

## **Dickens and Modern Landscape Painting**

*Marianne Camus, Université de Bourgogne*

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Landscape, as we know, does not exist as such. It is a constructed representation in which elements of the environment are chosen and rearranged in order to make an impression on the spectator or reader.<sup>1</sup> The fact that for a long time landscapes were only used as background to religious or historical paintings and that until the nineteenth century they were painted indoors only confirms this point. Not that outdoor painting did away with the necessity of composition. In Monet's paintings of haystacks, some stacks are carefully isolated from all the others lying in the same field. What this brought about is greater attention to everyday landscapes and therefore greater immediacy, so much so that one could almost apprehend the painted landscape through one's other senses, feel the hot smell of hay or the crisp air around the poplars along a canal, to refer to Monet's painting again.

As Leonee Ormond has pointed out, though not as versed in painting as other writers like Henry James or Marcel Proust, Dickens did have some knowledge of Old Masters (Ormond 1983) and he "had many painter friends [...], amongst them Clarkston Stanfield, Daniel Maclise, Augustus Egg, W. P. Frith and Frank Stone" (Ormond 1984). The present article however does not purport to delve into Dickens's actual knowledge of painting, since this has already been skilfully done by Ormond and subsequently by Richard Lettis (1989). It instead builds on John Jordan and

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<sup>1</sup> See Andrews 1999.

Carol T. Christ's ground-breaking volume on *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Imagination* to argue that though Dickens's opinions on actual paintings were often very conventional, his own verbal constructions of landscapes were surprisingly modern, and that at times their strong visual quality even seems to have anticipated modern painting.

Dickens's landscapes draw on both traditional and more avant-garde pictorial strategies. They often intermingle, firstly, hints of what will be called avant-garde, secondly, premonitions of the cinema, and finally insights on perception which science and research by psychologists and neurologists have proved as facts. One of these facts is that the continuum of stimuli that surrounds us does not automatically become perception. Before any object seen, felt or smelt can be said to be perceived, one or several areas in the brain have to react and decide that it, or part of it, is worth being noticed. This process of reaction to and treatment of sensorial stimuli is as complex as it is variable. It depends on several factors. There is first, the subject's conscious activity as well as his/her physical, intellectual and emotional state at the moment of perception. Then, and concomitantly, experience and memory intervene: the imprints left by earlier stimuli are reactivated and revised by the new sensory experience at the same time as they revise or at least inflect it.<sup>2</sup> Finally, there is the fact that the construction of perception relies not only on the connection of the relevant areas of the brain but also on their interconnection in a network of shared information before any sensory stimulus or part of a sensory stimulus is deemed relevant to the perceptive spectrum of the individual. This synthesis, brief as it is, clearly shows that perception is a complex process. More importantly, it reveals the fact that it is often fractured, never complete and always emotionally tinted.<sup>3</sup> This paper will freely draw from these ideas in its analysis of landscape painting, or writing, in Dickens.

### **1. A Scarcity of Uninhabited Landscapes**

It is true that landscapes, understood as a genre in painting, cannot be said to be a major feature of Dickens's writing. We have an instance of a painterly landscape in *Bleak House* when Esther writes about a walk in the woods and about looking "through an arched perspective" at "a green vista supported by thousands of natural

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<sup>2</sup> See Schama 1995.

<sup>3</sup> See Bagot 1999, Brossard 1992, Paquin 1997 and Rock 2001.

columns, the whitened stems of trees, upon a distant prospect made so radiant by the contrast with the shade in which we sat" (*BH*, ch. 18, 308). *Our Mutual Friend* goes beyond this mere framing strategy and constructs an almost Claudean landscape around the paper mill up the river, with its succession of planes,

beyond the silver river – beyond the deep green fields of corn [...] – beyond the hedgerows and the clumps of trees – beyond the windmills on the ridge – away to where the sky appeared to meet the earth [...] (bk. IV, ch. 6, 672)

In the foreground of this picture are depicted the tiny human figures of workers going home. However the figures are not mythological but very much contemporary English. Claudean landscapes are thus revisited and transformed by Dickens.

