

**Imagining the Thames:  
conceptions and functions of the river  
in the fiction of Charles Dickens**

by  
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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines Dickens's uses of images of the river throughout his fiction, and also in the early sketches, the reprinted pieces from *Household Words* and *The Uncommercial Traveller*. The river concerned is usually but not exclusively the Thames, usually but not exclusively in London. The thesis offers some practical evidence to account for the powerful influence of the Thames upon Dickens's imagination and shows how he conceives of it both within existing frames of reference and in some distinctively Dickensian ways. It considers how Dickens's representations of the river play into the cult of the picturesque which emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, and into the tradition which sees it as a symbolic conduit of the empire. It goes on to consider his use of the river as a boundary, the consequent importance of river crossings in his work, and his conception of the riparian space as a liminal one. It then explores a distinctive scheme of discourse which uses the river to represent rebellious forces beyond the control of human agency and shows how this reflects the sense of spiritual threat which is to be found in some of the other, albeit rare, depictions of nature to be found in his writing. It then shows how Dickens uses the river symbolically to express ideas about death and rebirth, together with the loss of and changes in identity, and how he draws on a scheme of distinctively Christian iconography to do so. Finally it shows how he uses it to create and represent an underworld for London, using tropes of epic founded on classical models. The thesis concludes that, in its use of natural forces to signify social ones, Dickens's writing about the river serves to amplify his conception of stratification in Victorian society and adds weight to the socially conservative political stance which is known to be present in his world view.

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## Abbreviations

<i>SB</i>	<i>Sketches by Boz</i>
<i>PP</i>	<i>Pickwick Papers</i>
<i>OT</i>	<i>Oliver Twist</i>
<i>NN</i>	<i>Nicholas Nickleby</i>
<i>OCS</i>	<i>The Old Curiosity Shop</i>
<i>BR</i>	<i>Barnaby Rudge</i>
<i>AN</i>	<i>American Notes</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Christmas Books</i>
<i>MC</i>	<i>Martin Chuzzlewit</i>
<i>PfI</i>	<i>Pictures from Italy</i>
<i>DS</i>	<i>Dombey and Son</i>
<i>DC</i>	<i>David Copperfield</i>
<i>BH</i>	<i>Bleak House</i>
<i>CS</i>	<i>Stories for Christmas</i>
<i>CHE</i>	<i>A Child's History of England</i>
<i>HT</i>	<i>Hard Times</i>
<i>LD</i>	<i>Little Dorrit</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Reprinted Pieces</i>
<i>TTC</i>	<i>A Tale of Two Cities</i>
<i>UT</i>	<i>The Uncommercial Traveller</i>
<i>GE</i>	<i>Great Expectations</i>
<i>OMF</i>	<i>Our Mutual Friend</i>
<i>ED</i>	<i>The Mystery of Edwin Drood</i>

All quotations from these works are followed in the text by the above abbreviation followed directly by the page number in the edition specified in the bibliography.

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## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

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The 'Literary London' conference was attended in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 at the University of London, and papers were presented there on the last two occasions. The 'Dickens's Style' conference at the University of Oxford in 2011 and the 'Dickens and the mid-Victorian Press' conference at the University of Buckingham in 2012 were also attended.

Word count of main body of thesis = 82,452 from p.1 to p.170.  
(Includes notes. Excludes prefatory matter and bibliography.)

Signed: .....

Date: .....

## Introduction

*He* does not trouble his head as I do, about the river at night. *He* does not care for its creeping, black and silent, on our right there, rushing through sluice gates, lapping at piles and posts and iron rings, hiding strange things in its mud, running away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than midnight funeral should, and acquiring such various experience between its cradle and its grave. It has no mystery for *him*. (RP 149, CD's italics)

Dickens is generally accepted to be a writer of the built environment, not the natural environment - the great writer of the city, not the country - and when he does write about nature he is understood to do so either superficially or even quite badly. London is by far the predominant setting of his novels, while other urban locations include Portsmouth in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Salisbury in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Cloisterham in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and the fictional Coketown of *Hard Times*. Dickens himself famously described London as a 'magic lantern spectacle'<sup>1</sup> which was essential to his artistic inspiration: he spent much time walking its streets, particularly in the poorer districts, sometimes in company with the police, as *The Uncommercial Traveller* and other journalism attests, and the London scenes of his novels are described in a wealth of accurate detail. Scenes of the natural world are by comparison rare, and tend to fall into the category of a very conventionalised pastoral. As one critic typically has it: 'London is his Lake District'.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis examines the one significant exception to this rule, which is that he does write a great deal about the river: usually, but not exclusively, the Thames. It will suggest that Dickens's writing about the river stands out from the rest of his nature writing and that his response to it is a powerfully imaginative one, sometimes of a very sinister nature. As nature's only physical representative in the publicly accessible parts of Victorian London,<sup>3</sup> the Thames obtrudes itself upon his notice, in a way in which the countryside beyond the limits of the city does not. Most obviously, it serves as a setting and major plot element in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, but Dickens uses the river in many ways throughout the rest of his work, too, as setting, signifier and metaphor.

The main purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which he does so, the meanings and effects produced, and to re-evaluate the significance within his work of this writing about the river. In London, of course, the river is an urban feature as well as a natural one, so this study takes its place alongside several books on the relationship between Dickens and the urban environment. Classic among these is F. S. Schwarzbach's *Dickens and the City* (1979), while important recent contributions include Jeremy Tambling's *Going Astray: Dickens and London* (2009) and Andrew

Sanders's *Charles Dickens's London* (2010). While the Thames unsurprisingly makes appearances in these works, their main focus remains on the built environment.

This study can also be read in the context of generally dismissive responses to Dickens's writing about nature. Classic among these is that of John Ruskin, who wrote: 'It is evident the man is a thorough cockney, from his way of talking about hedgerows, and honeysuckles, and village spires.'<sup>4</sup> More recently, Robert Barnard writes: 'Dickens was a town-boy. Nothing proves this so conclusively as his descriptions of nature, which he always thought of as "Nature"'.<sup>5</sup> This suggests that Dickens sees nature as being comprehended within a single, generalised label, and supports a view that he writes about it in stereotypes to produce a conventional image of the pastoral. Meanwhile, for Paul Schacht, nature in Dickens really only means human nature, and he explores, for example, how the growth of plants is used as a metaphor for human development in the case of Louisa in *Hard Times*.<sup>6</sup> George Levine points out the distinctly un-Romantic representation of Alpine scenery in *Little Dorrit*, describing it as 'an unreal world' to which 'William Dorrit carr[ies] his moral disease with him',<sup>7</sup> while Schwarzbach observes the number of ruined gardens which appear in Dickens, citing as examples Fountains Court in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and, from *Great Expectations*, the garden of Satis House, which he (Schwarzbach) describes as 'a grim, ironic parody of the supposed pastoral qualities of the village'.<sup>8</sup>

A more detailed study by Robert Patten bears out these perceptions that Dickens's representations of nature are weak. He writes:

... these scenes are not particularly carefully observed or differentiated. They contain nothing more than the conventional ingredients of a pastoral setting: sunshine, birds, blue sky, green fields, vitality, beauty, happiness, and peace.

We do not have the impression that Dickens felt strongly, either as a person or as a writer, about the minutiae of Nature, even after he took up residence at Gad's Hill.<sup>9</sup>

Patten goes on to focus his study of nature writing in Dickens on the Christmas stories where, he says, nature plays its most prominent part. This is because these stories are generally set in the middle of winter, and nature supplies bad weather. Bad weather out of doors clearly serves to counterpoint and thereby enhance the comfort of the convivial hearth-side indoors, which is one of Dickens's most insistent motifs and a much more important setting to these stories. However, it also sets up a conception of nature as something hostile, and threatening to human interests, which may be true of Dickens's work as a whole. As Patten says: 'For Dickens, human engagement with Nature is likely to be problematic.'<sup>10</sup>

This seems right, and may be referable to Dickens's self-confessed 'love of order'.<sup>11</sup> In the novels there are many affectionately described scenes of meticulously ordered interiors, of which Dickens obviously approves. Perhaps the best example is Mr Pumblechook's corn-chandlery and seedsman's shop in *Great Expectations*, with its 'tied-up brown paper packets' of seeds and bulbs, all in drawers. Pip reflects: 'It appeared to me that he must be a very happy man indeed, to have so many little drawers in his shop.' (*GE* 49) The Uncommercial Traveller also likes the idea of 'little drawers', in an imagined apothecary's shop (*UT* 215), and there are many other examples of similar scenes, such as Solomon Gills's shop in *Dombey and Son*, or Tim Linkinwater's office in *Nicholas Nickleby*. If, as Patten says, nature is 'problematic' for Dickens, that may be because it is beyond the human power to order it and place it in 'little drawers' like Mr Pumblechook's. Perhaps in the city and its houses Dickens sees the potential for such orderliness, whereas in the countryside he sees only dangerously uncontrollable natural forces.

While agreeing with such evaluations in general, this study will develop further Patten's idea that Dickens perceives nature as being hostile to human interests, and suggest that his response to the river is a particularly strong one in this regard. It will account for this partly by the fact that a very particular set of conditions prevailed on the Thames in London at precisely the time that Dickens was writing. Not only was the problem of pollution at its worst but, in 1832, when his career was about to start, the removal of old London bridge restored the river to its full tidal range and thus to a primitive condition not seen since the middle ages. Then, in the years around 1870 when he died, the construction of the embankments brought it back under human control and reduced it once again from a natural to an artificial state. Dickens's observation of these changes would have brought the Thames all the more prominently to his notice, and helps to account for the importance of it to his work, particularly as a force beyond human control, which this thesis seeks to point out.

Critical attention to the river in Dickens has previously been confined largely to the famous denouement of *Great Expectations* and to *Our Mutual Friend*. For example, one significant text to which this thesis will respond is Michelle Allen's 2008 study, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London*, where she devotes a chapter to: 'The Geography of the Thames in *Our Mutual Friend*'. Meanwhile, surprisingly little attention is given to the river in criticism of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where I suggest that it is of considerable importance. The canon of Dickens criticism contains many thematic books which follow the *Dickens and ...* formula: Dickens and the city, as seen above, alongside numerous other topics such as women, childhood, Christmas, the law, prisons, money, the empire, reality and so forth. There is, however, no full length study of Dickens and the river, as attempted in this thesis.

My methodology is partly ecocritical, in that the thesis closely explores images of nature within canonical literature, and the ways in which ecological paradigms might inform literary criticism: two out of the three functions of ecocriticism as set out by Cheryll Glotfelty in her *Ecocriticism Reader*.<sup>12</sup> It is also concerned with what the ecocritic Michael McDowell has described as: ‘the practical application of theoretical ecological concepts to specific literary works’ and, also with McDowell, it sometimes sees a sense of place not merely as setting, but as a participant: ‘determin[ing] the possible ideologies available to a character’.<sup>13</sup> It is this kind of thinking which enables other ecocritics to see nature as ‘a player’<sup>14</sup> or as a ‘vulnerable subject’, as opposed to ‘mute object’,<sup>15</sup> or even as: ‘the energising medium from which human lives emerge’.<sup>16</sup> an idea in which this study will very much participate, and which is made all the more relevant by the changing character of the Thames in Dickens’s time.

As a study of Dickens’s imagination it is based largely on close reading of the primary texts across the whole of his work, informed by principles of urban geography, and by details of the physical geography of the Thames in the Victorian period. Among these, its estuarine character in London helps to explain why, in some of the passages to be explored, Dickens conflates images of the river with those of the sea. Before the construction of the embankments, the river was up to 500 yards wide even within the City,<sup>17</sup> while it still widens to about a mile at Gravesend, and more than five miles at its confluence with the Medway between Southend and Sheerness – the five mile reach below Gravesend being, of course, the scene of the denouement of *Great Expectations*. Its big tidal range, amplified as it was in Dickens’s time, means that it ebbs and flows like the sea even in central London, and is increasingly brackish downstream.

The physical image of the river in London is therefore not unlike an image of the sea, and the discourses which reference them in Dickens can sometimes seem interchangeable. Thus, for example, the superstition which attaches to the tide at Yarmouth in *David Copperfield*, that people can only be ‘properly born’ on a flood tide near high water, and can only die when the tide is going out, as Barkis does (see *DC* 444-5), would be equally believable in London. In the same novel Martha Endell associates herself very powerfully with the Thames, but she is also strongly associated with the maritime community at Yarmouth, where she comes from and where she works in Mr Omer’s shop at her first appearance in the novel. The two environments are thus conflated within one of the most important riparian characters to be examined below.

Dickens is therefore not always precise in his terms, and there is sometimes a slippage between his discourse of the river and his discourse of the sea. While maintaining its primary focus on the river, this study does recognise that, and will at one point explore the slippage partly by examining Victorian responses to a more general or even abstract concept of fluidity. In this regard it is indebted to a persuasive recent study by Jules Law, entitled *The Social Life of Fluids: blood, milk and water in the Victorian novel*, to which this thesis is, to a significant degree, a response.

In drawing conclusions about Dickens's writing about the river, the thesis will also attempt to throw additional light on other aspects of his writing throughout the six chapters. Thus, for example, the chapter on the picturesque will show that his conception of the pastoral is actually less socially aware and responsible than he himself claimed, while the chapter on liminal spaces will demonstrate additional structural coherence to *Little Dorrit*. Similarly, the chapter on death and rebirth will re-examine the religious character of Dickens's writing, while that on the riparian underworld will both consider the classical influences on his writing and re-evaluate the expression of his views on social mobility, by exploring the security of barriers between different social groups in London.

