

## **Charles Dickens: The Romantic Heritage and the Victorians' Challenge of Ecology**

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### **1. Dickens and Wordsworth: Two Contradictory Views of London?**

Romanticism had long come to an end when Dickens entered the stage of Victorian literature. After Coleridge's death in 1834 there was essentially only one relic of the Romantic age left, and that was William Wordsworth, who was on the point of turning into an inveterate Victorian poet and eschewing his Romantic affiliations. Although Michael Slater writes about Dickens's admiration for Wordsworth in his 2009 biography (136), contact between both writers seems to have been sparse. Dickens is said to have met Wordsworth only once, at a dinner in February 1839; the poet and the novelist do not seem to have been much impressed by each other. In his 1989 biography, *William Wordsworth, A Life*, Stephen Gill does not even refer to this fleeting encounter, and Dickens seems to have been more intrigued by Wordsworth's son, about whom he viciously remarked that copyrights needed to be hereditary, since genius obviously was not (Schlicke, 604).

Although Wordsworth seems to have outlived his fame in the Victorian age and even though as Poet Laureate from 1843 to 1850 Wordsworth was seen as "the poet of unpoetical natures" (Heims, 53), both he and Dickens share an ecological concern which was, however, ultimately eclipsed by the Victorians' adoration for technology and industrialisation. In September 1802, Wordsworth was ready to ignore the squalor, "the blackening church[es]" and the corruption of London which William



Face after face; the string of dazzling wares,  
Shop after shop [...]. (VII, 150–58, my italics)

While in the famous 1804 poem “I wandered lonely as a cloud” the “host of golden daffodils” engages in a harmonious cosmic dance which involves the waves, the stars and eventually even the heart of the hesitant speaker, the dance (and the heartbeat) of the city is different; and as the adjective “quick” indicates, it is a frenzied sequence of colours, lights and figures which corresponds to the nervousness and anti-natural rapidity of metropolitan life. Translating the language of nature poetry into the context of an urban narrative, Wordsworth seems to explore the templates that Dickens was to use for his later descriptions of London. In order to convey the idea of London as an “endless stream” of men and things, Wordsworth not only reverts to an upbeat rhythm and a staccato enumeration of nouns in Book VII of *The Prelude*, he also alarmingly equates men with things and shows the extent to which the metropolis is a leveller both of social and ontological categories. In this incessant flux of phenomena, there is no longer a strict distinction between the species, between objects and their users, and while human beings are reduced to a bewildering multitude of anonymous faces (somewhat suggestive of the rapidly emerging faces in Ezra Pound’s later poem on the Paris metro), the “string of dazzling wares” and their symbols of burgeoning capitalism are also increasingly endowed with human qualities and become agents in their own rights. The reader is immediately reminded of Adorno’s groundbreaking essay on Dickens’s *Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), where Little Nell is seen as a victim in a relentlessly modernist world of commodification, where the girl is nothing more than a piece of brittle china in the curiosity shop of capitalism and objects assume a semblance of life (cf. Hollington, 95–101).

As the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century hotbed of commerce and capitalism, London is excitingly colourful, but the “display and the cornucopia” (Porter, 173) of colours and articles are the visual expression of a wild mixture of different nationalities and of a cacophony of Babelian tongues. Having bidden farewell to the “sheltered seats / Of gowned students” and the “privileged ground” (VII, 53f. / 54) of the University of Cambridge, Wordsworth’s speaker unexpectedly finds himself flung into a medieval spectacle of exotic ‘otherness,’ surrounded by “Moors, / Malays, Lascars, the Tartar; the Chinese, / And Negro Ladies in white muslin gowns” (VII, 226–28). As if walking through a Dantean hell of freaks and monstrosities—“[g]iants and dwarfs, / Clowns, conjurers, posture-makers, harlequins, / Amid the uproar of the rabblement” (VII,

271–73)—Wordsworth’s persona cannot help being engulfed by the crude delights of the London nether-world, by the tacky *grands guignols* of Regency plays. But the lowest point of Wordsworth’s urban hell, its nadir, is still to come: Bartholomew Fair, where, in a Walpurgis night of blurry, infernal and distorted shapes, the Romantic concepts of anthropological dignity are severely put to the test. The “Giants, Ventriloquists,” the speaking bust, the waxworks and the puppets not only testify to the fact that Madame Tussaud had opened her famous waxworks to the London public in 1802, but also that, in the wake of Romanticism, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century concept of the *homme machine* is resuscitated, this time devoid of the Enlightenment implications of rationality and precision.