This scarcity of landscapes viewed for their own sake is due first to Dickens's intense perception of the world he actually lived in. This is obvious when he uses, for example, the traditional motif of ruins; he brings it almost ruthlessly up to date. There is nothing like Turner's *Tintern Abbey*<sup>4</sup> in his novels. What we have is, for instance, the "deserted place" around Satis House in *Great Expectations* with "the pigeon house [...] blown crooked on its pole by a high wind [...] a wilderness of empty casks [...] a rank garden and an old wall" (*GE*, ch. 8, 54). Another example is what is left of Staggs' Gardens in *Dombey and Son*, namely "carcasses of ragged tenement houses [...] knocked down; streets broken through and stopped; deep pitches and trenches dug into the ground" (*D&S*, ch. 8, 120-1). The dust heaps of London being turned into a modern version of the pyramids in the form of three "dark tall mounds ris[ing] high into the sky" in *Our Mutual Friend* are another case in point (*OMF*, bk. I, ch. 5, 62). In these descriptions, the picturesque ruins of the romantic period have given way to desolate and bleak wastelands, some of which bespeak of modern urban and industrial life.

Another reason for the scarcity of uninhabited landscapes in Dickens's novels is that his primary interest was in people. As such, one feels that Dickens the novelist is a direct heir to Breughel. Breughel is recognized as one of the inventors of landscape painting, but his winter scenes are teeming with a multitude of figures. Similarly Dickens's foggy London townscape is filled with the activities and struggles of all the people, small, great or middling who crowd its streets. The main difference is that Breughel's landscapes are rural while Dickens's landscapes are mostly urban, but

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<sup>4</sup> J. M. W. Turner, *Tintern Abbey*, 1794, Tate Gallery, London.

what really matters is that both the painter and the writer's landscapes bear traces of the presence of people.

This is also true of Dickensian landscapes set abroad, where the reader is taken through famous landscapes like the Alps. In *Little Dorrit*, the description opens on grape harvesting and wine-making and goes on to depict "a string of riders" (bk. II, ch. 1, 483) heading towards the Great St Bernard convent, with the mountains reduced to a majestic backdrop. In *David Copperfield*, a generic description of a "valley, as the evening sun was shining on the remote heights of snow" (ch. 43, 686) is followed by the mention of "lonely wooden cottages [...] the clustered village in the valley [...] shepherds' voices [...]" (686). The contemplative mood soon gives way to more mundane concerns, namely letters and supper in *David Copperfield* and the "noise and hurry" (ch. 39, 484) of the crowd of travellers in *Little Dorrit*. Moreover, in the Dorrits' Italian tour, the beauty of the villages and lakes does not conceal the squalor of people's lives and the "beggars of all sorts everywhere: pitiful, picturesque, hungry, merry; children beggars and aged beggars" (*LD*, bk II, ch. 3, 518) who crowd upon the travellers.

The same goes for less obviously romantic English landscapes and London itself. The narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* arriving in a small town tells us of "the houses of stone, of red brick, of yellow brick, of lath and plaster and of wood", following the slow accretion of changing fashions in house building. Very quickly he introduces human figures, "a few idle men loung[ing] about the two inns" and "some old people [...] dozing in chairs outside an almshouse wall." (ch. 15, 171-3) What we are given here is not, or not simply, a picturesque description of an old town nestling in the countryside, but a portrait of provincial humanity and of a way of life.<sup>5</sup> The descriptions of London are no different, only more tightly packed with humanity. The Dockland area in *Dombey and Son* is described through the sea-linked activities that characterize it: "slop-sellers' shops", "anchor and chain-cable forges", "mast, oar and block-making and boatbuilding" (ch. 9, 178-9), not to mention the ubiquitous pub. In a similar manner, the Thames in *Great Expectations* is apprehended through the different types of boats that sail it, "watermen's boats", "barges", "sailing colliers",

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<sup>5</sup> There is a very similar description in *Bleak House* of a small town "with a church spire, and a market place, and a market cross [...] and very few men sleepily lying or standing about in narrow little bits of shade." (ch. 18, 298)

“coasting traders”, “steam-ships”, “scullers”, “skiffs” and “wherries” (ch. 54, 323). These are two examples among many.

We even occasionally reach the point where London becomes a totally human landscape, with, for example, the evening streets in *Bleak House* described through the constant

Jostling against clerks going to post the day’s letters and against counsel and attorneys going home to dinner, and against plaintiffs and defendants, and suitors, and against the general crowd [...] (ch. 10, 186).

