning sun. The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on; and the oars of the fishermen dipped into the water with a clear and liquid sound, as the heavy but picturesque boats glided slowly down the stream (ch.5, 58)

Little wonder that Ruskin was unimpressed by Dickens's conventional picturesque mode.<sup>6</sup> Dickens's unenthusiastic use of the picturesque, refracted through his scepticism, makes the formulaic description merely function as a perfunctory pause before the narrative again gathers pace. As Catherine Robson points out, "when Dickens does, on occasion, construct a rural scene by way of contrast to his frenetic metropolis, we are less likely to gain a rich feeling of fully-realized human relations than a simple sense that the narrative has stalled" (236). There is often a sense that when rural scenes are functionally necessary, they are best passed over as quickly as possible. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9), the long trek that Nicholas and Smike make from Dotheboys Hall to London is relayed in a single paragraph, while their journey from London to Portsmouth is accompanied by a few bland descriptions of scenery (95, 165–6). The same is true of many Dickensian journeys, and even the Alpine scenes in *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) are underwhelming. After analysing various landscape descriptions in Dickens's early novels, Marcus describes them as being "of such a degree of badness as to require an explanation for their being discussed seriously and at length" (139). What then are we to make of the fact that the writer who so vividly and inventively conjures the city struggles to find a source of descriptive energy beyond it?

Dickens did not lack interest in the countryside, travelled to a number of the principal sites of landscape pilgrimage in Britain and Europe, and engaged with Romantic, and particularly Wordsworthian, responses to environment. Andrews emphasises this legacy, and in particular its impact on Dickens's presentation of childhood, but concludes that "he is neither a worshipper of Nature as a moral guardian, nor particularly responsive to the more spectacular landscape of his native country" (28). For Andrews, "his favourite kind of tour is one in which he has the most congenial companionship, rather than the most spectacular landscapes" and that "he

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<sup>6</sup> As Nancy K. Hill demonstrates, Dickens did pursue other picturesque modes and, in particular, used the counterpoint of the grotesque as a means to undermine the traditional conventions of pastoral and, by extension, as part of his broader commitment to social reform. Jane R. Cohen demonstrates the attention Dickens paid to the production of picturesque images to accompany his serialised novels, particularly in his collaborations with George Cattermole. See pp. 128–31 on this in relation to *The Old Curiosity Shop*.

always has less appetite for natural scenery than for human incident” (32, 28). Magnet notes that “Dickens writes often enough of nature’s beauty and sublimity”, but argues that “such scenes as delight him are of humanised and cultivated nature, in which ploughed fields and antique church spires testify that man’s harmony with the natural world is arduously earned”, and that “unmodified Nature, by contrast, like the alpine landscape in *Little Dorrit*, almost always makes Dickens the city-dweller uneasy” (29). Dickens’s city gaze proves paradoxical in that it makes him somewhat blind to the wonders of nature, but clear-sighted about the encroachments of the city. His unconvincing forays into the picturesque and the pastoral articulate anxieties that the country has become an extension of the ever-extending world of urban experience.

## 2. Impossible Idylls: Dickens and Pastoral

Writing towards the start of a decade characterised by hunger, political dissent, and continued acceleration of scarcely-regulated urban growth, Dickens (like many of his readers) felt a strong desire to believe in idylls. *The Old Curiosity Shop* is of interest in relation to Terry Gifford’s definition of the pastoral as a literary tradition centring on a desire to escape urban woes by finding renewal in simple country life; and as nature literature that contrasts the city and the country (2). As Greg Garrard argues, “Classical pastoral precedes the perception of a general crisis in human ecology by thousands of years, but it provides the pre-existing set of literary conventions and cultural assumptions that have been crucially transformed to provide a way for Europeans and Euro-Americans to construct their landscapes” (38). This complex literary tradition, open to endless interpretation, and with roots in Hesiod, Theocritus, and Virgil, centres around a core belief in the possibility of a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature, and in the existence of an Arcadian idyll in which the bounty of nature is effortlessly available to humankind, and in which even the mark of a plough or axe are represented as assaults on divine nature.