Dickens's writing about the river it is not only far more copious than his writing about any other topographical feature, but it is also much more realistic, detailed and imaginative than his other nature writing. One reason for its influence on his imagination can be found in the fact that he was himself very closely associated with the Thames, made considerable use of it and spent a great deal of time on it. This is something to which the biographers give very little attention, but the letters, which have only been available in their currently complete form since 2002,<sup>18</sup> provide ample evidence of it, and it seems relevant to set out some of that evidence here as part of the context for Dickens's writing about the river to be explored in the following chapters.

Dickens's associations with riparian recreations begin early. When living as a child in Chatham, between the ages of four and nine, he used to sail with his father on the navy-pay yacht, down the River Medway to Sheerness and back again.<sup>19</sup> Edgar Johnson's account of this period in his biography describes Dickens as being 'entranced' by these trips as he took in all the dockyard and other waterside scenes,<sup>20</sup> while the romantic Kentish scenes from *The Uncommercial Traveller* to be quoted below would seem to vouch for the impression the Medway made upon him.

As an adult living in London, Dickens made considerable use of the Thames, both as a transport link and as a recreational space, throughout his life. He frequently decamped from London,

especially in the summer, either because Catherine was ill or simply to work in more congenial surroundings. His destinations were very often upstream on the river, and his journeys to and from them normally by water. For example, he rented several houses at Petersham, near Richmond, and at Twickenham. These sojourns involved boating on the Thames, and from time to time he probably kept his own boat.<sup>21</sup> He was an energetic swimmer in the river, describing, for example: ‘swimming feats from Petersham to Richmond Bridge.’ The same letter continues: ‘I myself have risen at 6 and plunged head foremost into the water ...’<sup>22</sup> There were day excursions to Eel Pie Island near Twickenham,<sup>23</sup> and an annual outing to the Star and Garter Hotel at Richmond, to celebrate his and Catherine’s wedding anniversary and John Forster’s birthday, the dates of which coincide. Dickens writes: ‘we always go down in great state to Richmond (an exquisite place upon the River Thames: some twelve miles off) and hold a solemn dinner.’<sup>24</sup> Forster reports that this practice was continued unbroken, except when Dickens was abroad, for 20 years.<sup>25</sup> He sailed,<sup>26</sup> attended rowing matches,<sup>27</sup> and spent a lot of time, as he says in a typical passage from the correspondence: ‘lying on the banks of the Thames at Richmond.’<sup>28</sup>

Going in the other direction, he sometimes took the steamer down to Greenwich, often with Forster, to dine at hotels such as the Crown and Sceptre there,<sup>29</sup> and in the spring of 1833 he took the same trip in company with Henry Austin, gathering material for *Sketches by Boz*.<sup>30</sup> Dickens and Catherine spent their honeymoon at Chalk, on the river next to Gravesend, and again they travelled there by boat. His favourite summer ‘watering-place’, however, was Broadstairs, on the tip of the Kentish peninsula, where he was keen on sea bathing, and once reported ‘taking a principal part in a regatta’.<sup>31</sup> The family spent every summer but two there between 1837 and 1851, returning once more at the end of the 1850s,<sup>32</sup> and once again they went by the river. Dickens repeatedly writes to friends with invitations to join them at Broadstairs, giving instructions on how to get there.

For example, in 1841 he writes to Thomas Beard, directing him to the Ramsgate boat which sailed daily from London Bridge Wharf at 9.00am: ‘All you have to do,’ writes Dickens, ‘is go aboard of her, and when you come off Margate or thereabouts, tell the captain you want to go ashore at Broadstairs.’<sup>33</sup> Writing similar instructions to Henry Austin in the same year, he enthusiastically advertises the service as taking only six hours and costing only six shillings.<sup>34</sup> Not only did Dickens go to Broadstairs and come back at the end of the season by the steamer but, when he was there, he frequently returned to central London overnight, to attend engagements of various kinds. He therefore spent a great deal of time on the river during this period and this is testimony, not only to his own preference, but also to the primacy of river passenger transport out of London in the earliest days of the railway.

In later years he took to the Thames again, to research the river chase which forms the denouement of *Great Expectations*. On 22 May 1861, he hired what must have been a fairly substantial steamer to take him from Blackwall to Southend and back, in company with eight or nine friends and three or four members of his family, in order to: ‘make himself sure of the actual course of a boat in such circumstances, and what possible incidents the adventure might have’. In this account, Forster recalls how avidly Dickens took in the riparian setting that day: ‘his sleepless observation was at work all the time, and nothing had escaped his keen vision on either side of the river’.<sup>35</sup> Following this trip his working plans for *Great Expectations* included timings for high and low water, to make sure the timing of the action fitted in with the tide, though admittedly his reckoning of exactly 12 hours for the tidal cycle is rather a crude approximation.

Dickens was also an oarsman, and had something like professional training. In ‘Down with the Tide’ he writes that he: ‘graduated, as [he] was once proud to do, under a fireman-waterman and winner of Kean’s Prize Wherry.’ (*RP* 159)<sup>36</sup> The reference is to a local tradition at Richmond, continued from 1832 by the theatre manager Edmund Kean, father of the celebrated actor Charles Kean, whom Dickens probably knew.<sup>37</sup> In a rowing race on the river, the Richmond watermen competed for the prize of a wherry (an early type of skiff), which was given at that time by Kean.<sup>38</sup> Dickens adverts to his tuition at the hands of this character again in his speech to the Metropolitan Rowing Clubs on 7 May 1866, reconstructed in the third person in Fielding’s edition as follows:

He could not get on in the beginning without being a pupil under an anomalous creature called a ‘fireman-waterman’ [laughter], who wore an eminently tall hat, and a perfectly unaccountable uniform, of which it might be said that if it were less adapted for one thing than another, that thing was fire. He recollected that this gentleman had on some former day won a King’s prize wherry; and they used to go about in this accursed wherry, he and a partner, doing all the hard work, while the fireman drank all the beer.<sup>39</sup>

Here ‘Kean’s’ is corrupted to ‘King’s’, presumably by the memorial reconstruction of the speech, but this clearly refers to the same experience. There is also a reference in Dickens’s early sketch, ‘The River’, to a: ‘prize wherry which is rowed slowly about by a pair of sculls’ (*SB* 94), and the idea of a prize boat appears again two years later, in *Sketches of Young Couples*. If these ‘prize wherry’ references were also suggested by Dickens’s own experience, then it clearly must have taken place between 1832 (when Kean gave his name to the prize) and 1836 (when *Sketches by Boz* appeared), though sadly no record of it is to be found in his correspondence of that period.

There is, however, plenty of other evidence of Dickens rowing on the Thames. When his eldest son Charley was at Eton, there was at least one occasion, on 1 July 1851, when Dickens took him, along with three of his friends, out on the river there, in ‘a big galley with an awning’.<sup>40</sup> Again, from 13

to 15 July 1855 he appears to have rowed from Oxford to London.<sup>41</sup> The letters which allude to this do not indicate with whom he went, but the accomplishment of the trip in only three days on a summer current does suggest a fair degree of prowess. Later in the speech to the Metropolitan Rowing Clubs cited above, Fielding reconstructs: ‘More recently still, the last time that he rowed down from Oxford he was supposed to have covered himself with honour.’<sup>42</sup> Here again, the use of the phrase ‘the last time’ suggests that this was at least a recurring, and perhaps a frequent, experience. In a letter of 1 February 1861 to his Swiss friend William de Cerjat, he describes walking by the river at Millbank and refers to a time: ‘When I was a rower on that river ...’<sup>43</sup> and here again, the phrasing of this expression suggests that Thames rowing had been a regular occupation with him. In later life he was President of the Nautilus Rowing Club, in which capacity he made the speech quoted above; and he was also invited to speak at a banquet following the race between the Oxford and Harvard university boat crews on the Thames from Putney to Mortlake on 27 August 1869.<sup>44</sup> Both of these facts support the idea that Dickens had, and was publicly known to have, strong personal associations with rowing on the river.

There is therefore ample evidence of Dickens’s own familiarity with, and use of, the Thames as a recreational space and transport link. This consistently comes through in his journalism. In *Household Words*, for example, it is on ‘a cheap steamboat’ from Westminster to the Temple that he meets the ‘Ghost of Art’.<sup>45</sup> In *The Uncommercial Traveller*, it is: ‘as I floated down the Thames among the bridges,’ (*UT* 203) that he has the reflections which lead to the piece, ‘Among the Short-timers’. The river has nothing to do with pieces such as these; it merely forms part of the backdrop of Dickens’s routine experience.

This all attests to the ubiquity of the river in Dickens’s frame of reference, but does not on its own account for the sense of menace which, I will suggest, he seems to have taken from it. Of course his engagement with the river would have been complex and various, as would his engagement with anything else, but one of his most formative encounters with it may be found in the most powerful of his childhood experiences. His removal from Chatham to London as a child has been described by Schwarzbach as ‘arbitrary and terrifying’ to him, even as ‘a secular equivalent of the Fall’<sup>46</sup> and, given the strength of these negative feelings, it may be significant that, in being sent to London, he was sent almost directly down to the river. A great deal has been made of the influence of his time at Warren’s blacking, and I want to suggest that the river may play a significant part in this.

The general influence of Warren’s over Dickens is undoubted. He writes about it himself as quoted below, all his biographers and many critics refer to it,<sup>47</sup> and it even produced physical symptoms of

stress (the pain in his left side, interpreted as some kind of kidney disease) which had occurred before but flared up when he was working at Hungerford Stairs.<sup>48</sup> Angus Wilson has written that Dickens 'looked back with amazed horror' at that period, and goes so far as to assert that he had an 'obsession' with it.<sup>49</sup> In his fiction this is expressed in the many references to blacking bottles, which become an emblematic feature of descriptions of a whole range of ruinous settings, most of them interiors, throughout the novels. Two early examples of this, both from *Nicholas Nickleby*, would be the 'broken blacking-bottles' on the garret landing of the hopelessly dissipated Newman Noggs (NN 163) and the blacking-bottles in which the crippled boy grows flowers at Tim Linkinwater's lodging (NN 525), but there are very many more. Dickens's early writing also contains four specific references to Warren's blacking: one in 'Seven Dials' (SB 69), two in *The Pickwick Papers* (PP 124 & 461) and one in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (OCS 209). In *Pickwick*, for example, Sam Weller refers to: 'Warren's blackin' or Rowland's oil, or some o' them low fellows'.

Michael Allen's book, *Charles Dickens' Childhood* (1988) gives a standard account of the episode, augmented by his 2010 article in *The Dickensian*. Allen believes that Dickens went to work at Warren's at Hungerford stairs in September 1823, that the business moved to Chandos Street in Covent Garden in January 1824, and that he remained there until September 1824.<sup>50</sup>

The dispiriting effect of Dickens's time at Warren's is of course well known. It was a time which brought financial hardship and tedious, menial labour: in the autobiographical fragment he describes it as 'an evil hour' when he went there, and says he was 'cast away'. However, the main cause of his distress was not physical hardship but the humiliation of being placed in the position of a common labourer, with common companions. After describing the other workers at Warrens, he reports:

'No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship; compared these every day associates with those of my happier childhood; and felt my early hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my breast.'<sup>51</sup>

This humiliation must have increased greatly when the firm moved to Chandos street, situated as it was in a busy thoroughfare where Dickens worked at a window, exposed to view as a living advertisement for the business:

We worked, for the light's sake, near the second window as you come from Bedford-street; and we were so brisk at it, that people used to stop and look in. Sometimes there would be quite a little crowd there. I saw my father coming in at the door one day when we were very busy, and I wondered how he could bear it.<sup>52</sup>

In contrast to this, the premises at 30 Hungerford Stairs, the last house on the left in a dead end, would have been secluded from public view.

Because of the humiliating public exposure involved with working at Chandos Street, and because he seems to have worked there for twice as long as at Hungerford Stairs, it might be expected that the Chandos Street premises would have endured in Dickens's memory and imagination as the prime locus of the whole experience. However, this does not seem to be the case. Instead, the autobiographical fragment describes the setting of his labours as being Hungerford Stairs:

It was a crazy, tumble-down old house, abutting of course on the river, and literally overrun with rats. Its wainscoted rooms and its rotten floors and staircase, and the old grey rats swarming down in the cellars, and the sound of their squeaking and scuffling coming up the stairs at all times, and the dirt and decay of the place, rise up visibly before me, as if I were there again. The counting-house was on the first floor, looking over the coal-barges and the river.<sup>53</sup>

This description becomes quite an emblematic one for Dickens. He repeats it in a very similar form when describing the nearest reincarnation of Warren's, the wine merchants Murdstone and Grinby in *David Copperfield*. David's experience there is a version of Dickens's own at Warrens, and he places it in an exactly parallel location, just downstream at Blackfriars. This building, too, is the last one in the street, where it curves down to some boatmen's stairs in the river:

It was a crazy old house with a wharf of its own, abutting on the water when the tide was in, and on the mud when the tide was out, and literally overrun with rats. Its panelled rooms, discoloured with the dirt and smoke of a hundred years, I dare say; its decaying floors and staircase; the squeaking and scuffling of the old grey rats down in the cellars; and the dirt and rottenness of the place; are things, not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant. (DC 154)

Dickens later develops the same scene, maintaining its new incarnation as a wine merchant's, as the principal setting of *No Thoroughfare*, his long story for the Christmas 1867 number of *All the Year Round*. The merchants in this version are Wilding and Co., and the place is described as a miserable dead end:

In a courtyard in the City of London, which was No Thoroughfare either for vehicles or foot-passengers; a courtyard diverging from a steep, a slippery, and a winding street connecting Tower-street with the Middlesex shore of the Thames; stood the place of business of Wilding and Co. Wine Merchants. Probably, as a jocosely acknowledged of the obstructive character of this main approach, the point nearest to its base at which one could take the river (if so inodorously minded) bore the appellation Break-Neck-Stairs. The courtyard itself had likewise been descriptively entitled in old time, Cripple Corner. (CB 2.6)<sup>54</sup>

This description is clearly defined by the river, in a pointedly unsavoury ('inodorous') way, while the associations of death in 'Break-Neck-Stairs', and of deformity and confinement in 'Cripple Corner', may convincingly be read as reflections of Dickens's emotions at Hungerford Stairs. Even the title of the piece, 'No Thoroughfare', suggests a place from which there is no escape.