Such descriptions recall not so much Breughel as Hogarth or Doré, with the feeling that the human factor has taken precedence over the landscape.

## 2. Sensory Landscapes and Avant-Garde Painting

This feeling is confirmed by the fact that in many instances the main function of landscape seems to be that of surrounding or leading the way to human habitation. A quick walk through the City in *Dombey and Son* leads one to a page-long description of the Wooden Midshipman (*D&S*, ch. 4, 87-8); an even quicker walk through busy streets leads Kit to Nell’s house in the *Old Curiosity Shop* (ch. 41, 388). To go further into this question would be beyond the scope of this paper; nevertheless, as it stands, it confirms the central position of human beings in Dickensian landscapes.

Landscapes are also worked out through the systematic presence of mental processes – perception, mood, memory – of the narrator or characters which colour every landscape or rather every glimpse of landscape. Landscapes in Dickens’s work do not give the illusion of a truthful and objective transposition of what lies out there, but exist very much through the perceiver’s impressions whether they be visual, auditory or even olfactory or palpable.

Sound in particular is a major element, although it varies greatly, according to whether the environment is rural or urban. The countryside is marked by the soft, muted quality of its sounds, as in the “little Wiltshire village” in *Martin Chuzzlewit* where one can only hear “distant feet and wheels”, a “distant husbandman” and the “chirp and twitter” of birds (*MC*, ch. 2, 57) – though this muted quality may at times be disrupted, as is the case at the opening of the novel where the wind causes some degree of turmoil – or in the Alps, where David Copperfield notices the “quiet air” and the “distant singing” of the shepherds mentioned earlier. There is one exception and

that is the description of the gale in Yarmouth in *David Copperfield*. In reading Dickens's description, one thinks of *Snow Storm*,<sup>6</sup> the painting for which Turner, as the legend has it, had himself tied to the mast of a steam ship in order to experience the full impact of the elements. David is standing on shore, but he is in the midst of the storm as well. To Turner's painting – "one of the grandest statements of sea-motion, mist and light, that has ever been put on canvas", according to Ruskin<sup>7</sup> – Dickens adds the terrific sound of the storm; he speaks of "the thundering sea", of "masses of water [that] shivered and shook the beach with a booming sound", of "the howl and roar, the rattling of doors and windows, the rumbling in the chimneys" (*DC*, ch. 55, 664-5). He compares the sound to the thunder of cannon which, when the winds lulls a little, has "diminished by the silencing of half-a-dozen guns out of hundreds"<sup>8</sup> (ch. 55, 666).

This is very much an exception, though, to the general contrast between country and town in Dickens's work, a contrast best seen when Nell and her grandfather glide along a canal: no sound is recorded until they come close to an industrial town, where we are immediately made to hear "the shrieks and throbbing" of engines at work, "the clank of hammers beating upon iron" and "the roar of busy streets and noisy crowds" (*OCS*, ch. 43, 412).<sup>9</sup>

In a similar way, there is nothing distant, nothing muted about the sounds of London; they are aggressive as well as unceasing. They start early in the morning with

the resounding stones of the streets [...] the wagons, carts and coaches [...] the workers going to various occupations [...] the opening of early shops; the traffic at markets [...] the stir of the riverside. (*LD*, bk I, ch. 14, 218)

They go on through the night, on the river at least, with "the turning of steam paddles", "the clinking of iron chains", "the creaking of blocks", "the working of oars", "the violent barking of a passing dog" and "the beat and splash of water" (*OMF*, bk. I, ch. 13, 168). Even Sunday, the day of rest, is filled with the noise of

maddening church bells of all degrees of dissonance, sharp and flat, cracked and clear, fast and slow, ma[king] the brick-and-mortar echoes hideous [...] in every thoroughfare, up almost every alley and down almost

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<sup>6</sup> J. M. W. Turner, *Snow Storm*, 1842, Tate Gallery, London.

<sup>7</sup> John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* (1843)

<sup>8</sup> We also know that both were inspired by the great storm that devastated the south-eastern coast on Friday, 13 November 1840.

<sup>9</sup> Coketown in *Hard Times* is another example of the noise of industrial cities.

every turning, some doleful bell was throbbing, jerking, tolling [...] (*LD*, bk. I, ch. 3, 67)

The question of the “soundscapes” arises here. One almost feels that the novelist has created a sound track.