While drawn to the idyllic tradition, *The Old Curiosity Shop* frustrates this urge.<sup>7</sup> It does so because Dickens recognises that while the countryside looks different to the city, it is increasingly an extension of the economic nexus that has so transformed the

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<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately it is beyond the scope of this article to explore the context of the Hungry Forties, a decade, as Gail Turley Houston points out, in which a dislocation of food supplies resulted from the Poor Laws, Game Acts, Corn Laws, and continued Enclosures Acts (8).

metropolitan world. Dickens's disenchantment with pastoral, like his ambivalence to that sub-category of pastoral, the picturesque, is rooted in economic and social awareness. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens ultimately recoils from the construction of pastoral idyll because his urban eye—which makes him a poor cousin amongst the great nineteenth-century prose stylists of nature—means he brings particular insights and preoccupations to his rural gaze. In the failure of the pastoral quest undertaken by Nell and her grandfather, a quest also for the supposed values of a disappearing past, the countryside is represented as marked by quintessentially urban ills. Because poverty, violence, intrigue, death, and economic competition are powerfully at play, the idyll is absent from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a novel that instead suggests that idyllic retreat from the urban is unavailable.

In whatever form it assumes, pastoral must be seen as a product of civilisation, culture, and modernity, where modernity is defined not in terms of debates over the emergence of a specifically-defined historical era, but as the experience of virtually every generation of feeling at the leading edge of social, political, cultural, and technological change. As Garrard points out, “the emergence of the bucolic idyll correlates closely with large-scale urbanisation in the Hellenic period” (39). From its earliest roots to the present day, pastoralists position themselves and their societies as bearing an unprecedented burden of change, and seek solace or escape from this predicament in constructions of alternative rural values. Ironically pastoral, the great myth of nature, is only possible because of urban modernity.

Because pastoral is a persistent but evolving form, part of a self-reflexive tradition but always associated with the particular conditions of modernity of each generation, it is possible to be somewhat specific about the pastorals produced in different periods. As Peter Marinelli suggests, pastoral's flexibility and endurance is grounded in “a capacity to move out of its old haunts in the Arcadian pastures and to inhabit the ordinary country landscapes of the modern world, daily contracted by the encroachment of civilisation” (3). Perhaps counter-intuitively, the nineteenth century is particularly fertile ground for the creation of a range of pastorals because of the pace of urbanisation, industrialisation, and social and intellectual change:

There had gradually emerged attitudes to the natural world which were essentially incompatible with the direction in which English society was moving. The growth in towns had led to a new longing for the countryside. The progress of cultivation had fostered a taste for weeds, mountains and unsubdued nature. The new-found security from wild animals had

generated an increasing concern to protect birds and preserve wild creatures in their natural state. Economic independence of animal power and urban isolation from animal farming had nourished emotional attitudes which were hard, if not impossible, to reconcile with the exploitation of animals by which most people lived (Thomas 301).

The Victorian period witnessed increased desire to locate, preserve, or construct idylls, but widespread transformation or destruction of landscapes meant that pastoral elegy, a mode of looking back with regret and longing to times or places that are constructed as lost idylls, became the dominant form of Victorian pastoral. This enduring cultural impulse to elegise generates two further elaborations: a belief that the idyll is recoverable leads to pastoral Utopianism, while a belief that disharmony is increasing generates apocalyptic tropes. During the Victorian period this sense of pastoral loss was also manifested in related forms, notably neo-Mediævalism (which lies beyond our present purposes) and anti-pastoralism. Seeking to rebut the idealising tendencies of all other pastoral forms, anti-pastoralism claims that environmental harmony has always been impossible, often accompanied by arguments that pastoral is a deluded or dishonest tendency to obscure the conditions of agricultural production, and that generating “a vision of rural life so removed from the processes of labour and natural growth [constitutes] a persistent mystification of human ecology” (Garrard 42). Countering idylls and elegies, the various forms of anti-pastoral either attempt to focus on the sufferings of agriculturalists, or to deny the possibility of harmonious co-existence between humans and nature. Anti-pastoralism, so strongly shaped by George Crabbe’s *The Village* (1783), was invigorated and reshaped in the Victorian period by religious scepticism, Darwinism, and, I would like to argue, by the close attention paid to the conditions of production of a rapidly-changing countryside. In this sense, the sceptical gaze of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is particularly instructive, seeking idylls but ultimately participating in both pastoral elegy and anti-pastoralism.