Here, then, are two distinct refigurings of the Hungerford stairs location, equally dismal and equally defined by the river. They come respectively from the middle and the end of Dickens's career,

which suggests that the scene is a lasting influence on his imagination. There are other, less distinct after-images of the place, too, in a whole range of semi-derelict, usually waterside buildings throughout the novels. The most striking examples are the house in Thames Street by ‘Spigwiffin’s Wharf’<sup>55</sup> where Ralph installs Mrs Nickleby; Mrs Clennam’s house in *Little Dorrit*, also between Thames Street and the river; the tavern with the summer-house in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters in *Our Mutual Friend*, the last two of which are actually overhanging the river. The Fellowships: ‘impended over the water, but seemed to have got into the condition of a faint-hearted diver who has paused so long on the brink that he will never go in at all’. (*OMF* 62-3) Schwarzbach refers to such settings in the novels as a ‘long series of tumbledown variant refractions of the blacking warehouse.’<sup>56</sup>

Like several of its reincarnations, Warren’s Hungerford Stairs location was thoroughly exposed to the river, and really defined by it. The river defined the condition of its structure: by rotting its timbers with the damp, by undermining its footings to cause its ‘crazy, tumble-down’ proportions, and by sustaining the rats. Surviving images of the property also use the river to define it, by adopting a point of view on the water side at low tide, as opposed to the land side, and thereby placing the river in the foreground.



Fig. 1: *Hungerford Stairs* by George Shepherd, 1810.



Fig. 2: *Hungerford Stairs* by Dennis Dighton, after George Harley, 1822.

The second of these images, showing a more advanced state of decay, is from the year before Dickens was probably there. The counting house where he did his work was on the first floor of the building on the right: it has the middle window next to the downpipe, overlooking the river as he says in the description quoted above. The river was therefore ever present to his view at this time, and his brief periods of recreation brought him even closer to it. Forster reports: ‘Sometimes he remembered to have played on the coal-barges at dinner-time, with Poll Green and Bob Fagin.’<sup>57</sup>

If the river became strongly linked in Dickens’s imagination with the experience of Warren’s, that would account for the attention which he gives to the Hungerford Stairs location as opposed to Chandos Street. In the first extract from the autobiographical fragment quoted above, he says that the place was ‘abutting of course on the river’, and there may be something to be read into those words, ‘of course’. There was nothing about the blacking business which required water transport. Warren’s moved several times throughout a complicated history involving the establishment of up to three rival concerns which flourished at a number of other locations as well as Chandos Street, for example in St Martin’s Lane, in The Strand, in Whitechapel Road and in Noble Street in the City, none of which were on the river.<sup>58</sup> There is therefore nothing automatic, or a matter ‘of course’, about a waterside location for this type of business. Instead the phrase seems to point to an essential imaginative link for Dickens himself. Perhaps, somehow, the descent into a social underworld of degrading, menial work among inferior companions becomes imaginatively linked at this point in his life with a descent to the river, and that might give coherence to the many sinister, under-worldly representations of the river which appear throughout his fiction.

Of course it is impossible to say whether it was the sinister presence of the river that made Warrens seem more miserable, or whether the experience of Warrens made the river seem more desolate, and a better explanation lies in some kind of reciprocal influence on Dickens's ways of imagining both of them. However, part of the influence which can be detected in the description from the autobiographical fragment is what he himself liked to call 'the attraction of repulsion' or 'the fascination of repulsion'.<sup>59</sup> Forster refers to the young Dickens's 'profound attraction of repulsion' which motivated him to visit the slums around St Giles and Seven Dials,<sup>60</sup> and John Bowen has gone so far as to say that this was: 'one of his favourite expressions'.<sup>61</sup> It accounts for a part of his response to London itself, and also for a part of his response to the river.

A further link between the building and the river is created by the young Dickens's two fellow-workers and companions there: Bob Fagin and Paul Green. Fagin's brother-in-law, with whom he (Fagin) lived, was a waterman. Immediately after this information is provided in the autobiographical fragment, Green's father is described as having 'the additional distinction of being a fireman' (at Drury Lane theatre),<sup>62</sup> and the word 'additional' here seems to imply that he was a waterman, too. He is the first of a whole network of characters, both real and imagined, which establishes the fireman-waterman as a significant Dickensian motif, beginning at Hungerford Stairs and further cementing the connection between the building and the river in Dickens's mind.

The fireman-waterman status of Green's father is confirmed when Fagin and Green reappear in *David Copperfield* as Mick Walker and Mealy Potatoes, David's associates at Murdstone and Grinby. Here David reports that '[Walker's] father was a bargeman, and walked in a black velvet head-dress, in the Lord Mayor's Show', while: 'Mealy's father was a waterman, who had the additional distinction of being a fireman, and was engaged as such at one of the large theatres'. (*DC* 155) The parallels between the circumstances of these characters and Dickens's own associates are exact, as indeed they are between some of the forms of words used to describe them.

Though it may seem paradoxical, there is nothing historically surprising about the figure of the fireman-waterman. Ever since the first fire brigades were established in London by buildings insurance companies from 1699 onwards, they had drawn their crews largely from the ranks of the Thames watermen, the skills required for the two jobs having been seen as complementary. This practice continued after the establishment of the city's metropolitan fire brigade in 1866, and perhaps up to the turn of the twentieth century. The insurance companies provided their crews with distinctive and quite ostentatious red uniforms with big badges on them, so the fireman-waterman would have been a conspicuously recognisable public figure in London at the time when Dickens

was writing.<sup>63</sup> However, I want to suggest that there is also something about the idea of such a figure which particularly appeals to Dickens's imagination.

The fireman-waterman reappears not only in *David Copperfield*, but much earlier in one of the two riparian *Sketches by Boz*, 'The Steam Excursion', which includes: 'an old fireman-waterman ... dressed in a faded red suit'. (SB 378) Then, in 'Sketches of Young Couples' (1840), the main characters of 'The Loving Couple' are accompanied on their river excursion by two fireman-watermen, three times specifically identified as such, who seem gratuitous, having nothing to do with the plot. One of them encourages an oarsman: "'Pull away, number two – give it her, number two – take a longer reach, number two – now, number two, sir, think you're winning a boat.'" (SB 2.60) This reference to winning a boat in turn creates a link to the real fireman-waterman who taught Dickens himself to row on the river, as described above. The figure of the fireman-waterman clearly appeals to Dickens's sense of the ridiculous, for he draws on it again in the character of the 'Game Chicken' of *Dombey and Son*, a comically characterised pugilist patronised by Mr Toots. It is the Chicken who steers the six-oared cutter from which Toots attempts to court Florence on the river at Fulham, and bizarrely he wears a fireman's coat to do it. Meanwhile Dickens's reference to his own fireman-waterman in the Metropolitan Rowing Clubs speech notably describes his instructor not merely as ridiculous in appearance, but 'anomalous.'<sup>64</sup>

Anomaly in the form of incongruity is of course one of the staples of Dickens's humour, and the anomaly he perceives here is clearly the incompatibility of the classical elements of fire and water which the fireman-waterman embodies in his emblematic title. There is other evidence that Dickens's imagination is alive to the concept of the four classical elements of earth, air, fire and water. A good example of their use in his fiction is to be found in *The Haunted Man*, where William Swidger explains how his wife, Milly 'may be taken off her balance' by each of the four elements in turn. He concludes: 'But these are elements. Mrs William must be taken out of elements for the strength of *her* character to come into play.' (CB 330) Meanwhile in *The Uncommercial Traveller* Dickens is suddenly confronted by French beggars who: 'always seemed by resurrectionary process to be recalled out of the elements for the sudden peopling of the solitude!' (UT 61) A little later, in the Alps, he dramatically finds himself: 'now ... in the region of wind, now in the region of fire, now in the region of unmelting ice and snow.' (UT 69) In such passages the emphasis is on the power of the elements, in these examples to call forth other people or to threaten himself.

In the following chapters I will suggest that Dickens uses the river partly to express this interplay between the classical elements. I will consider, for example, how the elements of fire and water are blended in the primary metaphor of both *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, and will explore a final, ultimate embodiment of the fireman-waterman in one of Dickens's most important river characters: Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. There is a considerable distance of travel between Paul Green's father and the imaginative construct of Daniel Quilp, and this chain of associations is just one piece of evidence for the strength of Dickens's conception of the river as an elemental force, which is one of the main themes of this thesis.

The first chapter begins by examining the ways in which Dickens's writing plays into a pre-existing perception of the Thames as a focus of the picturesque, as expressed through a new non-fictional literature of the river which emerged from the end of the eighteenth century onwards. The chapter compares traditional evocations of the picturesque by writers such as William Gilpin and Uvedale Price, which it identifies as 'historical picturesque', with Dickens's own call for 'a new picturesque', which might be more sympathetic to the rustic figures it depicts. The chapter explores prominent examples of picturesque river scenes from *The Pickwick Papers*, *Dombey and Son* and *Great expectations*, among others, and analyses them in terms of the power relationships between the characters present in them, their narrators and the reader, to suggest that in the river scenes Dickens in fact reverts to an earlier form of the historical picturesque: a fact which is emblematised by his privileging of sail over steam on the Thames.

The second chapter goes on to consider how some of these images of sailing ships on the Thames, and also a series of embarkation scenes associated with them, are used by Dickens to establish the Thames as a symbol of the British empire. It shows how this symbolism is itself an outgrowth of earlier depictions of the river as a symbol of the nation and its power, in the nationalistic poetry of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In particular the chapter examines the fantasies of empire expressed through some of the river scenes of *Our Mutual Friend*, along with embarkation scenes in *Dombey and Son* and *Great Expectations* among others, and then goes on to consider in detail the presentation of Abel Magwitch in association with both the river and the empire. It concludes by comparing Magwitch's final scene of attempted escape to the empire with a parallel one by Conan Doyle, in order to evaluate the extent to which critical approaches which have been applied to the episode in Doyle may also be applicable to Dickens..

The third chapter examines Dickens's use of the river as a liminal space dividing different states and conditions of human existence. It begins by considering some of the historical significances of

river crossings in London, and some of the biographical considerations which might have made them important to Dickens. The chapter shows how river crossings are used to signify transformations in the novels, using examples from *Barnaby Rudge* and *David Copperfield*, but concentrating principally on *Little Dorrit*, the novel in which Dickens makes most prominent use of such crossings and of the river generally as a feature of the geography of London. This analysis is based mainly on the idea that river crossings are used to represent transitions between legitimate and illegitimate spaces, and that scenes on London's bridges are used to create moments of critical suspension between different states.

The fourth chapter draws on Jules Law's idea that the concept of fluidity is established in Victorian literature as a literary trope connoting menace. It considers some of the historical considerations which did indeed invest the Thames with some sense of menace in Dickens's time, and goes on to consider how he deploys the discourse of the river to depict various kinds of menacing, unstable or unstoppable forces. This analysis covers a range of material, but the most distinctive of it expresses the movement of large numbers of people through the streets of cities. These appear most prominently in the scenes of civil unrest in Dickens's two historical novels, *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, which are here examined in detail and briefly contrasted with the depiction of similar scenes by other nineteenth century writers.

The fifth chapter shows how Dickens builds on traditional images of the river in the iconography of death, to use it as an agent not only of death but also of transformation, the loss of identity and of rebirth. This is perhaps Dickens's most significant conception of the river, and gives rise to some of the most sinister and menacing depictions of it in his work. The chapter considers the historical facts and cultural perceptions of the prevalence of suicide in the Thames in the period, and examines Dickens's representations of suicide by drowning and also the many other drownings and even more widespread prospect of it in both his fiction and some of his journalism. The most extensive treatment of Dickens's most important river novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, is in this chapter, but it also goes on to consider *Great Expectations*, showing how the discourse of death is closely aligned with that of rebirth, expressed partly through images of baptism, in both of these novels.

The sixth and final chapter develops this idea further by showing how Dickens uses the Thames to represent an underworld to London, along classical lines, not only as a sepulchral space but also as one of anarchy and disorder. The idea of an underworld is developed partly through real associations of the Thames with crime, pollution, stealth and secrecy, but also by two specific techniques. The first is through a series of scenes in which characters have to make perilous visits

to a riparian underworld in order to discover secrets, in a way which seems quite insistently to reference the classical idea of the visit to the underworld, like that in *The Odyssey*. Four such scenes are analysed in detail. The second is by placing in river scenes characters which seem actually to be supernatural, particularly Daniel Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Rogue Riderhood from *Our Mutual Friend*.

The last three chapters are united by the idea of the fluidity-as-menace trope, which is expressed in the epigraph to this introduction and is really Dickens's most distinctive conception of the river, giving rise to the strong sense of menace, doom and other-worldliness which it seems to inspire in him. However, I begin with some of his more conventional responses to it, which owe more to pre-existing frames of reference. The first of these is the cult of the picturesque which has its rise at the end of the eighteenth century and already had an important place in the nineteenth century imagination when Dickens began writing.

