



Dickensian Landscapes : introduction

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Introduction

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Though Dickens is best known for his unique characters, he is also associated with unforgettable descriptions of London. These memorable cityscapes will be used here as a springboard to conduct an in-depth analysis of Dickensian landscapes in general. In the wake of Malcolm Andrews's study of *Landscape and Western Art*, the word landscape is understood here as a twofold process in which land is not just perceived as landscape but actually built into art; in other words landscape is defined here as land "aesthetically processed" (Andrews 1, 7), or to paraphrase Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*, as a way of elaborating on land as raw matter (10).¹ It is this complex construction of landscapes—which in this instance are made of words—that the following collection of articles brings to light. They consider how Dickens combined what he saw with imaginary constructions, to build the unique cityscapes we all know so well. They show that Dickens's landscapes were informed by other artistic landscapes as well as by actual views of Victorian scenery. Unravelling the cultural influences, myths and memories that influenced his writing in the building of such landscapes, they tackle the question of mental landscapes. Mindscapes feature in fact prominently in this selection of articles.

These papers show how Dickens framed the scenery that he chose to depict and how his landscapes provide a setting for other views. Far from being mere backdrops, however, these landscapes always complement what they frame or foreground in subtle and complex ways. Some of them even seem to exist in their own right and not as mere frameworks for other subjects. This collection of essays

¹ See Malcolm Andrews, *Landscape and Western Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999 and Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, New York: AA Knopf, 1995.

examines the very nature of Dickens's response to his surroundings. The reader's experience of Dickensian landscapes is scrutinised and their sensory, personal but also spiritual and aesthetic dimensions are explored in detail. Following a pictorial model, the very composition of these landscapes is also taken into account—that is to say their subject matter, framing, foreground, middle ground and background. The feeling of unity that each landscape does or does not convey is also considered.

The articles further highlight how Dickens contributed, through his writing of landscapes, to making their surroundings more intelligible to readers. Dickens thus shed new light on Victorian scenery. His literary representation of contemporary landscapes recomposed reality and produced aesthetic emotions that made it possible for his readers to take a step back, to apprehend and appreciate their environment differently. Victorian urban or industrial areas must indeed have seemed disconcerting, baffling, inhospitable and even hostile. In this respect, such areas could be compared to a “new wilderness” (Andrews 18). Through his writing, Dickens endeavoured to make sense of this modern wilderness.

Last but not least, the contributions to this collection examine the opposition between cityscapes and landscapes and its implications. They show that this opposition dissolves, in the last analysis, into a set of complex issues that both polarise the dichotomy between urban and rural areas, and paradoxically enough connect them even more narrowly. This involves what the geographer Denis Cosgrove has defined as the insider/outsider opposition, in which insiders experience the landscape without seeing it as such, while outsiders admire it without noticing the experience of its inhabitants.²

In keeping with Malcolm Andrews's approach, the first section of this collection, entitled “Constructing Land into Landscape”, is devoted to the transformation of land into landscape. Marianne Camus underlines the modernity of Dickensian landscapes. She demonstrates how Dickens's insights seem to foreshadow artistic movements such as impressionism and cubism, as well as new media like the cinema—since his landscapes are often “on the move”, as seen as it were, through the eye of a camera. What stands out most clearly in Camus's contribution is the construction of landscape and its framing by the senses—all the senses and not simply sight—

² See Denis Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, 1984, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

feelings and memories of the perceiver. Dickens thus draws our attention to the predominant role of perception in the transformation of land into landscape. He also highlights the distortions and limitations of perception by debunking the superimposition onto landscapes of fashionable concepts, such as the picturesque, which eliminates people and their real sufferings from the pictures. A most interesting discussion arises in this respect between Camus's article and the next ones by Nathalie Jaëck and Xavier Amelot on the one hand, and Mark Frost on the other.

Geographical input is brought to bear by Jaëck and Amelot who describe how Dickens understood the rhetoric of landscape and developed strategies to resist it. Indeed Dickens deconstructs typical romantic country scenery, showing their literal as well as metaphorical emptiness, and shifts the focus on the people living in the landscapes, themselves to be understood more often than not as cityscapes, or more precisely as "cityscopes". He is not interested in the falsely idyllic country pictures enjoyed by the happy few, but in the workers and the newly born cities, seen from a viewpoint that is no longer panoramic and stable but mobile and fragmented. According to Mark Frost, it is precisely Dickens's urban gaze, alive to the unjust sufferings and exploitation of the people, which accounts for his apparent wooden descriptions of the countryside. Focusing more particularly on *The Old Curiosity Shop*, he shows how the novel's quest for "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)" fails, leading 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 becomes prominent)". The countryside is only an extension of the city; Nell is struggling to escape from Quilp, the monster spewed out by the city; and Dickens's novel betrays the anxieties caused by the blurring of the radical distinction between the rural and the urban.