As Michael Squires argues, the pastoral novel should be defined “as the sub-genre of the novel, developing out of the pastoral tradition, which idealises country life by using many of the elements and techniques of traditional pastoral—principally, the contrast between the city and the country” (18). That *The Old Curiosity Shop* effectively enact this contrast—because Dickens sees all too clearly that the rural and urban economies are not distinct—partly explains the instructive failure of its nostalgic project. This, and the novel’s preoccupation with rural poverty, brings the

novel into close proximity with anti-pastoralism. It is not simply that Dickens is bored by the countryside. Rather, he constructs a privatised, post-enclosure countryside that actively repulses outsiders, propelling them inexorably towards economic possibilities available only in urban or urbanised spaces. Although different, the picturesque and the pastoral both seek to construct an idealised landscape, and both often obscure or ignore the conditions of rural production. It is telling, therefore, that Dickens cannot truly embrace either of these traditions.

### 3. The Failure of the Idyllic Impulse in *The Old Curiosity Shop*

*The Old Curiosity Shop* is unusual in Dickens both for the amount of time spent in the countryside and for the ways that the novel frames this journey in specifically pastoral terms. In chapter 12, plotting their escape from Daniel Quilp and the city, Nell's grandfather constructs a benevolent idyll:

We will travel afoot through fields and woods, and by the sides of rivers, and trust ourselves to God in the places that He dwells. It is far better to lie down at night beneath an open sky [...] than to rest in close rooms that are always full of care (ch. 12, 92).

As F. S. Schwarzbach notes, *The Old Curiosity Shop*'s obsessive interest in the past is linked to specific anxieties of the 1840s about rapid urban change, and a Victorian longing to restore idyllic pasts (70–3). In this respect, *The Old Curiosity Shop* mirrors the most telling feature of idylls, namely their temporal status. A poetic idyll is depicted as existing in the present moment, while Edens and Arcadias (idylls viewed from the perspective of elegy) usually exist in a departed Golden Age, looked back to with longing, but uncertain of recovery. Each elegy contains an idyll, but it is simultaneously present and absent, clearly viewed through memory or evocation but temporally inaccessible. As Raymond Williams points out, the tendency to locate idylls in the past persists through every generation: in *The Country and the City* he transports readers on what he terms the elevator of history to seek an imagined idyll, starting in Williams's own present and infinitely regressing back through generations of equally dissatisfied elegists, but ultimately demonstrating that the lost idyll is a function of present dissatisfaction rather than a verifiable historical reality (9–14).

The country turn of *The Old Curiosity Shop* contrasts with the usual migratory movements of Dickens's characters, many of whom, as Josephine McDonagh points out, are driven into cities by demographic pressures and find sanctuary in the

suburbs (272). Nell follows what McDonagh sees as a nineteenth-century pastoral tendency to “associate rural locations with a traditional world of wholesome, face-to-face social relations”, but, she rightly argues, Dickens complicates this tendency by acknowledging the potential advantages of city life (269). Nell and her grandfather seek “a life of tranquil happiness” amidst “sun, and stream, and meadow, and summer days” (ch. 12, 93) but the countryside they encounter is harsh, competitive, and modern. It is not simply that the urban economy began to dominate the rural. Rather, the two economies are becoming entangled, guided by a new logic of production that required large numbers of urban workers, and therefore a growing and reliable food production and distribution sector. Increasingly in competition with foreign imports, British farming from the 1840s onwards became increasingly focused on trying to meet the needs of the hungry cities. To do so meant engaging with liberal economics and an emerging logic of agricultural mechanisation and improvement given powerful impetus by the privatising impact of the Enclosures Acts that had gathered pace from 1750 onwards. John Bowen, arguing that “the novel contains the most radical engagement in Dickens’s early fiction with the social cost of Victorian capitalism”, nods to the outward march of that economic system when he describes the novel as “the allegory of a child [...] in a commodified world” (141). The novel demonstrates that this process of commodification is not confined to the cities.