## Notes to the introduction

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, his letter to John Forster, 30 August 1846. *Letters*, vol.4, p.612.

<sup>2</sup> Barnard (1974) p.13.

<sup>3</sup> Almost all the parks were either Royal, or confined to exclusive regions of the West End. The first truly public park, for the use of ordinary people, was Victoria Park, which opened in Hackney in 1845.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of 6 June 1841 to W.H. Harrison. See Ruskin (1841) p.103. Also cited in Schwarzbach (1979) p.76.

<sup>5</sup> Barnard (1974) p.13.

<sup>6</sup> See Schacht (1990) pp.79-84.

<sup>7</sup> Knoepflmacher & Tennyson, eds. (1977) p.150.

<sup>8</sup> Schwarzbach (1979) pp.95 & 188.

<sup>9</sup> In Knoepflmacher & Tennyson, eds. (1977) p.154.

<sup>10</sup> In Knoepflmacher & Tennyson, eds. (1977) p.154.

<sup>11</sup> See letter of 22 April 1848 to John Forster: *Letters*, vol.5, p.290.

<sup>12</sup> See Glotfelty & Fromm, ed.s (1996) throughout the introduction.

<sup>13</sup> Glotfelty & Fromm, ed.s (1996) pp.383 & 387.

<sup>14</sup> Gretchen Legler in Kerridge (1998) p.72.

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Manes in Glotfelty & Fromm, ed.s (1996) p.17.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Sanders in Glotfelty & Fromm, ed.s (1996) p.183

<sup>17</sup> Jules Law's estimate. See Law (2010) p.47.

<sup>18</sup> The date of the final, 12<sup>th</sup> volume of the definitive Pilgrim edition. (See bibliography.)

<sup>19</sup> See Forster (1892) p.5.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson (1952) p.17.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, *Letters*, vol.1, p.168, where he offers J.P. Hullah 'a boat for your rowing'.

<sup>22</sup> *Letters*, vol.1, p.557.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, *Letters*, vol.2, p.65, and also Slater (2009) p.144.

<sup>24</sup> *Letters*, vol.3, p.452., but see also Ackroyd (1991) p.262, and Forster (1892) p.42 on this.

<sup>25</sup> See Forster (1892) p.42.

<sup>26</sup> For example with Henry Austin. See *Letters*, vol.1, pp.21-2.

<sup>27</sup> For example Goding's match at Lambeth. See *Letters*, vol.1, p.185.

<sup>28</sup> *Letters*, vol.3, p.452.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, *Letters*, vol.1, p.283, or vol.2, p.61, or vol.2, p.214.

<sup>30</sup> See Slater (2009) p.36.

<sup>31</sup> To John Forster, 22 September 1842. *Letters*, vol.3, p.329.

<sup>32</sup> See Slater (2009) p.106 and also the Dickens Fellowship, Broadstairs branch website.

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- <sup>33</sup> *Letters*, vol.2, p.347.
- <sup>34</sup> *Letters*, vol.2, p.361.
- <sup>35</sup> See Forster (1892) p.370.
- <sup>36</sup> A *Household Words* article of 5 February 1853.
- <sup>37</sup> Charles Kean was associated (controversially) with Dickens's close friend, the theatre manager William Macready. See *Oxford DNB* for an account of this.
- <sup>38</sup> See [www.richmond.gov.uk/local\\_history\\_and\\_heritage](http://www.richmond.gov.uk/local_history_and_heritage).
- <sup>39</sup> Fielding, ed. (1960) p.360.
- <sup>40</sup> See *Letters*, vol.6, pp.416, 419 & 427.
- <sup>41</sup> See *Letters*, vol.7, pp.670-672.
- <sup>42</sup> Fielding, ed. (1960) p.360.
- <sup>43</sup> *Letters*, vol.9, p.383.
- <sup>44</sup> See prefatory matter in Fielding, ed. (1960) p.360.
- <sup>45</sup> See *RP* 67-74.
- <sup>46</sup> Schwarzbach (1979), pp. 11 & 16.
- <sup>47</sup> See, for example, Graham Greene in Hollington, ed. (1995) p.168, on the associations of evil which Warrens produced in Dickens, or Jack Lindsay, also in Hollington, ed. (1995) p.174, on the use of Fagin's name which, writes Lindsay: 'had come to stand in his mind for the level of wretched toil into which he had feared himself sinking, the proletarian pit yawning under the petty-bourgeois feet so ominously ...'
- <sup>48</sup> See Forster p.13, or Fred Kaplan's account for this detail.
- <sup>49</sup> Wilson (1970) pp.202 & 208.
- <sup>50</sup> Allen (2010) p.28.
- <sup>51</sup> Forster (1892) pp.10-11.
- <sup>52</sup> Forster (1892) pp.15-16.
- <sup>53</sup> Forster (1892) p.10.
- <sup>54</sup> *No Thoroughfare* was a collaboration with Wilkie Collins, but we do know that Dickens wrote this opening description. See Slater (2009) p.569.
- <sup>55</sup> Andrew Sanders points out that this wharf itself is 'Dickens's invention.' See Sanders (2010) p.109.
- <sup>56</sup> Schwarzbach (1979) p.156.
- <sup>57</sup> Forster (1892) p.14.
- <sup>58</sup> See Allen (2010) for a full account of this.
- <sup>59</sup> For example in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, p.234.
- <sup>60</sup> See Forster (1892) p.7 and Sanders (2010) p.31.
- <sup>61</sup> Bowen (2006) p.255.
- <sup>62</sup> Forster (1892) p.11.
- <sup>63</sup> See Ingram (1978) pp.107 & 112.
- <sup>64</sup> Fielding, ed. (1960) p.360.

## 1. The river as focus of the picturesque

From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the Thames acquires a literature all its own, in the form of a new genre of guide books and descriptive coffee-table books which flourished throughout the nineteenth century. Through this genre, as well as through representations in the visual arts (with which many of them were also illustrated), the river becomes among other things a focus of the cult of the picturesque. Dickens intensifies this focus through a range of river scenes in the novels which clearly fall into the category of the picturesque, the effects of which this chapter will consider. However, he also resisted traditional conceptions of the picturesque, which will here be termed, after Susan Johnston, 'historical picturesque',<sup>1</sup> on the basis that they were socially irresponsible, and argued instead for what he termed 'a new picturesque'<sup>2</sup> which would be more sympathetic to its subjects. This chapter will examine the tension between these two modes, and suggest that, while Dickens may consciously resist it, the historical picturesque as expressed through the river scenes remains for him the dominant mode.

Firstly, it may be well to set out some established elements and theories of the picturesque, against which Dickens's work may be measured. As an aesthetic category, the picturesque is inaugurated at the end of the eighteenth century as a development of Edmund Burke's ideas that landscape depicted in art may be divided into two categories according to the emotions which it inspired in its viewer. It could be either beautiful, in which case it inspired pleasure, even love, or it could be sublime, in which case it inspired fear and awe, the best example of a subject for the latter mode being precipitous alpine scenery.<sup>3</sup> The new, third category of the picturesque was thought instead to inspire curiosity, and its ways of doing that are defined most significantly in three essays by William Gilpin, *On Picturesque Beauty*, *On Picturesque Travel* and *On Sketching Landscape*, all of which appeared in 1792; in Uvedale Price's extensive collection of *Essays on the Picturesque, as compared with the sublime and the beautiful, and on the use of studying Pictures for the purpose of improving real landscape*, which appeared in 1794; and in William Payne Knight's book *The Landscape*, also from 1794.

Price wrote that: 'picturesqueness appears to hold a station between beauty and sublimity',<sup>4</sup> and that it achieves its effect of curiosity in the viewer chiefly by means of irregularity, while this in turn is achieved by presenting scenes in various states of disarray. Thus picturesque subjects are often rural or agricultural, and often involve scenes of rustic destitution. Their stock motifs are half-ruined cottages and other old buildings, abandoned agricultural equipment, ragged peasant figures, and sometimes wandering gypsies, their caravans and animals. Interestingly for present purposes,

Joseph Phelan also points out that: ‘reflections in water are a staple of picturesque description throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’.<sup>5</sup> Some quotations from Gilpin and Price will serve to establish some of the qualities and spirit valued by the theorists of the picturesque, against which Dickens’s scenes can later be measured. Gilpin writes:

... *roughness* forms the most essential point of difference between the *beautiful*, and the *picturesque*

...

A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree ... But ... Should we wish to give it picturesque beauty, we must use the mallet instead of the chisel: we must beat down one half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a *smooth* building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin.

...

Turn the lawn into a piece of broken ground: plant rugged oaks instead of flowering shrubs: break the edges of the walk: give it the rudeness of a road; mark it with wheel-tracks; and scatter around a few stones, and brushwood; in a word, instead of making the whole *smooth*, make it *rough*, and you make it also *picturesque*.

...

Picturesque composition consists in uniting in one whole a variety of parts; and these parts can only be obtained from rough objects.

...

... the picturesque eye is perhaps most inquisitive after the elegant relics of ancient architecture; the ruined tower, the gothic arch, the remains of castles, and abbeys. These are the richest legacies of art. They are consecrated by time ...<sup>6</sup>

Price writes:

... the most striking among [picturesque scenes] should be owing to the indiscriminate hacking of the peasant, nay, to the very decay that is occasioned by it.

...

... the two opposite qualities of roughness, and of sudden variation, joined to that of irregularity, are the most efficient causes of the picturesque.

...

Observe the process by which time, the great author of such changes, converts a beautiful object into a picturesque one.

...

The ass is generally thought to be more picturesque than the horse; and among horses, it is the wild and rough forester, or the worn-out cart-horse to which that title is applied.

...

In our own species, objects merely picturesque are to be found among the wandering tribes of gypsies and beggars; who in all the qualities which give them that character, bear a close analogy to the wild forester and the worn out cart-horse, and again to old mills, hovels, and other inanimate objects of the same kind.<sup>7</sup>

While many of the traditional subjects of the picturesque may appear to be in state of disarray, they are in fact artfully composed and arranged, in order to produce the desired effect of curiosity in the viewer. They are also artificially framed, to give them clearly defined limits, as an artist places a picture within a frame. This is also analogous to the use of the Claude glass, that essential accessory of nineteenth century picturesque tourism, which allowed the user to view a reflection of the landscape, enclosed within the limits of the glass, tinted and distorted by the concave mirror. The desire for artful composition in the landscape is reflected in the motive of Price’s 1794 essay

cited above, which promoted the study of pictures ‘for the purpose of improving real landscape’: that is, to remodel and physically change the actual landscape, as the great eighteenth century landscape gardeners indeed did. Gilpin himself admits that: ‘nature is most defective in composition; and must be a little assisted’.<sup>8</sup>

Price also writes about reflections in water, on the particular aesthetic value of rivers, and the framing effects of their banks.<sup>9</sup> It has furthermore been suggested by others that there is something intrinsically picturesque about the river as a landscape feature, simply because it is framed by its banks. As David Punter points out, William Gilpin’s 1782 *Observations on the River Wye, etc.*:

uses the frequent analogy of stage design to claim that rivers, as aesthetic objects, have four elements which need to be considered: ‘the area, which is the river itself; the two side-screens, which are the opposite banks, and mark the perspective; and the front-screen, which points out the winding of the river.’<sup>10</sup>

Presumably the ‘front-screen’ here refers to a theatrical backdrop, so here there is a further analogy with the framing effect of a proscenium arch, as well as the analogy of the artist placing the landscape within a picture frame.

The theoreticians of the picturesque may belong to the later eighteenth century, but the genre they describe is older, and good examples of it can be found in the work of Adriaen Ostade and his school, which we know that Dickens, as quoted below, particularly admired. The following painting of a frozen river scene is by Ostade’s pupil and younger brother, Isaak van Ostade:

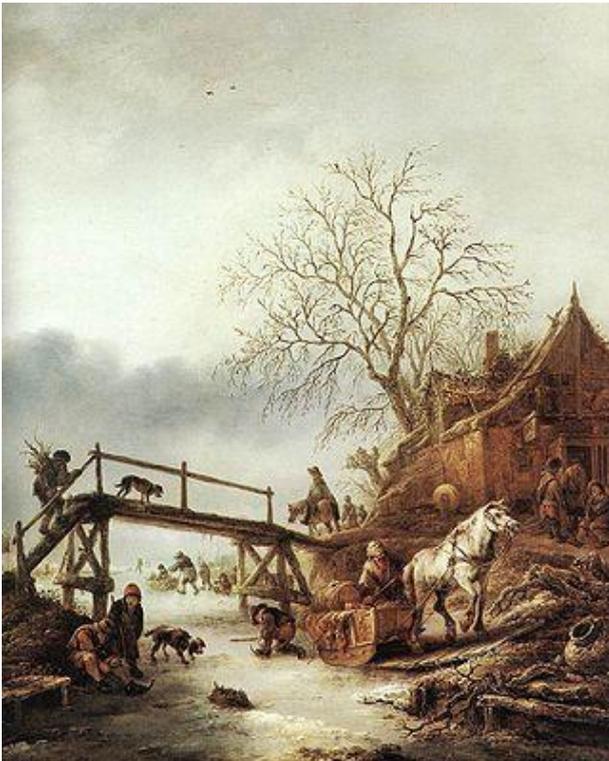


Fig. 3: *A Winter Scene* by Isaak van Ostade, after Adriaen Ostade, 1645.