Moving from the transformation of real land into landscapes, the second part of this collection of essays, "Landscapes and the Mind" focuses on the internalisation of landscapes and the way they can give rise to various mindscapes. Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay offers a detailed and most subtle analysis of *Bleak House*, which she opposes to earlier novels such as *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*, to highlight how sharp distinctions have broken down and given way to an all-pervasive

corruption and “an uncanny similarity between London and the country”. In a way that echoes Camus, Dupeyron-Lafay suggests that we understand landscapes in *Bleak House* not only as “mindscapes”, but as the projection of the characters’ unconscious, and even as places bearing simultaneously signs of the past, the present and the future in “a foreshortening of the diachronic perspective [which] produces a sense of constriction akin to claustrophobia. Everything merges and converges in this world where evil, corruption and suffering are as diffuse, elusive and ubiquitous as the unhealthy London fog”.

Sara Gazo offers another take on Dickensian mental scapes, which she approaches from the angle of dreamscapes. Her article shows that Dickens used dreamscapes to explore geographical spaces differently but also to connect these spaces to the space of the mind. Gazo traces the evolution of Dickensian dreamscapes from the 1830s until the 1860s through three short texts, namely an essay from *Sketches by Boz* entitled “Early Coaches”, a section from *Pictures from Italy* on Venice and another essay from *The Uncommercial Traveller* bearing the title “Night Walks”. Gazo relates the dreamscapes described in these texts to interactions between external stimuli and the innermost self. Besides analysing such phenomena in detail, she alludes to the scientific theories underlying them as well as to various mental states and external elements triggering them. The article shows that dreamscapes are characterised by shifting perspectives rendered narratively by the use of references to optical devices like the magic lantern or the diorama. From these dreamscapes emerge scenes infused with mystery and eeriness typical of the sensations, thoughts and impressions experienced during sleep, ranging from daydreaming to nocturnal dreamscapes. Atmospheric cityscapes pervade almost all of these dreams; they do so, however, in altered forms that connect urban geography and the geography of the mind in complex manifestations involving projections of the self. In these alternative urban environments, the limits between the inner self and the world become blurred. The maze of the city comes to mirror the labyrinth of the mind.

In the last section of this collection of articles, “Man, Place and Landscape”, Diana Archibald, Norbert Lennartz and James Cutler explore further connections between man, place and landscape. Norbert Lennartz deals with landscape through the turbulent relations between man and nature. His article mentions the destructions

wrought by man upon nature and, by extension, upon the landscape. Lennartz depicts the opposition between nature and cities as a violent clash in which one does not know the victim from the victimiser. Treacherous cities repress nature and monstrous nature, incubate the foulest miasma that are not just to be found and left to stagnate in the distant swamps of America but encroach upon the very heart of London, via the Thames. This article situates Dickensian landscapes somewhere in between those depicted by Wordsworth and Byron. Dickens is not so reluctant as the former to present the conflicts brought about by the imbalance between man and nature, nor as thoroughly pessimistic in his depiction of nature as the latter is, although his optimism rests on somewhat blinkered views, much to some critics' woe—Lennartz notably recalls how Allan MacDuffie complains that Dickens leaves his readers “with the unsatisfying idea that middle-class marriage makes possible some kind of clean, untapped, uncompromised energy source”.

Landscapes of liminality where in-betweenness prevails is the subject of Diana Archibald's article, devoted to the Dickensian portscapes of Boston and Boulogne. These harbour scenes are characterised by a sense of transition related to those who go through them on their way from one country to another. Archibald argues that these areas “dis-locate Dickens and facilitate transition to a new phase of his life and career”. Reaching these ports from the sea implies a view upon the shore, the islands and the mainland, all of which awaken anticipations on the part of the traveller and prepare for the transition between two worlds, the Old and the New World in the case of Boston, England and the Continent in the case of Boulogne. What strikes us in Diana Archibald's article is that Dickens's writing even seems to have anticipated the definition of landscapes as “imagined worlds” or as extensions of what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities”,³ in which landscapes are the imaginary projections or constructions of a group of people. In this respect, Archibald shows that in the mind of many British travellers, Boulogne was precariously balanced between a sense that it was an extension of Britain and the idea that it had no character, being neither British nor continental.