Without being aware of Wordsworth’s pejorative portrait of London in the (then unpublished) 1805 version of *The Prelude*, Dickens, proves to be at his most Wordsworthian, when, on the one hand, he introduces Mrs. Jarley’s waxworks into *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and when, on the other, he depicts the Smithfield livestock market as the nucleus of urban chaos in *Oliver Twist* (1838). While the scene with Mrs. Jarley’s life-like figures, which make the young ladies in Baker Street scream and confuse Mary Queen of Scots with Lord Byron (hardly a compliment for the wax figure sculptor), elicits laughter, the depiction of Smithfield in *Oliver Twist* reflects Dickens’s concern about the moral and ecological risks that man is willing (or doomed) to take in these congested urban areas. While Henry Mayhew’s compilation of newspaper articles *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) concentrates on and pinpoints the glaring economic imbalances of rampant capitalism, Dickens never loses sight of the fact that the problems of Victorian urban life are multi-faceted, constituting an intricate web of economic, moral, ecological and sanitary threads. When Sikes and Oliver approach the city, the first thing that perplexes and intimidates the boy is the noise and the traffic, both of which rapidly swell “into a roar of sound and bustle” (*Oliver Twist*, 171). Dickens makes use of a whole semantics of the auditory to convey the unthought-of din of the metropolis, the “tumult of discordant sounds,” and to make plausible the fact that Oliver’s “amazement” (171) is not only astonishment, but most of all the loss of orientation in a labyrinthine confusion, in the maze of the streets.

The description of the market morning that, in its glaring colours and deafening noises, takes up a long, enumerative paragraph of the narrative reveals the compellingly early modern heritage in Dickens’s texts. The focus on the “filth and

mire,” on the “thick steam perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle,” in conjunction with the sooty fog, “which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops” (171), is, however, a clear evidence of Dickens’s awareness of the ecological damage that appears to go hand in hand with commercial prosperity. But what is even more threatening is that, in Smithfield, man is not only dragged into an ecological disaster, but that he/she is absorbed into a swamp in which ontological boundaries have ceased to exist and in which everything is enveloped in a dense pall of dirt, odour and noise. Dickens seems to agree that the “great foul city of London,” which Ruskin disparaged as “a ghastly heap of fermenting brickwork, pouring out poison at every pore,” (Porter, 341) threatened not only man’s health (as it did during the Great Stink of 1858), but that it also endangered the foundations of man’s existence: his environment, his natural habitat and the myth of his theomorphic identity. In order to convey the dizzyingly degenerative process which reduces man (a chequered assortment of “butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers and vagabonds of every low grade,” 171) to the level of bleating sheep and squealing pigs, Dickens (like Wordsworth before him) reverts to the stylistic device of the vertiginous list and exposes his readers to an overwhelming catalogue of nouns and participles which is meant to erase the distinction between the species:<sup>2</sup> the “discordant din” (171) blurs the difference between drovers, oxen, sheep and pigs and transforms the scene into what, from a more distanced perspective, Wordsworth called a noisy “ant-hill” (VII, 149).

In the same way that London’s towers and theatres disturbingly merged with nature in Wordsworth’s 1802 poem, culture, in Dickens’s novels, proves to be vexingly susceptible to inroads of nature, to onsets of a nature which has lost its Romantic sublimity and turned vindictive. There is no denying that Wordsworth’s concept of nature is compounded of two sides, beauty and fear, and that for reasons of edification, she (nature is always gendered feminine) “may use / Severer interventions” (I, 355), but nonetheless Wordsworth leaves his readers in no doubt that nature is intertwined with man, that communication between nature and the Romantic hero has never come to a halt: “the earth / And common face of Nature spake to me / Rememberable things” (I, 586–88). By contrast, Uriah Heep, the uncanny horse whisperer, the Jew Fagin and Daniel Quilp, Nell’s repellent

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<sup>2</sup> For Umberto Eco’s idea of the dizzying proliferation of things in Dickens, cf. Orestano, 205–14.