Here are all the classic elements of the ruinous cottage, the peasants, their animals and general detritus, but the composition is very precise. It follows the rule of thirds both horizontally and vertically, with the hard lines formed by the trunk of the tree and the deck of the bridge being exactly a third of the way from the right and the bottom of the image respectively. Figures and even dogs above and below the bridge are balanced against each other in a V formation, while the river is framed by the bridge, and all the converging lines draw the eye towards a focal point at the back of the sled, which is exactly in the middle horizontally.

Historians and critics of the picturesque generally interpret such scenes as exerting the power of the viewer over the landscape, and this is done in three principal ways. Firstly, the selection of poor, peasant subjects emphasises their social inferiority to the cultured connoisseur viewer, who remains detached from them. Secondly, the composition and framing of objects within the image, just as a painting is framed for display, expresses the artist's physical control over the landscape, and this sense of control is shared by the viewer. Thus in one sense the term 'picturesque' can mean any view that looks like a picture, and Nancy Hill points out the importance of this idea in Dickens's time: 'During the Victorian era the predominant aesthetic was probably still the picturesque, defined most simply as seeing the world as a picture.'<sup>11</sup> The key element here is the artificial – literally artistic – composition of a scene, which maintains superiority of the composer, framer and viewer over the scene.

Thirdly, the images often use high or distant viewpoints so as to place the viewer in a dominant position over the landscape on which they look down, and to create a sense of the viewer's separation and detachment from the scene. This is what Michael Charlesworth has called the 'dominant overseeing eye' of someone who has conquered the landscape, or seeks to do so, as opposed to the view of someone who has created it, or participates in it. His example is a painting of the ruined abbey of Rievaulx, the high viewpoint of which he argues is a Reformation view which takes in the entirety of the destruction wrought on the monastery by the reformers, but denies the perspective of the monks who were once within it.<sup>12</sup> Raimonada Modiano similarly describes how the use of distant viewpoints helps to reinforce the social separation and detachment of the viewer from the subject,<sup>13</sup> and also points out that picturesque viewers might in some cases actually be the owners of the view:

... in the Picturesque the attachment to property is so strong that landscape itself comes to designate property just as property comes to designate landscape. There is certainly no way of ignoring the fact that the major aestheticians of the Picturesque were wealthy landowners and that their ability to reserve vast amounts of land for the enjoyment of Picturesque views was made possible by the profits they drew from enclosures.<sup>14</sup>

This point is echoed by David Worrall, who writes that the picturesque actually: ‘demanded private ownership, or exclusive aesthetic appropriation, at a time when ownership was being contested.’<sup>15</sup> Ownership may be seen as an ultimate form of power over the view, and indeed Gavin Budge suggests, after John Barrell, that: ‘the prospect-view ... is an embodiment of 18<sup>th</sup> century aristocratic authority’. He also writes that the picturesque: ‘is based on an educated mode of perception rather than on perceptions that are available to all’,<sup>16</sup> and the importance of the intellectual superiority of the observer is also emphasised by Susan Johnston. She writes: ‘For eminent regency theorists Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, the picturesque was an educated mode of aesthetic vision,’ and quotes Knight’s idea that the picturesque “”afford[s] no pleasure, but to persons conversant with the art of painting,”” along with Price’s idea that it requires “”a cultivated eye””.<sup>17</sup> Johnston also coins the term ‘historical picturesque’, which I will use here to express all the above qualities of picturesque images in which the viewer stands in a position of power in relation to the view. One of the consequences of this power relationship is that the viewer tends to be concerned only with surfaces, and quite unconcerned with the real poverty and suffering which lies behind the historical picturesque scene. This is what Dickens was later to challenge.

The link between the traditions of the picturesque and the Thames literature is established from the beginning by William Gilpin himself, whose landscape writing about the outlying regions of the British Isles was to do so much to popularize picturesque tourism from the 1770s onwards. In 1764 he projected and partly accomplished a Thames tour, in three sections. It was the middle section, from Windsor to London, which he actually travelled, and his description of it was eventually transcribed into manuscript somewhere between 1798 and 1802.<sup>18</sup> It was never published, but has much in common with the river books which began to appear in the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Before 1790, only about six books had been published which were devoted entirely to descriptions of the Thames, whereas between 1790 and 1910 there were at least 80 – and only about the same number again since then. The first of the new genre was Samuel Ireland’s two-volume *Picturesque Views on the River Thames: from its source in Gloucestershire to the Nore, with observations on the public buildings and other works of art in its vicinity* (1792), with subsequent editions in 1799 and 1801-2 providing evidence of its popularity. Prominent among the many others which followed were those by Combe (1794), Fearnside (?), Hall (1859), Harrison (1890), Leyland (1897), Murray (1862), Senior (1891) and Thorne (1847), while one of the best examples was Westall and Owen’s magnificently produced *Picturesque Tour of the River Thames* (1828).

As can be seen from the above examples, many of the Thames books use the word 'picturesque' in their titles and it appears frequently in their texts as well, while their copious illustrations often follow the aesthetic conventions of historical picturesque art as described above. These include the use of high, distant viewpoints in their views of the river, such as Westall and Owen's view from Richmond Hill<sup>19</sup> and Gilpin's view from Cooper's Hill which, he writes, is 'celebrated in poetry for the objects it commands'.<sup>20</sup> Here the use of the word 'command' is strongly suggestive of Gavin Budge's idea of 'aristocratic authority'. These books therefore clearly establish the Thames as a focus of the picturesque but, in addition to their conventional rustic scenes, they also describe and illustrate a number of important buildings on the river, sometimes celebrating the members of the establishment who own them and historical events associated with them. The focus of such passages is on the magnificence of the property and structures, the wealth and status of individuals, and on those historical details of the buildings which show to the greatest patriotic advantage. While such views may seem to be the opposite of historical picturesque because they invest the power and superiority not in the viewer but inside the view, they still express power over the landscape: in this case the power of the establishment to shape it and give it value. They also, incidentally, help to cement the symbolic relationship between the Thames, the establishment and the nation which is crucial to the discussion of empire in Ch.2 below.

By the time Dickens begins writing in the mid-1830s, then, there is an established genre of picturesque writing about the Thames, and later he was even to become personally associated with it, albeit posthumously. His son, Charles contributed to the river literature in 1883 with *Dickens's Dictionary of the Thames*, while a later production strongly links Dickens himself with this kind of work. *Our Beautiful Homeland* (1919) by Haslehurst et al is really a river book, devoting its first three sections to 'The Thames', 'Windsor Castle' and 'Hampton Court'. However, its fourth section is entitled 'Dickens land', and is devoted to descriptions of picturesque scenes in the novels and their originals in reality. In the eyes of at least one writer around the end of the century, then, Dickens is closely associated with the river and, in turn, with the cult of the picturesque.

He also owned many books of picturesque tourism,<sup>21</sup> and indeed Forster reports that he had an 'insatiable relish' for travel literature generally.<sup>22</sup> Dickens uses the term 'picturesque' frequently in his writing, and the best evidence of his attitudes towards the tradition is to be found in his own travel book, *Pictures from Italy*, where he uses the term more than ever,<sup>23</sup> and it is an appropriate enough one for him to be using here because, as Johnston points out, it is the 'principles of the Italian landscape painters' which define Knight's and Price's coining of it.<sup>24</sup> Dickens's book also sets out to do what it says in the title: to create word-pictures of a series of discrete visual

impressions which the country has made on him,<sup>25</sup> and in it he clearly attends to the qualities of picturesque composition, often using the language of art in his descriptions. For example, on the road between Bologna and Ferrara, where Dickens ‘arrived upon a little scene,’ he uses the term ‘foreground’ (*PfI* 66), while the home of the guide to the Palace of the Popes at Avignon is described as ‘look[ing] exactly like a picture by Ostade.’ (*PfI* 20)<sup>26</sup> Within his word-pictures he also tends to focus on the traditional subjects favoured by Gilpin and Price: the variegated mediaeval architecture of Genoa, Verona, Rome and Naples, chaos in the streets, villages on the road, ordinary working people and their animals.

### **Dickens and the ‘new picturesque’**

However, he also uses *Pictures from Italy* to mount a very specific attack on the ‘historical picturesque’, with its disregard for real human suffering. He frequently expresses his disquiet at the destitution and dereliction which underpins the rustic picturesque scene. Of travelling on the Cornice road, he reports:

Much of the romance of the beautiful towns and villages on this beautiful road, disappears when they are entered, for many of them are very miserable. The streets are narrow, dark, and dirty; the inhabitants lean and squalid ... (*PfI* 54)

Here, the act of entering such towns and villages collapses the distance and sense of separation which, I suggest above, is one of the defining characteristics of picturesque viewing. At Genoa, where he spends, some time, he writes: ‘the disheartening dirt, discomfort, and decay; perfectly confounded me ... It requires a little time and use to overcome the feeling of depression consequent, at first, on so much ruin and neglect.’ (*PfI* 24) He is easily moved to charity by the poor people he meets, like the cicerone at Mantua:

His face was so very wistful and anxious, in the half-opened doorway, and there was so much poverty expressed in his faded suit and little pinched hat, and in the thread-bare worsted glove with which he held it – not expressed the less, because these were evidently his genteel clothes, hastily slipped on – that I would as soon have trodden on him as dismissed him. I engaged him on the instant ... (*PfI* 82)

Towards the end of the book, he channels such emotions, together with his reaction to the poverty of Naples, into a specific critique of picturesque art:

But, lovers and hunters of the picturesque, let us not keep too studiously out of view the miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness, with which this gay Neapolitan life is inseparably associated! It is not well to find St Giles’s so repulsive, and the Porta Capuana so attractive. A pair of naked legs and a ragged red scarf, do not make *all* the difference between what is interesting and what is coarse and odious? Painting and poetizing for ever, if you will, the beauties of this most beautiful and lovely spot of earth, let us, as our duty, try to associate a new picturesque with some faint recognition of man’s destiny and capabilities; more hopeful, I believe, among the ice and snow of the North Pole, than in the sun and bloom of Naples. (*PfI* 156)

After making the Italian tour, but before publication of the book, Dickens also wrote to Forster: ‘I am afraid the conventional idea of the picturesque is associated with such misery and degradation that a new picturesque will have to be established as the world goes onward.’<sup>27</sup> Joseph Phelan has identified this sentiment with a more general Victorian impulse toward a ‘new picturesque’, and suggests that, in Italy, Dickens is in a conflicted position between this sense of social responsibility and the ‘purely specular role of the picturesque tourist’ into which he ‘finds himself forced’.<sup>28</sup>

However, Phelan also writes that Dickens is: ‘much clearer about what is wrong with the “old” picturesque than he is about the shape of the evolving “new” picturesque.’<sup>29</sup> Nathalie Vanfasse suggests, with Nancy Hill, that for Dickens a new picturesque might incorporate elements of the grotesque, but she also points out that John Ruskin: ‘paradoxically ... reproached Dickens’s novels for being picturesque in the sense which Dickens himself was condemning’.<sup>30</sup> This leads her to speculate that the appeal for a new picturesque at the end of *Pictures from Italy* may actually have been a response to Ruskin’s criticism. However, it is not only here that Dickens is critical of the business of traditional picturesque viewing and tourism.

Firstly, he is scornful of professional artists’ models who play the rustic parts in picturesque art, because they are so false. In *Pictures from Italy* he satirises the ones to be found in Rome (*PfI* 121), and he returns to the subject in 1850 with a piece for *Household Words* entitled ‘The Ghost of Art’. Secondly, as Hill has noted, he satirises connoisseurs of the picturesque through unpleasant or unsympathetic characters such as Mrs Nickleby, John Chester in *Barnaby Rudge* and Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son*, who profess themselves to be such connoisseurs.<sup>31</sup> To this list could be added comic characters such as Flora Finching in *Little Dorrit* and the highly entertaining Alfred Tomkins, who expresses his devotion to a broken chimney-pot in the sketch, ‘The Boarding-House’. Tomkins looks out of a window and observes:

‘Do you see,’ said the connoisseur, placing Wisbottle in the right position – ‘a little more this way: there – do you see how splendidly the light falls upon the left side of that broken chimney-pot at No. 48?’

‘Dear me! I see,’ replied Wisbottle, in a tone of admiration.

‘I never saw an object stand out so beautifully against the clear sky in my life,’ ejaculated Alfred. Everybody (except John Evenson) echoed the sentiment, for Mr Tomkins had a great character for finding out beauties which no one else could discover – he certainly deserved it. (*SB* 287)

Tomkins even has something to say about the picturesque qualities of the Thames. The tone here at first seems more romantic, but the character of Tomkins is still ridiculous and the river is yellow, so Dickens’s satire is sustained:

‘If it’s very fine,’ said Mr Alfred Tomkins, addressing the company in general, ‘I shall ride down to Richmond to-day, and come back by the steamer. There are some splendid effects of light and shade on the Thames; the contrast between the blueness of the sky and the yellow water is frequently exceedingly beautiful.’ Mr Wisbottle hummed, ‘Flow on, thou shining river.’ (SB 289)

Satire of a more serious kind is to be found in *The Chimes*, where Will Fern is critical of picturesque tourism and asserts that it is impossible to live decently in a cottage. He says:

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

...

‘Tis harder than you think for, gentlefolks, to grow up decent: common decent: in such a place. That I grewed up a man and not a brute, says something for me – as I was then.’ (CB 132-3)

Here, what Will ‘won’t say’ hints at conditions too indecent to be mentioned in this Christmas book, and to which the lady tourists are also blind: preoccupied with the pleasing surface of country life, it implies, the middle classes are oblivious to its hidden privations and degradation, so this can be read as another appeal for a ‘new picturesque’ which is more socially aware and responsible. It predates *Pictures from Italy* by some two years.