The link between landscapes and the idea of travel is taken up again in James Cutler's article, which tackles Dickensian landscapes through the idea of thanatourism, in connection with Dickens's propensity to explore sites related to

³ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflection on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983, New York: Verso, 1991.

death and to introduce them into his novels. Thanatourism introduces two novelties in the perception of landscapes. It stresses the fact that landscapes can be travelled past or through, and it emphasises the possibility of being immersed in a landscape. Cutler aptly shows that Dickens's preoccupation with deathly landscapes is not just a sign of his fascination mixed with horror for such sights, but also a symptom of his preoccupation with his own death and the afterlife of his art. The depiction of landscapes related to death was paradoxically part and parcel of strategies aimed at overcoming oblivion and complete erasure. Cutler centres his paper around *Our Mutual Friend* and highlights the role of riverscapes in connection with death in this novel. He shows that the 1998 film adaptation refrains from offering large vistas of the river in period-drama style. The close-up views of the river are used as a backdrop to foreground the corpses that the Thames washes up. Similarly, views of urban landscapes in the novel are also at times limited by the eye's incapacity to see through the London fog, whose elaborate colour-scheme is described in the novel with the outmost detail. Here the eye is forced to hover above the surface of the landscape and to appreciate only its coating or, so to speak, veneer of fog.

Of course, Dickens is not free from contradictions and nostalgic wishful-thinking: thus in the foreword to this selection of articles, Paul Schlicke's overview of Dickens's corpus shows that in Dickens's work pastoral idylls are closely associated with memories of childhood, tenacious but never allowing the idyll to be retrieved. In the afterword to this collection, Michael Slater describes Dickens vainly searching for the sublime during his first American tour in 1842, though he later leaves *David Copperfield* utterly unmoved by views of the Swiss sublime, as though such hackneyed scenes failed to provide him with the solace he is seeking, a solace he only finds by going down into the valley and looking at the men working there.

All in all, these articles argue that the concept of landscape never goes unchallenged in Dickens's writing. It is never simply or simplistically seen as the easy transposition of empirical reality—it is, precisely, a concept, created from ideals or ideology, involving and reflecting the characters' subjectivity, thick with the representation of their past, present and even future, at the same time as it is utterly "other" and cannot ever be entirely caught in any representation. Dickens was aware of the plasticity and evolving quality of landscapes. In his work, the word landscape shifts from its predominantly pastoral acceptance, with occasional variations like the

seascapes in *David Copperfield*, to the description of increasingly urban environments in the form of townscapes or cityscapes, with their own distinctive and striking sound and olfactory scapes. Dickens clearly understood landscapes as not being “objectively given” but as perspectival constructs. His novels even seem to anticipate very recent and postmodern forms of landscapes, defined by the sociologist Arjun Appadurai as ethnoscapas, technoscapas, mediascapas and ideoscapas.⁴ Dickens’s landscapes anticipate “ethnoscapas” in the form of unstable flows of restless characters and communities on the move, epitomised by Little Nell and her grandfather, Pip, the Dorrit family or the French revolutionaries, to mention but a few. All these characters belong to changing worlds whose boundaries are becoming more and more uncertain and fluid and therefore impossible to pin down. Dickens’s very work fits into what is now called a “mediascape”—the growing network of sources used to produce and disseminate information on an increasingly large scale and at increasing speed. At times, Dickens even seems to foresee the emergence of “technoscapas”, namely the mechanical and informational fluidity of technology across boundaries. Thus, in *Little Dorrit* the rumours about Merdle’s investment schemes and then about the financial collapse of his ventures spread through society and especially through Bleeding Heart Yard like wildfire, and this propagation somehow foreshadows today’s social networks and tweets. Moreover, the whole of Dickens’s work sets up a constantly evolving imaginary world or “ideoscape”, both quintessentially English and increasingly transnational, as his work travels across frontiers and becomes part and parcel of the imaginary constructions of other communities. In short, Dickens had already realised and shown in his work how powerful a tool the notion of landscapes and its declensions could be to understand the self and the world.

⁴ See Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy”, in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. 27-47.