*succubus*,<sup>3</sup> are, due to their ghastly liminality, the emissaries of a malicious, detrimental and corrosive nature. While Uriah Heep is not only persistently compared to animals and reptiles (as a bat foreshadowing the parasitical Count Dracula), he is also characterised by an enormous degree of natural porosity, especially when his fingers leave snail-like traces on the pages of the books that he seems to peruse. In the case of Fagin, the image of a monstrously porous and retaliatory nature is even more evident. To make this natural implication visible, Dickens deploys a whole battery of figurative language when, on a “chill, damp [and] windy night” (153) he has Fagin leave his bestial den, which is not on the rural outskirts, but right in the heart of London. That his “shrivelled body” (153) neatly fits into the atmosphere of dampness and oozing liquidity is a clear sign that he is capable of mimicry, that he knows how to keep his body invisible in the rain that is falling “sluggishly down.” The fact that Fagin “glide[s] stealthily along” (153) like a water-snake is a Dickensian foray into the fantastic, into the Gothic novel which the Victorian novel is not only closely affiliated with, but to a certain degree, a translation of into 19<sup>th</sup>-century realism. But apart from the mere evocation of the uncanny, there is more to Dickens’s use of the fantastic and the Gothic: the fact that Fagin’s shrivelled body is associated with a “loathsome reptile” (153) prowling the streets of London conveys the alarming idea that culture is always threatened by nature running riot, that nature, in the shape of hideous mutations or Frankensteinian monsters, might strike back and take fierce revenge on the various tamers of shrewish nature.

Considering the fact that Victorian literature is teeming with monsters, imps, goblin men and other eerie freaks of nature (cf. Goetsch, 126–28), the reader is invited to account for these striking intrusions of the monstrous by taking an ecocritical perspective: the more nature is repressed, domesticated, explicated and made subservient to technology, the more the hideous residues and mutilations of nature will take on a life of their own. The enormous pride that the Victorians took in London as the hub of modern metropolitan life and especially in the Crystal Palace as the manifestation of steely technological prowess was thus constantly jeopardised by harbingers of a porous, malicious and freakish nature, by mutations that in the post-modern form of multi-resistant germs or virulent diseases still wreak havoc in our times. In order to stress the Jew’s radical otherness and the ecological catastrophe that produced him (a detail that was deeply interwoven with Victorian phantasms of

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<sup>3</sup> For a consideration of Nell as the “object of sexual interest to Quilp,” cf. Bowen, 138.

anti-Semitism), the Jew is compared to a monster that was born in a process of abiogenesis, “engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved” (153). As David Paroissien proves, this passage is clearly indebted to a Romantic text, to Lord Byron’s verse drama *Cain*, where Lucifer tells Cain that the man’s poor attributes are made to suit “[r]eptiles engendered out of the subsiding / Slime of a mighty universe” (Dickens, *OT*, 506n). The horrors that modern cities seem to have in store for man are thus regularly visualised by the recourse that 19<sup>th</sup>-century authors have to what Mary Shelley had termed the “workshop of filthy creation” (*Frankenstein*, 55).

Dickens resorts to Byron’s dark and gloomy fantasies about primordial nature while Wordsworth (unbeknownst to Dickens in the late 1830s) sums up his disgust at the (human) perversions of nature in the contradictory image of a “Parliament of Monsters” (VII, 718), an oxymoronic image that conflates political culture with the nightmarish idea of its monstrous parody. In order to convey his feelings of nausea at the manifold “freaks of nature” (VII, 715)—from the “[d]umb proclamations of the Prodigies” to the “chattering monkeys” (VII, 693f.), the buffoons, the dwarfs and the “learned Pig” (VII, 708)—, Wordsworth depicts Bartholomew Fair itself, with its tents and booths, as a devouring monster, as a mill that after consuming its visitors unceremoniously throws them up again. For the Romantic poet, Bartholomew Fair is not only the symbol of a modern trivialised and hybridised city, it also epitomises the return to the state of primeval existence where life was just as nondescript and of a pulpy uniformity as the monstrous crabs that H.G. Wells’s time traveller envisages at the end of his *Time Machine* (1895): “the same perpetual whirl / Of trivial objects, melted and reduced / To one identity, by differences / That have no law, no meaning, and no end” (VII, 725–28). For both Wordsworth and Dickens the city is a treacherous thing: beneath its lurid colours and attractively fashionable garments it is scarcely more than a deformed lump, an incessant vortex in which all ontological demarcation lines become horrifyingly blurred. No matter whether it is London or other imaginary cities and towns such as Mudfog, urban structures in the works of 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers are imagined as gigantic sponges that absorb all sorts of beings, retain them in their porous, web-like substances only to release them to assail civilisation and to aid and abet ruthlessly destructive nature.