The urban forces governing their lives pursue them, not merely in the form of Quilp and the Single Gentleman, but in terms of economic pressures governing their every step. In chapter 15, as they escape London, the travellers pass through various levels of enclosure and filth before discovering at the city’s margins a Dickensian pastoral in “pert cottages”, a “freshly-painted” public house, “tea gardens and a bowling green”. Amidst this orderly but scarcely rural countryside they pause at an elevated viewpoint where “the traveller could [look] back at old Saint Paul’s looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud [...] and casting his eyes upon the Babel out of which it grew until he traced down to the furthest outpost of the invading army of bricks and mortar whose station lay for the present nearly at his feet – might at last feel that he was clear of London” (ch. 15, 114). By explicit contrast to a city monstrous in its desire to swallow and pollute the surrounding land, this site promises physical and spiritual renewal:

The freshness of the day, the singing of the birds, the beauty of the waving grass, the deep green leaves, the wild flowers, and the thousand exquisite

scents and sounds that floated in the air, – deep joys to most of us, but most of all to those whose life is in a crowd, or who live solitarily in great cities as in the bucket of a well, – sank into their breaths and made them very glad (ch. 15, 114).

This moment is in fact a recapitulation of an earlier pastoral retreat in *Oliver Twist*, when the Maylies and Oliver spend some weeks at a temporary country retreat at Chertsey:

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquillity, the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods, of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness, deep into their jaded hearts! Men who have lived in crowded, pent-up streets, through lives of toil, and who have never wished for change; men, to whom custom has indeed been second nature, and who have come almost to love each brook and stone that formed the narrow boundaries of their daily walks; even they, with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn for one short glimpse of Nature's face (ch.32, 101).

In both passages, the marked contrast between urban and rural is typically pastoral, but in other ways the pastoral project is problematised. Oliver, like Nell, appreciates nature more for having existed “among squalid crowds, and in the midst of noise and brawling”, but as Pykett argues, Oliver (and, we might add, David Copperfield after his journey to Brighton, and Nicholas Nickleby after reaching Portsmouth) is allowed “to survive and find a place in society through the discovery of family and a vocation or profession”, while Nell's destiny “is to die a pathetic and lingering death after helping others to find family, vocation, or profession” (61, 62). Oliver's eventual (and highly Dickensian) idyll ultimately lies not in the countryside but in London's suburbs, while Nell's quest for a genuinely rural idyll fails. Despite their delight in escaping the city, Nell and Trent find there is no possibility of remaining in this spot or finding sustenance and safety there. Their first pastoral moment is in this sense merely picturesque, a transient moment of sensory pleasure and temporary renewal of spirits, rather than the discovery of somewhere to live.<sup>8</sup> As Steven Marcus points out, even in the moment of supposed pastoral relief, “discontent, pain and death are

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<sup>8</sup> On his journey from London to Brighton David Copperfield experiences of exclusion, hunger, and rural violence is a more pronounced example of Dickens's representation of the countryside as withholding sustenance, and as a dangerous space to be passed through as quickly as possible (73–5). Travelling to London, *Oliver Twist* experiences the same inhospitable reaction: “in some villages, large painted boards were fixed up: warning all persons who begged within the district, that they would be sent to jail [...] If he begged at a farmer's house, ten to one but they threatened to set the dog on him; and when he showed his nose in a shop, they talked about the beadle” (ch. 8, 29).

inescapable". As the novel progresses, he suggests, "they pass through scenes which recall the pastoral, agricultural past, [but] they can find no place to stop, and are forced to move beyond the simple past toward the primitive and prehistoric" (141).<sup>9</sup> They certainly must keep moving, but, I will suggest, this movement is towards modernity rather than primitivism.