Thirdly, a good case can be made (as, once again, Nancy Hill has done) that the peregrinations of Mr Pickwick and his companions across the countryside are themselves a satire on picturesque tourism. Hill persuasively compares the relevant passages of *The Pickwick Papers* to an earlier, overtly satirical piece by Rowlandson and Combe, entitled *The Tour of Dr Syntax in search of the Picturesque* (1809).<sup>32</sup> Mr Pickwick’s compulsive note-taking, which gets him into such trouble with the cab driver when he first sets out in Ch.2, would certainly seem to support this view of the novel. These satirical performances, together with the manifesto set out in *Pictures from Italy*, show that Dickens’s stance in relation to the cult of the picturesque is therefore revisionary, at least at a conscious level. However, I want to suggest that in his river scenes he does return, perhaps less consciously, to some of the conventions of the ‘historical picturesque’, and that for Dickens a power relationship between the observer and the landscape, in which the observer holds the advantage, remains important.

Rivers form a recurring motif in a pastoral mode of writing which Dickens invokes when he describes spaces of peace and safety, where characters can take refuge and feel in control over their surroundings, and they may also be read as spaces within which the reader can feel superior. There are many examples of such river scenes, including the Meagles’ house by the Thames at Twickenham in *Little Dorrit*: a setting which shelters Tattycoram, who has been rescued from the

Foundling Hospital (see *LD* 19), and the place where Daniel Doyce and Arthur Clennam take refuge from the rigours of London business. (See *LD* 199-203 etc.) In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Nell's grandfather indulges in a fantasy of escape from London, in which: "we will travel afoot through fields and woods, and by the side of rivers, and trust ourselves to God in the places where He dwells." (*OCS* 92) To him, then, the river is a godly place. The two sisters whom Nell later encounters in the town of Jarley's wax-works also represent a fantasy of family security to her and, as she takes to following them in their country walks, they become closely associated with a pastoral river scene: 'Their evening walk was by the river's side.' (*OCS* 238 etc.)

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene and Mortimer take refuge from their working life (such as it is) by the Thames at Hampton (see *OMF* 148) and, in the same novel, Lizzie retreats to the Thames village where the paper-mill is, which some critics have identified with Henley.<sup>33</sup> She comes to this idyllic, innocent rural world to escape the attentions of Eugene, and the moral hazards which he and his urban, sophisticated world embody. The two worlds are contrasted in the description, particularly when the village fair is conducted in the riverside meadows. Dickens ironically describes it as a 'scene of depravity', meaning the opposite in an expression of his familiar support for innocent popular entertainment, and fills the scene with characters whom he calls 'the rougher hewers of wood and drawers of water': the stock peasant figures of picturesque art. (*OMF* 719) Betty Higden is another peasant figure and it is, of course, here that she finally comes to rest, having followed the course of the river all the way. Her poverty is extreme, as evidenced by her occupations of child-minder at Brentford and tinker on the road, but Dickens passes quite lightly over it in the abstract, presenting her as a romantic character throughout. Betty's characterisation may therefore be likened to the mode of historical picturesque of which Will Fern complains.

The river in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which is associated with the Medway at Rochester, is similarly the refuge of Mr Crisparkle, where he takes his morning swims and evening walks. His 'favourite outlook' there is 'a beetling fragment of monastery ruin' (*ED* 122): another stock picturesque motif which is pleasantly developed later:

Cloisterham is so bright and sunny in these summer days, that the Cathedral and the monastery-ruin show as if their strong walls were transparent. A soft glow seems to shine from within them, rather than upon them from without, such is their mellowness as they look forth on the hot corn-fields and the smoking roads that distantly wind among them. (*ED* 225)

The tone of this passage echoes that of *Pickwick's* Rochester bridge scene explored below. While it is obviously impossible to tell how the picturesque mode might have played into the whole novel, it may at least be observed that the text of *Edwin Drood* has a strongly religious tone – and, according to some critics, message<sup>34</sup> – which would be consistent with the idea of an ordered landscape under

the control of a benign creator. All these scenes are described in the pastoral mode, all focus strongly on the river, and all give their occupants a sense of security and control. Three further examples may be explored in more detail to show how the power relationships within them work.

Dickens's first prominent evocation of the historical picturesque on a river occurs early in *Pickwick Papers*, at the Rochester Bridge scene on the Medway:

On the left of the spectator lay the ruined wall, broken in many places, and in some, overhanging the narrow beach below in rude and heavy masses. Huge knots of sea-weed hung upon the jagged and pointed stones, trembling in every breath of wind; and the green ivy clung mournfully round the dark, and ruined battlements. Behind it rose the ancient castle, its towers roofless, and its massive walls crumbling away, but telling us proudly of its old might and strength, as when, seven hundred years ago, it rang with the clash of arms, or resounded with the noise of feasting and revelry. On either side, the banks of the Medway, covered with corn-fields and pastures, with here and there a windmill, or a distant church, stretched away as far as the eye could see, presenting a rich and varied landscape, rendered more beautiful by the changing shadows which passed swiftly across it, as the thin and half-formed clouds skimmed away in the light of the morning sun. The river, reflecting the clear blue of the sky, glistened and sparkled as it flowed noiselessly on; and the oars of the fishermen dipped into the water with a clear and liquid sound, as their heavy but picturesque boats glided slowly down the stream. (*PP* 58-9)

Here are many elements of picturesque art. The scene is framed between the two banks of the river, carefully composed and proportioned using a series of specific prepositional phrases, for the benefit of the 'spectator'. This term is used here in a fruitfully ambiguous way; in one sense it is Mr Pickwick, who is standing on the bridge and controlling the scene with his eye, but in another it could be a reference to the reader, or a generic spectator, as one who observes a work of art.<sup>35</sup>

The ruins of Rochester castle, the pastures, country churches and fishing boats are classic historical picturesque subjects – and, of course, the genre is specifically referenced at the end, as it is on three further occasions over the course of the novel.<sup>36</sup> The scene is then entered by 'the dismal man', who vaguely contemplates suicide by jumping off the bridge – but he has thought about this 'often' before without doing so, and soon: 'the momentary excitement quickly subsided; and he turned calmly away ...' (*PP* 60) The calmness of his general tone makes it clear to the reader that the dismal man is in no real danger of jumping, and therefore that Mr Pickwick is in no risk of getting caught up in a dangerous incident. Mr Pickwick's presence also goes some way towards keeping the dismal man safe, partly because the latter has come here to find him.

This is appropriate to a novel much of which is devoted to Mr Pickwick's progress across a landscape which, for Dickens's comic purposes,<sup>37</sup> must remain powerless to confront him with any real threats. He is a trusting and very innocent type of the picaro figure, therefore vulnerable, and travel is inherently dangerous, so his movement across the landscape is not without its potential

hazards - such as the runaway horses of Ch.5 or Dingley Dell's thin ice of Ch.30 – but they cannot harm anything but his dignity. In the former case the chaise, horses and hostlers make up a merely picturesque scene, and the narration does not really attend to the danger in the situation. Instead the uncooperativeness of the horses only serves to make the Pickwickians look ridiculous. In the latter case, when the ice cracks and it becomes evident that Mr Pickwick has actually fallen through it, the consequences seem at first to be inappropriately horrific for this novel. However, the water turns out to be only about three feet deep, and he simply stands up again. The requirements of comedy take precedence over the drama, and the power relationship between Pickwick and the landscape remains in his favour. Mr Pickwick's adventures also echo those of heroes of the 18<sup>th</sup> century picaresque novels which Dickens so admired.<sup>37</sup> The hazards of unruly horses and water features are also to be found, for example, respectively in Sterne's *Sentimental Journey* and Smollett's *Humphry Clinker*, both of which, like Smollett's other novels, inhabit worlds which seem superficially chaotic and dangerous, but lack the power to do any real damage to people. The generic formula of such stories diminishes the possibility of genuine threat, and a 'broken head' is never as bad as it sounds.

Back on the Thames, a good example of historical picturesque river description is to be found in a little regarded passage from *Dombey and Son*. Florence is staying at the house of Sir Barnet and Lady Skettles, 'a pretty villa at Fulham, on the banks of the Thames' (*DS* 350) – which is so close that they are occasionally flooded. With her morale at a particularly low ebb, she forms a habit of walking alone by the river early in the morning, 'among the children of the poor' (*DS* 357) and Dickens then develops the following scene:

There was one man whom she several times observed at work very early, and often with a girl of about her own age seated near him. He was a very poor man, who seemed to have no regular employment, but now went roaming about the banks of the river when the tide was low, looking out for bits and scraps in the mud; and now worked at the unpromising little patch of garden-ground before his cottage; and now tinkered up a miserable old boat that belonged to him; or did some job of that kind for a neighbour, as chance occurred. Whatever the man's labour, the girl was never employed; but sat, when she was with him, in a listless, moping state, and idle.

Florence had often wished to speak to this man; yet she had never taken courage to do so, as he made no movement towards her. But one morning when she happened to come upon him suddenly, from a by-path among some pollard willows which terminated in the little shelving piece of stony ground that lay between his dwelling and the water, where he was bending over a fire he had made to caulk the old boat which was lying bottom upwards, close by, he raised his head at the sound of her footstep, and gave her Good morning. (*DS* 357-8)

In this pleasant setting, the fact that the willows are pollarded signals a controlling human intervention in the natural environment, and many of the classic, rustic picturesque elements are also here: the cottage, the poor garden-ground, the dilapidated, upturned boat, the peasant figure of the man himself; and once again the scene is carefully composed, through the relative positions of these objects, into a visual image. It transpires that the girl is the man's daughter, but that she is ill-

tempered and does not love him, in spite of all his best efforts and kindness. Their relationship is therefore the opposite of that of Florence with her own father, and the man's predicament the same as hers, as Andrew Sanders has put it: 'a reverse of her own painful situation.'<sup>38</sup> While this fact may heighten her sympathy for the man, the picturesque conditions in which he is presented to her eye also place her, and indeed the reader, in a position of superiority over him. Florence is, after all, the daughter of a gentleman, and has the power to impose a financial obligation upon the peasant, which she duly does: 'Florence softly put some money near his hand, on the old boat, and left him.' (DS 359) She is made less abject, despite her manifold distresses, by the comparison with him and by her economic power over his situation. At the same time her fundamental goodness is enhanced and foregrounded by the act of charity, strengthening her character in the reader's estimation.

The picturesque is also invoked to enhance the status of Pip in *Great Expectations*. Because the river is so important to its plot, this novel contains many Thames scenes of a sinister and dramatic nature; but also one which seems out of step with the others, until it is interpreted in terms of the picturesque. This is Bill Barley's house at Mill Pond Bank, in the Pool, below London Bridge. When Pip is trying to find him there (by way of the 'Old Green Copper Rope-Walk') he describes the setting in very chaotic terms, characterised by busy nautical activity, but also by many signs of dereliction:

... what stranded ships repairing in dry docks I lost myself among, what old hulls of ships in course of being knocked to pieces, what ooze and slime and other dregs of tide, what yards of ship-builders and ship-breakers, what rusty anchors blindly biting into the ground though for years off duty, what mountainous country of accumulated casks and timber, how many rope-walks that were not the Old Green Copper. (GE 354)

Despite the 'ooze and slime and other dregs of tide', Pip finds the smells of the boat builders' yards 'not disagreeabl[e]' and, on finally finding Mill Pond Bank, reports that: 'it was a fresh kind of place, all circumstances considered, where the wind from the river had room to turn itself round.' Mrs Whimple, the landlady, is a peasant figure: 'of a pleasant and thriving appearance', (GE 355) while the household is homely, quaint and dominated by the eccentric nautical habits of Bill Barley, who weighs out all their provisions and whose room, as Herbert says, 'must be like a chandler's shop.' (GE 355)

Once again, Pip's observation of this scene can be interpreted in terms of his power relationship with it. Ever since the fight at Satis House, he has seen himself as being superior to Herbert, who has brought him here – and in a sense this is Herbert's domain, for he is to marry Clara Barley. Like Florence Dombey above, Pip has bestowed charity upon Herbert, by secretly buying his interest in Clarriker & Co, which by now employs him. As an observer of the picturesque, Pip

therefore has an interest in feeling superior to these surroundings. Furthermore, as someone who is about to attempt a fairly serious crime in helping Magwitch to escape, his and the reader's sense of his own moral superiority is perhaps in need of some reinforcement at this particular point. This effect is made stronger here than in the passage quoted from *Dombey and Son* because Pip is a first-person narrator, so it is positively his view of the scene, as opposed to a third-person narrator's view merely focalised through the perceptions of Florence.

In this analysis, then, Sam Pickwick, Florence and Pip all hold positions of relative power over the river scenes which they survey, and this is wholly consistent with the description by Barrell and others of the function of the picturesque. However, in each case the scenes also excite their curiosity and this, too, is a key function of the picturesque scene as defined by Uvedale Price and cited above. Mr Pickwick wants to find out the dismal man's interpolated tale (which he later agrees to send him by post), while Florence wants to penetrate the secret of the relationship between the man and his daughter but is afraid to ask, and Pip is in a state of curious perplexity simply because he is lost, and cannot find the Old Green Copper Rope-Walk. Pip's movement from the rope-walk into Bill Barley's house is also a movement out of picturesque riparian landscape into a different type of picturesque scene: that of the rustic interior. This, too, is an established sub-genre of the picturesque in the visual arts, and many good examples of it can be found in the work of Adriaen Ostade himself. The following is typical:



Fig. 4: *Peasant Family in an Interior* by Adriaen Ostade, 1661.