Whilst the time-honoured antagonism between nature and civilisation, between the city and the countryside was fuelled by the Romantics, the ecological combat was

aggravated to such an extent in Victorian novels that nature more often than not turned sadistic and tried to ambush man in a final showdown. Even though the term 'ecology' was coined by the Darwinist Ernst Haeckel as late as in 1866 (Reinhard, 404), mid-Victorian writers already sensed that the old balance between man and nature was contested and in dire need of re-negotiation. In her 1848 novel *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë sheds an interesting light on the relationship between man and nature, when she reveals nature not as benign and communicative, but rather as treacherous and collusive with death. In lurid contrast both to the semantic field of maternity and to the idea of spring as a time of regeneration (*reverdie*), the beauty of the vernal countryside, the *locus amoenus*, is suddenly and shockingly unmasked as a hotbed of typhoid fever; as "the cradle of fog and fog-bred pestilence" (89) and in deceptive collusion with the "quicken[ing] spring," nature, as a false and insidious mother, breathes typhus into the school dormitory. It might be too far-fetched to ascribe this sceptical view of nature to Charlotte Brontë's intellectual engagement with the darkish works of Lord Byron, but there is no denying that Byron's radical deconstruction of nature certainly had a sustained impact on Victorian novelists and that his disenchanting poems from "Darkness" to *Don Juan* ushered in a new form of realism which was unprecedented and out of tune with what was generally considered to be Wordsworthian or "positive" Romanticism.<sup>4</sup> Byron's ruthless ways of unveiling nature as being unsympathetic, crude and inimical to man not only takes Wordsworth's short-lived disillusion in "The World is Too Much with Us" to extremes, but it also suggests that Romantic notions of ecology (including a radical recourse to vegetarianism) have become subservient to the idea of a nature that savagely "gnaw[s]" man to the resolution of becoming a brutish transgressor and cannibal (Byron, "Don Juan," II l. 75, 598).

## 2. Ecological Dystopias

Byron's warped idea of ecology, his lop-sided view of nature as terrifyingly sublime and apocalyptic (in line with Beddoes's, Martin's and Mary Shelley's dark visions of the last man in the universe), is subjected by Dickens to a more balanced and complex view of nature. Man and nature seem to be locked in a more complicated and variable relationship of being the victim and the victimiser than in Byron's and other Romantics' poetry. While nature seems to produce monstrosities like Fagin,

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<sup>4</sup> For the old categorisation of "positive" and "negative" Romanticism, cf. Peckham, 5–23.

Heep and Quilp to checkmate man and to subvert his achievements of civilisation, Dickens also gives his readers a whole array of characters that seem to be intent on domesticating, manipulating and destroying nature, on giving the balance between man and nature a dangerous tilt. This ecological perspective was lost on most of Dickens's contemporaries who, in the wake of Byron, defined nature in terms of uncouthness, as something in dire need of cultivation and who, like Oscar Wilde, were only ready to bear with nature when it was embellished, artificialised ("green lacquer leaves of the ivy," *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 10) and even humanised. By leaving out the aspect of nature and environment altogether, mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century studies such as Jerome H. Buckley's *The Victorian Temper* (1951) or Walter Houghton's *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (1957) seem to insinuate that an awareness of ecology was non-existent in the Victorian age, recent publications such as Allen MacDuffie's book on *Victorian Literature, Energy, and the Ecological Imagination* (2014), however, underline the fact that questions of environmental damage, loss of energy and pollution were indeed addressed by many authors from Dickens and Ruskin to Stevenson and Wells.

While MacDuffie is more interested in the "global problem of energy and irreversibility" (131), as it is touched upon in *Our Mutual Friend*, the 1848 novel *Dombey and Son* tackles the issue of ecology from the assumption that there is a binary opposition between nature and the world of machines, the latter benefiting from the boost of the Blakean dark "Satanic mills" ("Milton," l. 27) and man's longing for mobility. In what looks like a losing battle for nature, swathes of devastation are cut across the countryside by the thrusting iron engines of the railway. Elevated on to an allegorical level, Mr. Dombey's train journey is shown as the modern and mechanised equivalent of the old *danse macabre*: while in the early modern age death is represented in the guise of a fiddler leading a long train of people into the abysmal grave, in Dickens's novel, it is the piercingly transgressive power of the engines that in their steely monstrosity drag "living creatures of all classes, ages, and degrees behind" them (297–98). To what extent Dickens's dance of death is also sexualised is clear from the fact that the modern triumph of the death-inflicting railway is represented as a ruthless act of rape. When the engine burrows its way through the "damp earth," "plunging down into it" (298) with deafening shrieks and roars, it not only encroaches upon all the (feminine) elements that were traditionally used in pastoral poetry, the heath, the orchard and the garden; what is conveyed to the