One cannot help noting that Dickensian landscapes are not only noisy, they are also smelly. In fact, you can feel them at the tips of your fingers, on your skin, in your body as well as in your nose. Again, there is a difference of degree and quality between town and country. Country smells are usually “fresh”, described as “scents” or “fragrances”, like “the fragrance of hay” wafting right down to Miss Tox’s street in *Dombey and Son* (ch. 29, 488) or the “pleasant fragrance of fallen leaves” in *Martin Chuzzlewit* (ch. 2, 57). The contrast with London is striking; there, smells are often foul ones and quite often equated with stench<sup>10</sup>. One can discern two types of smells in London, the dry ones and the damp ones, neither one being preferable to the other. Grit and a sharp wind characterize the dry sort, especially in *Our Mutual Friend*, a novel in which the whole city feels like a giant dust heap whose “grit gets into the hair and eyes and skin” (bk. II, ch. 15, 386). And in *Great Expectations*, the words used to describe Barnard’s Inn, “dusty decay”, “soot”, “smoke”, “ashes”, and “dust hole” (ch. 21, 136-7), all convey simultaneous sensations to the nose and the fingers which any Londoner would have recognized.

Most of the time, however, London is characterized by dampness, maybe because of the Thames and its banks full of “rank weeds”, “marshy land”, “slimy gaps and causeways”, “a sickly substance sticking” to old wooden piles and “the ooze and slush” (*DC*, ch. 47, 572) leading to the ebb tide.<sup>11</sup> The mixture of the stench and sliminess of rotting refuse plunges the reader into an almost direct sensory experience. But physical discomfort is not specific to the riverbanks. One of the most telling scenes is probably the opening of *Bleak House*, a wet, muddy and foggy day in London:

as much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth [...] smoke lowering down from chimney pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes [...] Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very-blinkers. Foot passengers [...] losing their foot-hold at street corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been

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<sup>10</sup> One of the few exceptions is the scent of wood shavings mentioned in *Dombey and Son* (ch. 9, 178), *Great Expectations* (ch. 46, 279) and *David Copperfield* (ch. 47, 572).

<sup>11</sup> This example, as well as the previous one, also suggests variations on the idea of ruins, mentioned above.

slipping and sliding since the day broke [...] adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud [...] (ch. 1, 49)

In this cityscape, we again have the conjunction of physical discomfort, disagreeable tactile sensations and behind them, untold but certainly understood by Dickens's contemporaries, the pervasive smell of coal smoke. In all these examples, the aesthetic distance usually associated with the production of a landscape is done away with. One could be tempted to conclude that Dickens's choice of representing landscape from the inside and from the ordinary man's perspective constructs another type of landscape, that might be called an anti-landscape. One should note, however, that the scene just quoted from is visually hampered by the fog that prevents any attempt to go beyond basic bodily sensations, as shown in the mention of "chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all around them" (*BH*, ch. 1, 49).

What the reader is given is in fact a carefully constructed alternative to standard landscapes. Deliberately doing away with the visual implies that when it is present it is just as carefully thought about and crafted. Again, one notices that Dickens starts from perception, its quirks and limitations, and this leads to representations of landscape that foreshadow ways of seeing that we take for granted today. Some of Dickens's views call impressionist paintings to mind, with their choice of ordinary objects and their attention to the shifting effects of light. The landscape by the river Saône on an autumn evening in *Little Dorrit* is a case in point,

the stream like a sullied looking-glass [...] reflected the clouds heavily [...] The flat expanse of country about Chalons lay a long heavy streak, occasionally made a little ragged by a row of poplar trees against the wrathful sunset. (*LD*, bk. I, ch. 11, 165)

London is treated in the same manner, shown as full of moving or shimmering lights. In *Great Expectations*, we find a description of a windy night, a dark background with "the lamps on the bridges and the shore [...] shuddering, and [...] the coal fires on the barges on the river [...] carried before the wind like red hot splashes in the rain" (*GE*, ch. 39, 236-7). The novel also offers a description of dawn on the river, with the "winking lights on the bridge", the "coming sun like a marsh of fire on the horizon" and "the river [...] spanned by bridges that were turning coldly grey with here and there at top a warm touch from the burning in the sky" (*GE*, ch. 53, 322).