That the novel is framed as a pastoral quest at all is in some ways curious, given Dickens's attitudes to modernity and the past. Humphry House argues that in his works "there is no trace of idealising the past. When he writes of the Middle-Ages, or even of the late eighteenth century, he does so with an amused contempt for their standards of life, which shows him as a proud Victorian, conscious of living in a progressive age" (34). Terry Eagleton suggests that "of all the major English writers of the past century and a half, Dickens is perhaps the least contaminated by organicist ideologies" (127), while Robson argues that Dickens's "refusal to idealise the past" meant that he "parts company with an important and influential strain in nineteenth-century discourse" (236). Dickens's nostalgic strain was directed to "the experiences of his own personal past", but "he did not indulge in the cultural longing for a fantasized preindustrial bucolic idyll which affected such a large number of his contemporaries" (235). Inspired by "the abuses and inequities of contemporary English life", Dickens's "fury with some aspects of the present is never underwritten by an assumption that things were done better in the past". The problematical present could not be resolved by "evocations of the organic fusion of feudal agricultural society" (236).<sup>10</sup>

Part of the reason for this is that Dickens's urban gaze attunes him to focus on the modes of rural production and employment. In an 1855 notebook entry he evokes an image of pleasing "English Landscape. The beautiful prospect, trim fields, clipped hedges, everything so neat and orderly – gardens, houses, roads", only to

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<sup>9</sup> For Marcus, primitivism and the prehistoric are associated with the atavistic tendencies and relics of the Old Curiosity Shop and of the village churchyard, and with a movement away from life and vitality: the novel's idyll, he argues, "does not celebrate recaptured joy and companionship; it celebrates peace, rest and tranquillity. The strongest impulse with which the novel is charged is the desire to disengage from energy, the desire for inertia. The fatigue and steady decline of vitality which Nell suffers is merely one manifestation of this need. The idyll itself has been transformed into a Utopia of solitude" and in the novel "the idyllic recollection of Eden, of life restored to its pristine harmony, has here developed clearly on the side of its tendency towards death" (142).

<sup>10</sup> In a related manner, Dickens notoriously expresses impatience with Rousseauvian ideals of natural simplicity. Prompted to write "by the renewed public enthusiasm for the eighteenth-century concept of 'the noble savage' in part because of "the latest show presenting native Africans to be staged in London", Dickens's "The Noble Savage" (1853) lambasts "a wild animal with the questionable gift of boasting; a conceited, tiresome, bloodthirsty, monotonous humbug", adding "I call him a savage, and I call a savage something highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth" (141, 143).

immediately wonder “where are the people who do all this? There must be a great many of them, to do it. Where are they all?”, before adding a final, troublesome question: “and are *they*, too, so well-kept and fair to see?” (*Book of Memoranda*, 10). Dickens’s muted, qualified, or disenchanting responses to prevailing landscape conventions is largely a result of this unwillingness to relinquish the question of rural economics. Unable to effectively construct either picturesque or pastoral scenes, he cannot help thinking about the lives and conditions of those occluded rural labourers, or the social, political, and cultural systems that control their lives.

Distaste for such conventions is evident elsewhere in Dickens’s work. Xavier Amelot and Nathalie Jaëck suggest that his Christmas stories see him “commenting upon and then deconstructing another aspect of the Romantic representation of nature – the reactivation of the Pastoral idea that nature is a peaceful retreat, a haven from the city, celebrating the beauty of the English landscape”.<sup>11</sup> Amelot and Jaëck draw attention to *The Chimes*, suggesting that the irruption into the narrative of Will Fern undermines picturesque conventions and insists on another kind of gaze:

You may see the cottage from the sunk fence over yonder. I’ve seen the ladies draw it in their books, a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I’ve heerd say; but there an’t weather in picters, and maybe ‘tis fitter for that, than for a place to live in. Well! I lived there. How hard – how bitter hard, I lived there, I won’t say (119).