Victorian reader is that the encounter between industrialisation and nature can scarcely be imagined other than in terms of sexual violence and rape. More than a generation prior to Émile Zola's anthropomorphisation of railway engines in *La bête humaine* (1890), Dickens conflates iconographies of death and patriarchal violence in the image of a fiercely devastating railway engine. The ecological (and sexual) consequences for the traditionally female earth are apocalyptic: "Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes and miserable habitations far below" (299). While in the programmatic preface to her novel *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), George Eliot visualises travelling as a futuristic shuttle service, in which people are bandied to and fro in something like a pneumatic tube system, Dickens is (literally) more down to earth and alert to the fact that mobility cannot be thought of without ecological havoc and the ruthless rape of the earth by the accelerated dance of death in the guise of progress.

Like painters such as J.M.W. Turner who wavered between their fascination for the velocity of trains and a feeling of revulsion at engines that were said to appear like threatening and disturbing centipedes in their landscapes, Dickens, who came to be almost absorbed in the vortex of the modern *danse macabre* in the 1865 Staplehurst crash, never tired of voicing his distrust of the railway and its footprints of "remorseless Death" while showing a kind of "complicity with the engine's relentless advance" (Douglas-Fairhurst, 173). Revising his monumental poetic autobiography around the time of the publication of *Dombey and Son*, Wordsworth seems to turn a blind eye to the disastrous effects of industrialisation and prefers to marginalise ecological issues by relegating them to his shorter occasional poetry. In his 1844 sonnet "On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway," he vaguely associates the project of the railway with a "rash assault" and admonishes nature, apostrophised as "thou beautiful romance / Of nature," to raise its "constant voice" and to protest against the intrusion of technology (*Miscellaneous Sonnets*, XLV). Pitted against his earlier and more idealistic poetry, this sonnet is comparatively weak and reveals the awkward position of the aged Poet Laureate, wandering, like Arnold, between two worlds and looking wistfully at the lost myth of uncontested nature.

As long as ecological problems did not reach and threaten the Lake district, Wordsworth employs the strategy of ignoring them and arranging his biography as a circuitous journey, as a return from the debased city to the unviolated haven of Grasmere: "escaped / From the vast city, where I long had pined / A discontented

sojourner [...] till choice was made / of a known Vale whither my feet should turn" (l. 6–8 / 71–72). Unlike the parochial Wordsworth, Dickens follows in the footsteps of Victorian contemporaries such as Samuel Sidney who turned their backs on industrialised Britain and tried to re-cast exotic places such as Australia as a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Arcady revisited, where "every striving man who rears a race of industrious children, may sit under the shadow of his own vine and fig-tree" (Lansbury, 75). In the final chapters of *David Copperfield*, Dickens has his social misfits start a new life in Australia, where neither the moral restrictions of Grundyism nor the ecological taints of civilisation exist. Wanting to keep his idealised image of Australia unimpaired by the grim reality of Magwitch and his companions Dickens declined all invitations to visit a place which had the unfortunate reputation of being the meeting point for criminals of all sorts (Schlicke, 27-28). Unaware of texts such as Eliza Hamilton Dunlop's poem "The Aboriginal Mother (from Myall's Creek)," which had been published in the *Australian* in 1838 and which thematised the massacre of some thirty unarmed aborigines by European stockmen (Forché and Wu, 390), Dickens depicts Australia as a utopian island where the "English steel" (l. 12) threatens neither nature nor human beings' bodies. The utopian character of Dickens's image of Australia is even enhanced by a twofold fiction, by fictitious letters in a novel, by unreliable narrations that are transmitted by dropouts and liminal figures such as Mr. Peggotty or Mr. Micawber, the latter being especially notorious for his flamboyant, but fabricated stories.