At times, it is Whistler that *Great Expectations* calls to mind through the structure and deliberately limited range of colours used. The landscape at the beginning of the novel is indeed strikingly Whistlerian with its superposition of the “dark flat wilderness”, a “low leaden line” (ch. 1, 9), a “long black horizontal line”, “the river [...] another horizontal line”, “the sky [...] a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermingled” (ch. 1, 12). The strong horizontal structure in red and greys and black is brought to perfect visual completeness by “two barely discernible” vertical lines.<sup>12</sup> That this is deliberate artistry becomes clear when it is taken up later when Pip goes to meet Orlick and the landscape is described with “the dark lines of the marshes” and beyond, “a ribbon of clear sky, hardly broad enough to hold the red large moon” (ch. 53, 314).

But what of the view from the top of Todgers in *Martin Chuzzlewit*?

There were things to gaze at [...] well worth seeing [...] if the day was bright, you observed upon the housetops, stretching far away, a long dark path: the shadow of the Monument: and turning round, the tall original was close beside you [...] then there were steeples, towers, belfries, shining vanes and masts of ships [...] gables, housetops, garret-windows (ch. 9, 188).

The entanglement of vertical and diagonal lines, the simultaneous double view point, and the – implied – muted range of colours go beyond impressionism and come very close to early twentieth century cubism, to Braque in particular. The same applies to the view of Deal in *Bleak House*, where the “long flat beach”, the “bare upright poles” and the “irregular” rectangles of houses create a geometrical landscape in grey with “raw misty morning” and in dark red and brown with “wooden and brick” (ch. 45, 674).

Dickens’s writing even foreshadows modern art in a few examples such as the view of London from a distance, cut down to “a pale dead light [...] into its long sullen lines of clouds [...] Towards London a lurid glare overhung the whole dark waste” in *Bleak House* (ch. 21, 484). The three superposed bands of strong contrasting colours resemble some of Rothko’s earlier work. As for the view “from my Lady Dedlock’s own windows, “alternately a lead-coloured view, and a view in Indian ink” (*BH*, ch. 2, 56) it offers a monochrome or a near monochrome.

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<sup>12</sup> The beacon and the gibbet.

### 3. Landscapes on the Move

But Dickens's landscapes do more than simply point in the direction of some of the visual avant-gardes to come. At times, one feels that they are literary premonitions of what will become the new 20<sup>th</sup> century art form, the cinema. Dickens is certainly one of the first to use so consistently the trick of revealing a landscape from a moving point of view, managing to indicate and follow the character's pace and speed. Many instances can be found in *Bleak House*, mainly in Esther's narrative, in *Little Dorrit*, in Clennam's walks to Twickenham and in the Dorrits' Continental tour, in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and the journey across America, in *Our Mutual Friend* in Betty Higden's flight, or in *Dombey and Son* in Carker's journey/flight through France. One of the most striking instances records the slow changes in the landscape as Nell and her grandfather leave London on foot, first through the noisy labyrinth of inner London,

this quarter passed, they came upon the haunts of commerce and great traffic [...] again this quarter passed, they came upon a straggly neighbourhood [with] mean houses [...] going on for many a while [...] at length these streets becoming more straggly, dwindled and dwindled away, until there were only small garden patches bordering the roads [...] to these succeeded pert cottages, two and two with plots of ground in front [...] Then came the public house [...] then fields [...] and then some houses, one by one, of goodly size with lawns [...] then came a turnpike [...] then fields again; then a hill; and on top of that the traveler might stop, and – look [...] back at St Paul's [...] (OCS, ch. 15, 171-3)

Is not this a literary equivalent of the slow dolly shot, always including the long distance panoramic view, that we have become so accustomed to in feature films as well as in documentaries? Also exemplifying that cinematic technique yet to come into being, Tom Pinch on the reverse journey, from the provinces to London in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, rides on a coach, and the rendering of the trip brings to mind cloak-and-dagger films.