This contains many of the same elements of peasant subject matter, composition and framing as the landscape image considered above, except that the confined space removes the possibility of physical distance between the viewpoint and the scene. Instead the human subjects are kept separate and detached from the viewer by the fact that they do not look out of the frame. They are all looking at either the child or the dog, so eye contact with the viewer is denied, and the subjects therefore do not allow the viewer to get a sense of participation in their scene. This is analogous to Pip's role in the Barley household, on which he has no impact but remains an inert external observer, and to Dickens's treatment of the other interior scenes explored below.

The description of Bill Barley's room being 'like a chandler's shop' furthermore plays into Dickens's sense of orderliness. The chandler's shop or seedsman's shop is a recurring image, and its appeal to Dickens, of everything being under control, is well illustrated in the description of Mr Pumblechook's premises earlier in the same novel and cited in the Introduction above. (*GE* 49) However, it also belongs to another class of setting which is very common in Dickens and may be considered as a distinctively Dickensian mode of the historical picturesque: that of rooms and houses which are fitted up like ships' cabins,<sup>39</sup> and occupied by usually nautical people who behave, when at home, as if they are actually at sea.

### **Land boats and dockyard scenes**

These settings are generally characterised by their quaintness, benignity, charm, and the humour which Dickens finds in the incongruity and redundancy of nautical objects on land. Their descriptions often have still-life qualities of composition like those created by painters of rustic interiors and I would suggest that they are all expressions of the historical picturesque, partly because they tend to be occupied by low-status, harmless, often comic characters to whom it is easy for a reader, and for other, higher-status characters who encounter them, to feel superior, and partly because their incongruity is itself a curiosity.

The most obvious example of this is Mr Peggotty's house in *David Copperfield*, which is actually a stranded boat. David is captivated by this:

If it had been Aladdin's palace, roc's egg and all, I suppose I could not have been more charmed with the romantic idea of living in it. There was a delightful door cut in the side, and it was roofed in, and there were little windows in it; but the wonderful charm of it was, that it was a real boat which had no doubt been upon the water hundreds of times, and which had never been intended to be lived in, on dry land. That was the captivation of it to me. If it had ever been

meant to be lived in, I might have thought it small, or inconvenient, or lonely; but never having been designed for any such use, it became a perfect abode. (DC 30)

Inside it is perfectly clean and well appointed, and therefore an attractive setting, but it is inhabited by the peasant figures of the Peggotty family and the destitute Mrs Gummidge: all of them classic picturesque subjects. In that Clara Peggotty was a servant of his parents' household, David is already socially superior to the family and therefore to this scene when he first visits it, so as a picturesque viewer he stands in the same power relationship towards it as the other examples cited above. Although he may not consciously feel this as a child, he certainly does when he returns as a more educated young man – and so, of course, does Steerforth, who so mercilessly exploits it.

Meanwhile at Portsmouth, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mr Crummles lodges at the house of a ship's pilot called Bulph. He has:

the little finger of a drowned man on his parlour mantel-shelf, with other maritime and natural curiosities. He displayed also a brass knocker, a brass plate, and a brass bell-handle, all very bright and shining; and had a mast, with a vane on the top of it, in his back yard. (NN 302)

The emphasis on brass fittings here further signifies the nautical<sup>40</sup> and again this interior is very orderly, while the reference to 'curiosities' is a marker of the picturesque and the collection including the finger perhaps an affectionate satire on the collecting habits of the Victorian connoisseur. While we do not learn anything further about Mr Bulph himself, the occupant Mr Crummles is certainly a picturesque figure, characterised in affectionate terms by the narrator, along with his family and the rest of his theatrical troupe.

A similar interior can be found in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in the top floor set of rooms in London occupied by the former sailor Lt Tartar. Described as 'the neatest, the cleanest, and the best-ordered chambers ever seen', these also contain polished brass fittings, charts, telescopes and navigational instruments, and the image of the seedsman's shop is here, too:

His sitting-room was like the admiral's cabin, his bath room was like a dairy, his sleeping chamber, fitted all about with lockers and drawers, was like a seedsman's shop; and his nicely-balanced cot just stirred in the midst, as if it breathed. (ED 247)

Here the stirring of the cot expresses the motion of the sea, and Tartar even erects rigging outside the windows, where his flower garden is. The narrator concludes: 'there was a sea-going air upon the whole effect, so delightfully complete ...' (ED 248)

The comedy of such settings proceeds partly from the nonsensical attempts of the characters in them to operate on land as if they are at sea, which they cannot successfully do because they are out of their natural element. One way in which this effect is achieved, is by applying the language of

navigation and the sea to such characters' movements on land, and the best example of this is Capt. Cuttle in *Dombey and Son*. Thus he refers to his lodgings at Brig Place as his "'moorings'" (eg *DS* 465). When his landlady Mrs MacStinger is cleaning them he refers to her "'swabbing of these here planks'" (*DS* 341). He describes the disappearance of Sol Gills in London as him "'[going] over the side ... without a splash ... without a ripple.'" (*DS* 471) The narrator sometimes describes his progress as a 'course' (eg *DS* 343) or a 'cruise' (eg *DS* 704), and when he plans to leave Brig Place he 'resolve[s] to weigh anchor'. (*DS* 350)

These are only a few examples of a very insistent strain in Dickens's writing about Capt. Cuttle, which does much to portray him as unable to cope with his environment – and he is indeed extremely limited. He has no idea what to do about Sol's disappearance, or what to do with Florence, and has to resort for advice to the even more hopeless Capt. Bunsby. He is therefore a figure to whom anyone can feel superior and it seems improbable that either of them could really have held the rank of captain. With their antic dress and manners they have more in common with the peasant figures of the picturesque, and Capt. Cuttle certainly presents himself in that light when he makes his obsequious appeal to Mr Carker on behalf of Walter. (See Ch.17) He also supplies a further example of the boat-on-land type of setting described above: when he moves into Sol Gills's back parlour he makes some changes, and it is: 'now more than ever like the cabin of a ship.' (*DS* 466)

A final example from *The Old Curiosity Shop* is somewhat different. When Quilp moves in to the counting-house at the wharf, 'like Robinson Crusoe', he too equips it like a ship's cabin, with a 'second-hand hammock' and 'an old ship's stove with a rusty funnel.' (*OCS* 368-9) It is referred to by the narrator as a 'cabin' (see also *OCS* 500) and it later even acquires a ship's figure-head by way of decoration (see *OCS* 456). However, this environment is neither charming nor benign. It is generally filled with smoke, other characters find it a frightening, intolerable place to be, and Quilp himself is very far from being a harmless character, as explored in Ch.5 below. This interior is therefore a manifestation of that species of 'new picturesque' which has been described by Nancy Hill as incorporating elements of the grotesque.<sup>41</sup>

Dickens also evokes this nautical strain of the historical picturesque through a series of actual dockyard settings. These are characterised by the redundancy, dereliction and, once again, often the incongruity of their contents, and by a sense of chaos and muddle (albeit artfully composed into scenes) which suggests that they are ineffective as workplaces, and indeed as part of a transport infrastructure. This once again has the effect of rendering them harmless, and placing the reader in

a position of superiority over them. Among them may be included Pip's search for the Old Green Copper Rope Walk quoted above, and another is supplied by the environs of Capt. Cuttle's lodgings, with its: 'unheard-of difficulties from swivel-bridges, soft roads, impassable canals, caravans of casks, settlements of scarlet-beans and little wash-houses, and many such obstacles abounding in that country.' (DS 337)<sup>42</sup>

Also in *Dombey and Son* is the wharf where the young Florence, after being lost in London, is found again:

... escaping from the clash and clangour of a narrow street full of carts and waggons, she peeped into a kind of wharf or landing-place upon the river-side, where there were a great many packages, casks, and boxes, strewn about; a large pair of wooden scales; and a little wooden house on wheels, outside of which, looking at the neighbouring masts and boats, a stout man stood whistling, with his pen behind his ear, and his hands in his pockets, as if his day's work were nearly done. (DS 77)

Here the fact that the merchandise is 'strewn about', along with the indolence of the 'stout man', suggests the dysfunctionality of this place as a wharf, while the 'house on wheels' seems incongruous and recalls the gypsy caravans of historical picturesque art. Florence is curious about it but also, as the daughter of its owner, socially superior to it, so this is also the environment which puts her back in control. It is the place of safety from where she is restored to her father's house, and it is also the place where she meets Walter, whom she will ultimately marry. (It is because Walter works there that we know it must be one of Mr Dombey's wharves.)

Other examples from the same novel include the scene of Walter's embarkation on the *Son and Heir* explored in Ch.2 below, and the mooring of Capt. Bunsby's ship, 'whose tangled rigging looked like monstrous cobwebs half swept down.' (DS 343) Meanwhile *Martin Chuzzlewit* supplies the examples of the Thames wharf by the lodging house Todgers, with its playful description of the orange box porters (MC 135), and the dockland scene where the murderer Jonas Chuzzlewit is apprehended at the end. This, too, appears chaotic, but is safely under the control of the authorities who prevent his escape by sea. (See MC 641-3.)

Dickens's affection for such places may be partly traceable to his godfather, Christopher Huffam, whose home and business at Garford Street in London's docklands he used to visit after returning to London at the age of nine. Forster describes Huffam as: 'a rigger, and mast, oar and block-maker, [who] lived at Limehouse in a substantial handsome sort of way, and was kind to his god-child. It was always a great treat to him to go to Mr Huffam's.'<sup>43</sup> Michael Slater confirms that Huffam was actually a rigger to the Royal Navy.<sup>44</sup> Peter Ackroyd writes that: 'the atmosphere of Limehouse reminded the young boy of the ambience of Chatham,' and suggests that it provides a model for

Solomon Gills's shop in *Dombey and Son* which, as Ackroyd says, is 'treated with great affection'.<sup>45</sup>

Dickens's non-fiction also shows a personal fondness for these places. In *The Uncommercial Traveller*, a piece entitled 'At a Dockyard' describes: 'some out-of-the-way landing-places on the Thames and the Medway, where I do much of my summer idling', and goes on to develop at length a historical picturesque scene which again recalls the Rochester bridge scene from *Pickwick*. It even contains: 'a boy, to whom I am much indebted for additions to my scanty stock of knowledge [about the river]' who can easily be read as a refiguring of his younger self (*UT* 252-261), as indeed Michael Slater does.<sup>46</sup> A note of ironic false modesty may be detected here in the reference to his 'stock of knowledge' about the river which, as seen in the introduction above, was very far from 'scanty' by the 1860s when this was written. Meanwhile an earlier *Uncommercial Traveller* piece might be considered as belonging to a newer picturesque. The piece entitled 'Poor Mercantile Jack' describes the bustling activity of the Liverpool docks affectionately enough, but explicitly acknowledges the suffering of Jack himself, who works there in the snow and hail, and it goes on to describe the terrible conditions in which he lives. (*UT* 37-40)

Dickens's depiction of picturesque dockyard scenes is not only historical but also notably nostalgic, and this helps to identify them with the interest of historical picturesque art in anachronistic structures and particularly ruins. Dickens also places ruinous structures in his dockyards, but one of the most distinctive ways in which he expresses nostalgia about the river is through his treatment of the tension between sail and steam technologies. On land, the transition from road to steam rail transport was perceived as a clear and fairly immediate improvement (once they had got over unsatisfactory early experiments with wooden rails and all the disruption to cities caused by construction) but at sea the transition was much slower and steam more problematic.

This is best demonstrated by Dickens's own experience of his 1842 visit to America. The outbound voyage on the steam ship, *Britannia*, terrified him. He could see flames coming out the top of the ship's 40-foot funnel, and noticed that it was supported in stormy weather by hastily-rigged guy ropes. 'If the chimney were blown overboard,' he observed to Forster, 'it needs no great observation to discover that the vessel must be instantly on fire from stem to stern.' He also noted that for a transatlantic voyage over half the ship's burden was taken up with coal for the engines, from which he plausibly concluded that it must be either overloaded at the beginning of the voyage, or unstable because under-ballasted at the end, or probably both, and this was borne out well enough by his own experience: 'The daily difference in her rolling, as she burns the coals out, is

something absolutely fearful.’ He changed his plans for the return trip, which he made on the sailing packet, *George Washington*, Dickens commenting: ‘I never will trust myself upon the wide ocean, if it please Heaven, in a steamer again’.<sup>47</sup>

Because of these difficulties, sail and steam technology continued to co-exist at sea for the second half of the century, before diesel engines began to take over, and there were even some ships, such as the Royal Navy’s *HMS Warrior*, completed in 1861, which had both sails and steam engines.<sup>48</sup> The Thames was a site of interface between the two technologies, where they could be seen side by side, as most famously depicted in Turner’s painting of a sailing ship being towed by steam to her last berth on the river at Rotherhithe:



Fig. 5: *The Fighting Temeraire* by J.M.W. Turner, 1839.

Turner expresses his nostalgia for the age of sail through his romantic depiction of the ship in comparison to the tug, and Dickens does the same in his picturesque river scenes by privileging sail over steam. He does this in the romantic views of distant sails on the river in his articles in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, and in Bella’s fantasy of the empire in *Our Mutual Friend*. Bella fantasises about a ‘handsome three-masted ship’, imagines a ‘gallant bark ... with streamers flying’ and notices a ‘ship being towed out by a steam-tug’ before imagining all the romantic adventures which the ship – not the tug – will have.