Dickens's utopia abruptly turns into a dystopia at the very moment when the oral accounts and the myths of Arcadian places are suddenly juxtaposed with their crude reality; it is only then that Dickens finds his desire to escape to (non-) European places thwarted and the illusion of untouched nature translated into the lurid colours of a realism that adumbrates later naturalist pessimism. Since the England of mid-Victorian times was too firmly in the grip of the Murdstones, who destroy the young protagonist's ideal of a paradisiacal garden and even try to enforce a pedagogical fundamentalism, Dickens seems to be on the lookout for alternative worlds where the ecological equilibrium has not been upset. The feeble hope that America might be the golden age revisited was soon destroyed by William Blake in his visionary poem "America," where Albion is described as being "sick" and America as being on the point of fainting (l. 21). What, for Dickens, proved to be even worse, however, was not so much that America was the stage of apocalyptic battle (whose ecological

chaos was caused by leprous Urizen)<sup>5</sup> as that it turned out to be a place where nature and man were on an equal footing in their barbarism. While 20<sup>th</sup>-century critics such as Gregory Bateson start from the assumption that the relationship between man and nature is a dynamic one and that culture is to be defined as an evolutionary adaptation of nature (referring to the “curious homology whereby the engine is located in the front of the automobile, where the horse used to be,” Bateson, 253),<sup>6</sup> most Victorians were to think of nature in terms of an entity that had to be colonised.

Even for Dickens who always had a less imperialist stance towards nature than most of his contemporaries the shock must have been tremendous, when he found himself faced with a country in which man was afflicted by the same lack of containment as oozing nature was and ecology was just synonymous with a brutal “ecocentric naturalism” (cf. Abram). The antagonistic relationship between man and nature which characterises the staple works of Victorian literature seems, in Dickens’s *American Notes*, to give way to the idea of a collusion in which ignoble savages and inhabitants in the likeness of Swift’s Yahoos betray their pretensions to civilisation by wallowing in filth and yellowish sputum. Not only from an ecological point of view is Dickens’s travelogue a rigorous repudiation of idealised notions which both the Romantics and his friend Wilkie Collins entertained of America. The disenchanting mirror which Dickens holds up to the several warped images of America deconstructs not only the Romantic myth of the colonies and their rebellious “Thirteen Angels,” (Blake, “America,” I. 113) but also the stereotypical ideas of the rough, lonesome and honest hero with which Collins dallies in his sensational characterisation of the scalped Matthew Grice in *Hide and Seek* (1854). In Dickens’s writings, the long cherished idea of heterotopic America and its incorruptible frontier hero is eventually supplanted by a growing pessimism in which the dark sides of ecology and anthropology are disturbingly conflated.

The trip on the Mississippi to Cairo is just one case in point: foreshadowing Joseph Conrad’s late Victorian novel *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Dickens’s voyage is a descent into the hell of primitivism where man no longer tries to domesticate nature but allows himself to be debased and absorbed by it. It is this extreme form of resignation and ‘letting go’ that the Victorians dreaded most when they showed man

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<sup>5</sup> “His stored snows he poured forth, and his icy magazines / He opened on the deep, and on the Atlantic sea,” “America,” II. 212–13.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Zapf, 253–58.

exposed to tribal life and the laws of uncultivated nature. Surrounded by foulness and seepage and travelling on the Mississippi as on the back of a "slimy monster," (*American Notes*, 190) Dickens is at one point even compelled to drink the "muddy water of this river" (191). This drinking of the "opaque gruel" (191), which the native Americans consider to be wholesome, is more than just a daunting medical experiment; it is a symbol of the insidious way American anti-civilisation seizes hold of old-world man and instils the hellish germs of retrogressive nature into him.

The gigantic bog and ecological dead-end location that the American Dream of colonisation seems to be drowning in are expanded on in the America chapters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844). In order to pinpoint the ecological and anthropological horrors of the former colonies, Dickens, via his narrator, not only reverts to the Swiftian image of the trough from which the Americans feed in a Yahoo-like manner, he also maliciously shows the American Eden for what it really is: a monotonous expanse of land which is intertextually meant to remind the reader of "the grim domains of Giant Despair" in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burnt them up; where fatal maladies, seeking whom they might infect, came forth, at night, in misty shapes, and creeping out upon the water, hunted them like spectres until day; where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved. (*MC*, 360)