Fern, Amelot and Jaëck argue, is a locus of discontent about prevailing conditions of rural life and the consequences for marginalised figures such as himself:

“Now, gentlemen”, said Will Fern, holding out his hands, and flushing for an instant in his haggard face, “see how your laws are made to trap and hunt us when we’re brought to this. I tries to live elsewhere. And I’m a vagabond. To jail with him! I comes back here. I goes a-nutting in your woods, and breaks – who don’t? – a limber branch or two. To jail with him! One of your keepers sees me in the broad day, near my own patch of garden, with a gun. To jail with him! I has a nat’ral angry word with that man, when I’m free again. To jail with him! I cuts a stick. To jail with him! I eats a rotten apple or a turnip. To jail with him! It’s twenty mile away; and coming back I begs a trifle on the road. To jail with him! At last, the constable, the keeper – anybody – finds me anywhere, a-doing anything. To jail with him, for he’s a vagrant, and a jail-bird known; and jail’s the only home he’s got” (*The Chimes*, 122).

Because Dickens’s urban gaze is so often directed towards exploitation and injustice, it conditions him to recognise that those without a place in the rural

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<sup>11</sup> I am grateful to the authors for a copy of their excellent paper given at the Annual Dickens Symposium, Beziers, France, 2014.

economy and its deferential social system face exclusion, marginalisation, and persecution. Fern's refrain of "To jail with him!" invites readers to share his experience of repeated physical repulsion from the countryside, and to reveal the hegemonic structures that pastoral and picturesque seek to conceal. In an economy in which land, manufacture, and foreign trade are closely connected, the countryside is at least as unwelcoming as the city. Fern's experience is a particularly striking example of what Amelot and Jaëck perceptively describe as a broader disenchantment in Dickens's pastoral project.

#### **4. The City and the Country**

The pastoral quest of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is revealed as illusory on many levels. While Pykett suggests that "Nell's retreat from London and her mendicant wanderings in the countryside can be read as [...] a retreat from the cash nexus of capitalism", she points out that "Dickens's narrative is constructed so as to demonstrate to Nell and the reader that one cannot escape the City of Destruction or the forces of capitalism simply by removing oneself from London" because "the world of greed, gambling, and speculation which Nell had thought to leave behind is not confined to London" (Pykett 2002, 63). This is not just because Trent carries his destructive gambling urges with him, but also because the glimpses of an apparently idyllic rural life always carry markers of loss, deprivation, and economic struggle that indicate similarities between urban and rural life. In "the open country" first encountered in Chapter 15, they pass at "a thriving farm with sleepy cows lying about the yard", "dull pigs, turning up the ground in search of dainty food [and] plump pigeons skimming round the roof or strutting on the eaves" (116-17), but adjacent to this scene of apparent pastoral abundance they also find "a cluster of poor cottages, some with a chair of low board put across the open door to keep the scrambling children from the road, other shut up close while all the family were working in the fields" (116). Dickens's description renders visible that which pastoral and the picturesque seek to efface. The adjacent scenes cannot be disconnected: looking upon rural plenty we are faced with the economic hardship of land work. In a capitalist economy founded on scarcity the bounty of the private countryside is only available to those with full wallets. Dickens repeatedly displays the delicious products of the rural economy, but never forgets their costs, and directs our gaze towards the conditions of production. Nell and her grandfather, unequipped to become wage

labourers, have no choice but to pass by “the trim-hedged fields on either side” (ch. 26, 117).<sup>12</sup> Directionless, they merely resolve “to keep the main road, and go wherever it might lead them” (ch. 26, 191).