Yoho among the gathering shades [...] yoho beside the village green, across the old stone bridge, and down again in the shadowy road [...] Yoho! [...] over the hills and far and away [...] Yoho! Yoho! [...] Yoho! through ditch and brake, upon the plough land and the smooth, along the steep hill side and steeper wall [...] Yoho! [...] Yoho, past market-gardens, rows of houses, villas, crescents, terraces, and squares; past wagons, coaches, carts; past early workmen, late stragglers, drunken men and sober carriers of loads; past brick and mortar in its every shape [...] Yoho, down countless mazy turnings [...] and Tom Pinch [...] is in London!" (MC, ch. 26, 635-6)

The bugle's "yoho" sets the pace of the coach, gathering speed with exclamations marks, then slowing down near London, and losing its exclamation marks as the obstacles to its course grow in number.

The most striking "landscape on the move", though, is probably that seen from the train taking Mr. Dombey to Leamington. The speed of the machine is made clear by words such as "flashing", "bursting out", "flying", "fierce and rapid", "plunging down", etc. (*D&S*, ch. 20, 353-4). It contrasts with the three passages enumerating quiet features in the landscape: "by the heath, by the orchard, by the park, by the garden, over the canal, across the river", or slow moving objects: "where the sheep are feeding, where the mill is going, where the barge is floating, where the dead are lying, where the factory is smoking". This succession of glimpses, in Dickens's own word, of static or nearly static objects that "fall [...] upon the eye, and then are lost" (354), is something we recognize as part of our almost everyday experience, and thrill, of hurtling through a landscape. Dickens's fascination with the train, its speed and power, foreshadows that of the early cinema, exemplified, among many examples, by the classic British documentary, *The Nightmail* (1936)<sup>13</sup>. In this documentary, one can see a fast train rushing through the peaceful countryside of slow-moving rural England and the night lights of the busy industrial North. One could in fact suggest that there is more than foreshadowing here and that Dickens may have been a direct influence, especially when one listens to Auden's poem written for the film.

This is the Night Mail crossing the border,  
Bringing the cheque and the postal order,  
Letters for the rich, letters for the poor,  
The shop at the corner and the girl next door.  
[...]  
Shovelling white steam over her shoulder  
Snorting noisily as she passes  
Silent miles of wind-bent grasses.  
[...]  
Thousands are still asleep  
Dreaming of terrifying monsters,  
Or of friendly tea beside the band at Cranston's  
Asleep in working Glasgow, asleep in well-set Edinburgh,  
Asleep in granite Aberdeen,  
They continue their dreams. [...]

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Watt and Basil Wright, *Night Mail*, 1936. This is a documentary about the Postal Special train from London to Aberdeen. It was produced by the GPO film unit and, in the last few minutes, includes music by Benjamin Britten and W. H. Auden's poem.

The poem alludes to glimpses similar to those found in Dickens's text and it follows the rhythm of the wheels on the track, starting slowly and gathering speed, just as Dickens's recurrent formula "with a shriek and a roar, and a rattle" imitates the repetitive sound of wheels on the tracks.

One could also mention Renoir's film *La Bête humaine* which, with its mixture of physical sensations and emotional tension, reminds us of the emotional dimension of Dickens's landscapes which reflect the state of mind of his characters at any given moment. One is struck, for example, by the number of occurrences when the landscape seems to be blurred or to disappear. Nothing is described of Clennam's walk to Twickenham in *Little Dorrit*, simply because the character is too preoccupied with his love for Minnie to notice anything. He only recovers the use of his eyes when he reaches the house where she lives and then we have a full description the building. In the same way, though in a happier mode, David Copperfield hardly remembers the ride next to Dora's carriage to reach a picnic spot: "I don't know how long we were going, and to this hour I know as little where we went" (*DC*, ch. 33, 409). But the most striking instance of this phenomenon of mind blinding the eye is probably David's journey from London to Dover. He walks through what is generally considered as one of the most beautiful parts of England. But all he sees and records are the haystacks where he sleeps and some orchards (ch. 13, 163), probably because he is hungry and thirsty. The narration is completely centred on his state of exhaustion, his hunger and his (justified) fears whenever anybody crosses his path. These are of course situations of extreme emotional stress. Pip at the beginning of *Great Expectations* experiences a similar anxiety and yet the description of the landscape is extremely detailed, probably owing to his intimate knowledge of the place as opposed to Oliver's discovery of the road to London. These observations tend to reinforce the idea that Dickens was knowingly playing with the varied and fluctuating interactions of brain and eye when constructing landscapes.