For the ironic evocation of the place called Eden, Dickens has recourse to a variety of natural phenomena which are linked to pseudo-scientific and mythological lore. Four years later, in *Dombey and Son*, Dickens will repeatedly refer to the phoenix in a rather tongue-in-cheek manner, but in America the phoenix has lost all satirical implications and has taken on the shape of monsters, "vile and ugly things," that rise from the "decomposing ashes." As in *Oliver Twist*, the theme of abiogenesis seems to be paramount in Dickens's mind: the "slime" is not only the incubator of monstrous births and of luxuriously rank vegetation, it is also the basis of his 19<sup>th</sup>-century belief in miasma whose contagiousness was seen as the fountainhead of diseases such as cholera and typhoid fever. What the "blessed sun" shines on and eventually helps to bring forth stands not only in blatant contrast to the imagery of procreation in John

Keats's ode "To Autumn" (1819)—the "maturing sun" (l. 2)—, but is a form of "corruption and disease" that, from an ecological point of view, reveals Dickens as an unflinching precursor of Baudelaire and his shocking *nostalgie de la boue*.<sup>7</sup> The latter (without taking heed of the British novelist) dedicates an entire poem of his *Fleurs du mal* (1859), "Une charogne," to a rotting piece of carcass which the scorching sun metamorphoses into various stages of decomposition.

The Eden that Dickens conjures up is thus a sarcastic misnomer, with the post-diluvian references—"[t]he waters of the Deluge might have left it but a week before" (360)—making it patently clear that the American paradise is synonymous with hell, with an ecological waste in which "slime and matted growth" make all attempts at civilisation futile. While his Victorian contemporaries are expected to sneer at the Americans' abortive endeavours to tame and colonise nature, and might especially decry the "tottering" building of the Bank and National Credit Office which was gradually being sucked into the primordial mud, Dickens seems to insinuate that the "jungle" was not confined to the wilderness of America, but could easily infiltrate into the modern metropolises of Europe. The "fetid vapour" and the slimy "black ooze" (363) are, thus, apart from being components that bring forth figures such as Fagin, also characteristics of the Thames which winds through London and, with its corpses and putrid matter in *Our Mutual Friend* (1865), is ecologically on a par with the Mississippi (cf. Ackroyd, 551–52).

With "eco-catastrophes" looming large and lurking everywhere, Dickens mitigates the dire consequences of his scenarios and more often than not adopts the blinkered view of Wordsworth, when, as MacDuffie complains, he either shifts to "an allegorical mode" by the end of *Our Mutual Friend* or leaves his readers with "the unsatisfying idea that middle-class marriage makes possible some kind of clean, untapped, uncompromised energy source" (136). The only (non-European) place where Dickens's quest for Romantic nature does not meet with immediate disappointment is Canada, which at the time of Dickens's visit was still British territory ("British Possessions," *AN*, 222) and which, one generation prior to Rudyard Kipling's veneration of Canada as a clean and virginal country, accorded the hitherto Smelfungian traveller a short spell of Wordsworthian worship of nature (Lennartz, 145–61). Listening to the language of the thundering water at the Niagara Falls and

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<sup>7</sup> Isabel Vila-Cabanes pinpoints Baudelaire's proximity to Dickens, but focuses more on the metropolis than on nature, 108–20.

interpreting the moisture of the spray in terms of the “Heavenly promise” of “angels’ tears” (*AN*, 220), Dickens temporarily seems to have found a retreat where an ecological balance between man and nature is still possible. The diction that Dickens uses clearly has a Wordsworthian ring to it, and in striking contrast to the supercilious distance that he preserves for American places, Dickens is for the first time overwhelmed and drawn to the language of the Romantic sublime:

Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one—instant and lasting—of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of Mind: Tranquility: Calm recollections of the Dead: Great Thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness: nothing of Gloom or Terror. (220)

“Gloom” and “Terror,” the latter of which has nothing to do with Ann Radcliffe’s influential differentiation between claustrophobic horror and soul-expanding terror, vanish and leave the mind open to the awe-inducing beauties of nature, which, as in Wordsworth’s mystical spots of time, tip the ecological balance in favour of a self-sufficient nature (with man in the humble role of a Caspar David Friedrichian onlooker). The extent to which even this sacred place, “the very steps of Nature’s greatest altar” (222), is jeopardised by man’s intrusion is clearly highlighted by the fact that this sanctified scene is not exempt from “profanations” in the form of obscene scribblings on the rocks. Given the sad fact that this temple of nature is encroached upon by “human hogs” (222), Dickens is inclined to counterpoise the Romantic “bliss of solitude” in nature with a Victorian alertness to the anthropological problems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, it is hardly surprising that the Romantic passages of the *American Notes* with their references to the speaker’s purification in nature are deleted in the fictionalised travelogue of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Having been doomed to run the whole gamut of anthropological and biological hell for a considerably long time (including the obligatory spell among the nauseating tobacco chewers), Martin is eventually transported to his Victorian homeland, deprived of the privilege of finding the shelter and the ecological reprieve that figures such as David Copperfield find in the abode of divine nature.