Functionless within the rural economy, they are propelled by financial pressure towards small towns and their margins; and to a world of travelling entertainers for whom the countryside serves as a passage between events held in such places. Falling in with Punch entertainers Codlins and Trotters, Nell and her grandfather follow routes dictated by an economic order emanating from the cities. Drawn inexorably to the races, the travellers join “a stream of people” to a scene of disorder and economic exchange, on which “every piece of waste or common ground” is filled with gamblers and hucksters. Amidst “noisy trade”, “tumult and confusion”, “sickening smells”, and “a senseless howl” of singing, Nell is “stunned and blinded” by the “delirious scene”, and penned in on all sides by “vagabond groups” (ch. 19, 145). The sensations of entrapment, noise, stench, and danger which earlier in the novel were associated with the city now characterise the representation of the countryside, diminishing the distinction between the two realms, and thus the essential urban-rural contrast at the heart of pastoral.

Fleeing from the decidedly urban intrigues of Codlins and Trotters (who remain closely in touch with city intelligence), they find temporary relief in the small-town decorum of Jarley’s Waxworks before being plunged into the horrors of the “great industrial town” where they are “but an atom [...] in a mountain heap of misery”. “Why”, Nell asks, “had they ever come to the noisy town, when there were peaceful country places, in which, at least, they might have hungered and thirsted, with less suffering than in its squalid strife!” (ch. 44, 322). Their journey began with hope of pastoral plenty, but the novel repeatedly propels the travellers back into various forms of urban modernity, while acknowledging that to the dispossessed “peaceful country places” mean hunger, thirst, and death.

Even Nell’s final destination is a small town, rather than the countryside proper:

It was for such a spot the child had wearied in the dense, dark, miserable haunts of labour. Upon her bed of ashes, and amidst the squalid horrors through which they had forced their way, visions of such scenes – beautiful indeed, but not more beautiful than this sweet reality – had been always present to her mind (ch. 46, 342).

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<sup>12</sup> As Houston points out, “prostitution is just about Nell’s only option, though obviously Dickens’s heroine cannot follow such a course” (66).

As House suggests, this location fails to provide a pastoral connection to an idealised past, because “the church in which Little Nell at last finds rest is a monstrous curio rather than the relic of a great civilisation” and is “more a mausoleum than a sanctuary” (34, 35). The country town, described as the fulfilment of their quest, is at best a muted, partial idyll. It provides the scene of Nell’s rest, but the schoolmaster’s economic good fortune, rather than nature itself, is the cause of her rescue. Her contraction of illness in the industrial town is only one aspect of the way in which the novel repeatedly indicates urban predominance and occludes the possibility of idyllic renewal. The frequent irruption of Quilp into the narrative as he pursues Nell, and his ability (like Dickens) to move rapidly into the countryside symbolises the reach and predominance of the urban, and the inability of the countryside to withstand the values and economic methods that he represents. It should be noted that in a novel that spends a good deal of time following Nell’s pilgrimage, two-thirds of the chapters have an urban setting; and that the novel’s centre of gravity moves increasingly towards the city: as Nell declines the rural narrative diminishes, while the urban narratives of Quilp, the Brasses, Kit Nubbles, Dick Swiveller, and the Duchess expand.

## **Conclusion**

Reflecting the economic predominance of the city, the narrative can in the end only be resolved in London itself. Dickens’s representation of the countryside, not as a separate realm of pastoral possibility, but as a subservient extension of urban economic order and social disorder, suggests that the novel ultimately belongs within the anti-pastoral tradition. As Marcus points out, Nell’s “decaying Arcadia [...] resembles nothing so much as that other pile of rubble, the Shop itself”, so that while “she has moved through space she has travelled nowhere” (147). The novel’s closure offers few solutions to the problems of urban life, emphatically undercuts all notions of land idealism, and in a counter to pastoralism, draws attention to the similarities of urban and rural existence. Dickens’s urban gaze, his cockney perspective, means he is no adept at describing honeysuckles and hedgerows, but it allows him to escape the conventions of pastoral and to participate in a wider Victorian desire to observe and analyse the social and economic world of the countryside.

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