One should note, though, that the process is not simply restrictive, the mind can also, as has been so masterfully shown by Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*, add to what the eye sees, from memory, direct or indirect, the major memory thread being, unsurprisingly for Dickens, that of childhood. The persistence of childhood perception, experience and imagination is first perceptible through the allusions to games. The mountain villages that David observes from afar in *David Copperfield* are said to look "too small for toys" (*DC*, ch. 58, 685). Similarly, the area

where Headstone lives in *Our Mutual Friend* is “like a toy neighbourhood taken in blocks out of a box by a child of particularly incoherent mind” (*OMF*, bk. II, ch. 1, 219). The Monument hidden in the fog in *Martin Chuzzlewit* suggests Blind Man’s Buff (*MC*, ch. 8, 180), to cite only a few examples. The difficulty for a child to separate reality from fantasy is pervasive: animals communicate with young Pip, “sheep looking timidly” and “cattle staring angrily” (ch. 5, 32) at him in *Great Expectations*. That idiosyncrasy persists into adulthood, indeed partakes of the fantastic atmosphere of some of Dickens’s novels and expresses Dickens’s ability to perceive “the romantic side of familiar things”: thus a church is said to look like a “petrified monster” (*OMF*, bk. II, ch. 1, 221-2), houses “twist [...] themselves to peep down” at Pip (*GE*, ch. 20, 130), buildings make “an occasional struggle to get their heads above the foggy sea” (*BH*, ch. 25, 417) that engulfs London. Chimneys in particular seem to acquire a life of their own, given “ugly faces [...] frowning over at [Nell]” (*OCS*, ch. 9, 120) or “twirl[ing] their cowls, flutter[ing] their smoke, bridling and fanning themselves, looking on in a state of airy surprise” (*MC*, ch. 9, 188). Elsewhere, Dickens depicts animated steamboats on the Thames, “perspiring and fretting [...] fretting and chafing [...] always panting out without any stops” (*MC*, ch. 40, 697). These landscapes teeming with activity confirm our starting point of London as a fundamentally human landscape.

This may account for the multiple connexions established between landscapes and fairy tales and legends in Dickens’s writing. London on a foggy day appears in *Martin Chuzzlewit* like “a city in the clouds, which they had been travelling to all night up a magic carpet” (ch. 8, 180). The narrator’s comment on the monotony of suburbia in *Our Mutual Friend* is that there might have been “but one restless edifice with the locomotive gift of Aladdin’s palace” (bk. II, ch. 1, 219). The Thames in *Our Mutual Friend* is seen as full of monsters, including “the dreadfully facetious wolf in bed in Grandmamma’s cottage [saying] ‘that’s better to *drown*<sup>14</sup> you in my dears” (bk. I, ch. 14, 173). There is also, linked with the idea, mentioned above, of the landscape being mainly the environment to human habitation, the picture of enchanted houses in the middle of nowhere. A case in point is “the castle of the ogress”, Mrs. Pipchin, standing in a “chalky, flinty and sterile” landscape or Florence’s house, described as a “magic dwelling-place in [a] magic story, shut up in the heart of a thick wood” (ch. 8, 160; ch. 23, 393) or the Pegottys’ houseboat rising like a magic dwelling in the middle

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<sup>14</sup> Italics in the text.

of the empty “wilderness of sea and river” in *David Copperfield* (ch. 3, 32). The most obvious example to be found in *Great Expectations* where Wemmick’s estate is in fact a fairy tale landscape embedded in suburban London. One and a half lines are devoted to the surrounding landscape before describing in detail the miniature castle, drawbridge, moat, etc., which seem to come straight out of a children’s book illustration. Again, other examples can be found. Thus we see how Dickens’s landscapes, far from corresponding to a clear-cut reality, are the fanciful projections of human perception.

In conclusion, we can say that Dickensian landscapes draw on a very old tradition (Breughel), and infuse or transform it with visual techniques or motifs that fit the novelist’s needs. We can also say that they are avant-garde in their way of accepting human sensory and mental limitations. Dickens’s writing is undeniably visual, but apprehension of the world makes use of all the senses, including that of movement. All in all, Dickens’s landscapes can be summed up as being polymorphous and ever changing, the author having retained something of the child’s omnivorous capacity to absorb the world.

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