### 3. After-Thoughts

With Industrialisation in full swing, Dickens seems to be the first Victorian writer to see that Romantic ecology and Victorian interests could hardly be reconciled. Victorian concepts of progress and nature tend to contradict each other: nature is

either violated by the Victorian hallmarks of civilisation or is shown to retaliate upon the feats of technology and to drag man to its level of meanness and squalor. If there had been an alliance between feminine nature and patriarchal culture, that bond, with the Victorian age picking up speed, was on the point of being torn asunder; and in the same way that, after the Romantic period, women were squeezed into carapaces of steel and fish-bones and put into fashionable constructions that hardly allowed them to breathe, nature was violated by or put into iron structures and opened up to the brute force of phallic machines (Munich, 62; Zweig, 91).

In the wake of Blake's radical poetry, which Dickens was apparently not conversant with, but which seems to reverberate in novels such as *Oliver Twist*, where Harry Maylie thinks about social stratification in terms of fancy and "mind-forg'd manacles," Dickens voices his distrust of the metropolis London and envisages the British capital in terms of both a magic lantern and in what Wordsworth abhorred as the epitome of confusion. In his autobiographical novel *David Copperfield* (published in the same year as Wordsworth's revised *Prelude*),<sup>8</sup> Dickens seems to be so disappointed at the rift that was gaping between nature and culture in Britain that he leaves us in no doubt that his protagonist has to leave Victorian England and its "Parliament of Monsters." In Switzerland, in the sublime region of the Alps, he is painfully made aware of the fact that right up to his pilgrimage, to his re-definition of the Romantic Grand Tour, he had been impervious to the language of nature, suffering from ecological illiteracy: "If those awful solitudes had spoken to my heart, I did not know it" (820). In passages like these, as in various passages in *Bleak House*, Dickens is closer to Wordsworth than one might have thought. Despite their conspicuous ecological illiteracy, protagonists such as David and Esther Summerson are suddenly made aware of special spots of time, of epiphanic moments in which the characters see through the fabric of phenomenological reality and detect a language that lies beyond mere words.<sup>9</sup>

While "the dread heights and precipices," the "roaring torrents, and the wastes of ice and snow" in *David Copperfield* (821) are scarcely more than a Romantic backdrop, a cultural citation showing Dickens's awareness of the long tradition of the

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<sup>8</sup> Dickens even owned a copy of the revised 1850 *Prelude* (see Slater, 316)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Bleak House*, Chapter 31, where Esther Summerson is suddenly made aware of a Wordsworthian spot of time: "the feeling with that spot and time, and with everything associated with that spot and time," (485). Dickens's reading of Wordsworth is quite evident here. For this hint I am indebted to Ian Duncan, who gave a fabulous close-reading of this passage in Vechta.

sublime since Ann Radcliffe's novels, there is a solemnity in nature, a highly charged language (transmitted either by the Swiss shepherds or by an almost apocalyptic London) that suddenly alert David and Esther to a *lingua franca* which seems to have been lost in their Victorian environment, the language of "great Nature" (DC, 821). Without disclosing what nature has imparted to them, Esther and David have learnt lessons which they had completely ignored in their biographies: the closing of the gap between feminine nature and masculine culture by lifting the Victorian ban on tears, porousness and feeling.

Resting his weary head on the grass, David eventually succumbs to the urge to shed tears and weeps "as [he] had not wept yet, since Dora died!" (821). Although David clearly points out that he has "sought out Nature, never sought in vain" (822, and thus re-emphasises his indebtedness to Wordsworth), he returns to England (notably on "a wintry autumn evening," 825) to re-negotiate his affiliations with Romanticism and its fusion of ecology and dialectics. Given the fact that autumn in the Romantic age resonates with connotations of decline and rejuvenation, David—like Esther—seems to have imbibed the principles of a new moral ecology: that the rotten and stagnant elements have to be lopped off so that growth of the protagonist's mind will not be stunted. But as Dickens's later darker novels show, the ecological and moral aspects of the Romantic heritage were difficult to preserve in the burgeoning hard times of rampaging capitalism, environmental damage and looming railway catastrophes.

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