The interface between sail and steam is further referenced in Walter Gay’s embarkation scene in *Dombey and Son* because, as John Sutherland has also observed,<sup>49</sup> Dickens has Walter take a steamer from the wharf out to the sailing ship, the *Son and Heir*, which is to be the vehicle of his

romantic adventure. Of the two vessels, the *Son and Heir* clearly presents the more picturesque subject, with its:

... pretty state of confusion with sails lying all bedraggled on the wet decks, loose ropes tripping people up, men in red shirts running barefoot to and fro, casks blockading every foot of space, and, in the thickest of the fray, a black cook in a black caboose up to his eyes in vegetables and blinded with smoke. (*DS* 278)

The picturesque dockyard scenes mentioned above also tend to reference sail technology through their emphasis on rigging – Christopher Huffam’s stock in trade – and it is also notable that the steam vessels in the fiction have a tendency to represent a destructive force: in both *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*, steam boats run down rowing boats on the Thames and sink them.

A further example of the nostalgic quality of Dickens’s picturesque river scenes can be found in the sketch, ‘Scotland Yard’ which is Scene No.4 in *Sketches by Boz*. The yard here is described as ‘a small – a very small – tract of land, bounded on one side by the river Thames, on the other by the gardens of Northumberland House’. It contains:

a race of strong and bulky men, who repaired to the wharves in Scotland-yard regularly every morning, about five or six o’clock, to fill heavy wagons with coal, with which they proceeded to distant places up the country, and supplied the inhabitants with fuel. (*SB* 61)

These coal heavers can be compared to the peasant figures of picturesque art, and the scene they occupy is described in very nostalgic terms. It contains, for example, ‘a room of ancient appearance’ in a public house, where the coal heavers gather to recall the past:

Here, too, would they tell old legends of what the Thames was in ancient times, when the Patent Shot Manufactory wasn’t built, and Waterloo-bridge had never been thought of; and then they would shake their heads with portentous looks, to the deep edification of the rising generation of heavers, who crowded round them, and wondered where all this would end. (*SB* 62)

Set just before the demolition of old London Bridge in 1832, the sketch turns on the fears of the coal heavers that when its piers were cleared away the water would all run out of the river and their livelihood would be destroyed. These are therefore unsophisticated, innocent characters who do not seem to understand the tide and perceive themselves to be vulnerable to change, but the reader knows better.

### **The river as recreational space**

A final type of picturesque river scene in Dickens is that depicting recreation on the river. Dickens makes much of the emergence of the Thames as a recreational space, and historically this movement corresponds closely to the time when he was writing. The Leander rowing club at

Henley was founded in 1818, and Geoffrey Page traces the emergence of the first small, unofficial rowing clubs in London to around 1820.<sup>50</sup> The university boat race started at Henley in 1829 before moving to Putney in 1845, while the Henley Regatta began in 1839, becoming the Henley Royal Regatta in 1851 after gaining the patronage of Prince Albert. In the middle part of the century there were annual regattas at Richmond, Molesey, Goring/Streatley, and Reading. The London Rowing Club was founded in 1856, followed by the City of London Rowing Club in 1860, which expanded and changed its name to the Thames Rowing Club in 1862.<sup>51</sup>

In the last two decades of the century Thames boating was to assume the proportions of a craze, but in Dickens's time it was very much in its infancy, as the dates of all these institutions show. It was therefore for the most part very low-key, amateur and makeshift. It clearly appeals to Dickens's sense of humour, which is displayed in affectionate satire on the confusion, incompetence and mishaps of rowers, and to his sense of the picturesque, which is expressed in the composition of his rowing scenes. In these scenes the descriptions of landscape are highly visual, with emphasis on the ways in which the river is framed between its banks, and therefore owe something to the conventions of picturesque landscape painting. The scenes are always populated with low-status, often comic characters, often of incongruous appearance, who are in a sufficient state of muddle to excite the curiosity and patronage of the picturesque viewer.

The earliest examples are to be found in some of the *Sketches by Boz* which seem only semi-fictional. The narrator of scene No.10, 'The River' (*SB* 91-8), writes: 'we have been on water excursions out of number', in what seems like an autobiographical aside, before embarking on an account of the slapstick antics of the boat hirers. Rowing matches are described too, and there is even a prize wherry in the scene. This sketch was written before the development of widespread access to the upstream reaches of the river, so the focus here is on tideway rowing and the boats are hired from Searle's Yard, which was in Lambeth.

The latter part of this sketch is devoted to equally affectionate satire on the confusion and bustle to be found among the passenger steamers at London Bridge and St Katharine's Dock wharves, with people mixing up the Margate and Gravesend boats. This topic is also treated in tale No.7, 'The Steam Excursion', about a private party on board a steamer leaving from the Custom House wharf, organised by the hopeless Mr Percy Noakes. It has been suggested that the source for this was a sailing trip which Dickens took with Henry Austin in Spring 1833,<sup>52</sup> though there is no reason to suppose he was not relating his own experience of the steamers by which he was shortly to begin

travelling to Broadstairs. He returns to the rowers on the river in 'The Loving Couple' with more incompetent antics of the pleasure boaters, this time at Twickenham.

The novels also contain a liberal scattering of references to recreation on the Thames and these, too, are mostly of a very innocent nature. The characters who either partake of it or refer to it tend to be positively characterised, and again tend to be quite minor, comic characters. Thus in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Miss Morleena Kenwigs takes a steamer upstream to a convivial party on Eel-pie Island, Twickenham. (NN 696) In *The Old Curiosity Shop* Dick Swiveller has 'a blue jacket with a double row of gilt buttons, which he had originally ordered for aquatic expeditions.' (OCS 248) In *Bleak House* another ineffectual character, Richard Carstone, contemplating going into the law, says: "'I am fond of boating. Articled clerks go a good deal on the water. It's a capital profession!'" (BH 169) In *Great Expectations*, Pip tries to woo Estella by taking her and the Brandleys, with whom she is staying at Richmond, out on the water, (GE 286) and of course rowing is very much on the curriculum at Matthew Pocket's establishment in Hammersmith. In *Barnaby Rudge*, the clerks in the Temple 'cast sad looks towards the Thames, and think of baths and boats' (BR 115) while, in *Dombey and Son*, the more fortunate clerks from the city do get to 'go up the river' in the stock phrase of the time. (DS 247)

In the same novel, Mr Toots acquires a 'six-oared cutter' which he names 'The Toots's Joy' and takes up to the Skettles's house at Fulham to try to woo Florence, with the incongruous figure of the 'game chicken' in his fireman's coat on the rudder lines. This episode supplies a fairly representative sample of Dickens's treatment of recreation on the river:

Stretched on a crimson cushion in his gallant bark, with his shoes in the air, Mr Toots, in the exercise of his project, had come up the river, day after day, and week after week, and had flitted to and fro, near Sir Barnet's garden, and had caused his crew to cut across and across the river at sharp angles, for his better exhibition to any lookers-out from Sir Barnet's windows, and had had such evolutions performed by The Toots's Joy as had filled all the neighbouring part of the water-side with astonishment. But whenever he saw any one in Sir Barnet's garden on the brink of the river, Mr Toots always feigned to be passing there, by a combination of coincidences of the most singular and unlikely description. (DS 411-2)

The tone here is light, the scene pleasant and leisurely, but also ridiculous. The boat goes back and forth, but makes no progress. Nothing could be more innocent or harmless than Mr Toots's advances to Florence, and of course they are also completely ineffectual, for he can never bring himself to follow them (or anything else) through. In his own oft-repeated phrase, "'it's of no consequence'". This is therefore another example of a picturesque scene which poses no threat to anyone, over which an observer may feel in control. It also echoes much of the boating material in the early sketches.

More picturesque still is the scene of Eugene and Mortimer's boating holiday in *Our Mutual Friend*, briefly mentioned above. As the narrator says: 'They had taken a bachelor cottage near Hampton, on the brink of the Thames, with a lawn, and a boat-house, and all things fitting, and were to float with the stream through the summer and the Long Vacation.' (OMF 148) Finally, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, Mr Tartar, assisted by his man Lobley, takes Rosa and Mr Grewgious out on the Thames. In a long description which begins, 'the afternoon was charming. Mr Tartar's boat was perfect,' Dickens develops a setting which seems to recall the garden of Eden, with 'delicious odours of limes in bloom, and musical rippings.' When they return to London the Biblical reference seems to be confirmed in a strain of elegiac writing: 'the everlastingly green garden seemed to be left for everlasting, unregainable and far away.' (ED 257-8)

For the most part, then, Dickens uses scenes of recreation on the picturesque river to depict innocent pleasures, escape from more threatening circumstances, and a place of safety. The characters he places in them are often in a state of muddle, confusion and general ineffectiveness which places the observer in a position of superiority over them and makes them picturesque, while keeping them safe. Even in the idyllic scene last quoted, Rosa and Mr Grewgious come to innocent grief when they have a go at rowing but cannot really manage it.

Dickens's depiction of the river as a recreational space is in stark contrast with those of other writers, and indeed some artists, later in the century. In the 1880s and 1890s Londoners began taking to the water in their thousands and recreational boating on the Thames became economically accessible to a much broader cross-section of society than it had been before.<sup>53</sup> As the river historian R.R. Bolland puts it: 'In a strange way democracy flourished on the river.'<sup>54</sup> Anxiety about the resulting promiscuous class mixing then came to be expressed by writers who represented the recreational Thames as a place of moral danger. Examples include the near-elopement (albeit on another river) of Maggie Tulliver with Stephen Guest in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1880), Clara Hewett 'go[ing] up the river'<sup>55</sup> with the rakish Scawthorne in Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889), the dead body of the fallen woman discovered by the protagonists of Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889), and the loose women depicted with the naval officer in Tissot's painting, 'On the Thames' (1876). Such representations form a stark contrast to those of Dickens, in whose time the riparian space was far less commercial or busy, and for him it remains free from any such moral danger. His use of the recreational Thames is therefore in one sense a prelapsarian conception of the picturesque, as best exemplified by the final, Edenic example from *The Mystery Edwin Drood*.

This chapter has shown how the Thames in particular became a focus of the picturesque through its dedicated non-fictional literature at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and how Dickens develops that focus through a wide range of river scenes. It has argued that, in spite of the case for a ‘new picturesque’ which he makes in *Pictures from Italy*, the river scenes actually revert to a mode of the historical picturesque through the power relationships expressed within them. Such scenes are characterised by old-fashioned, dilapidated structures and chaotic confusions of often ill-assorted, often redundant, objects. They are populated by characters who are essentially vulnerable, often comically so, and who thereby supply the picturesque quality of placing the observer in a position of security, and even superiority, in relation to them. The overall effect is to make the landscape safe and bring it under human control. Many of these scenes are also distinctively nostalgic, particularly in the way they privilege sail over steam on the Thames, such as Bella Wilfer’s fantasies in *Our Mutual Friend* and Walter Gay’s embarkation scene in *Dombey and Son*. These examples also involve the beginnings of journeys out of the Thames to remote parts of the world, so the next chapter will turn attention to the importance of the river in the expression of Dickens’s ideas about the British empire.

## Notes to Ch.1

<sup>1</sup> The title of her 2004 article on the picturesque in Dickens and Jane Austen.

<sup>2</sup> In *Pfi* 156 as quoted below.

<sup>3</sup> As described in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

<sup>4</sup> Budge, ed (2001) vol.3, p.68.

<sup>5</sup> He is citing John Dixon Hunt. See Phelan (2002) p.122.

<sup>6</sup> Budge, ed. (2000) vol.1, pp.6, 7, 8, 19 & 46.

<sup>7</sup> Budge, ed. (2000) vol.3, pp.26, 50-51, 58 & 63.

<sup>8</sup> Budge, ed. (2000) vol.1, p.67.

<sup>9</sup> See Budge, ed. (2000) vol.3, pp.297-8 & 300-1, and vol.4, pp.23-25 & 82, and vol.5, pp.45, 83-4 & 172-3.

<sup>10</sup> In Copley & Garside, ed.s (1994) p.223.

<sup>11</sup> Hill (1981) p.9.

<sup>12</sup> Charlesworth (1994) p.70.

<sup>13</sup> Modiano (1994) pp.196-199.

<sup>14</sup> Modiano (1994) p.208.

<sup>15</sup> Worrall (1994) p.249.

<sup>16</sup> Budge, ed. (2000) vol.1, pp.vi & x.

<sup>17</sup> Johnston (2004) all p.173.

<sup>18</sup> For an account of this, see Brownell (1995)

<sup>19</sup> Westall & Owen (1824) facing p.131.

<sup>20</sup> See Brownell (1995) p.65.

<sup>21</sup> The Sotheran catalogue of the Gad’s Hill library contains 72 items which fall into this category.

<sup>22</sup> See Slater (2009) p.365.

<sup>23</sup> 23 times according to the Victorian Literary Studies Archive hyper-concordance at <http://victorian.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/concordance/dickens/>. This may not be accurate (I noticed only 17 occurrences in *Pictures from Italy*, but it is probably a safe indication of the preponderance there.)

<sup>24</sup> Johnston (2004) p.173.

<sup>25</sup> He also sets out this intention on *Pfi* 2.

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<sup>26</sup> Adriaen Van Ostade was also a painter of, in Johnston's term, historical picturesque scenes. Christopher Baker describes his pictures of: 'peasants merrymaking or brawling in houses, taverns, or barns.' See Brigstocke, ed. (2001) p.527.

<sup>27</sup> Letter of 11 February 1845 to John Forster: *Letters*, vol.4, p.266.

<sup>28</sup> Phelan (2002) pp.120-121.

<sup>29</sup> Phelan (2002) p.135.

<sup>30</sup> My translation of: 'Paradoxalement, Ruskin lui-meme reprocha aux romans de Dickens d'etre pittoresques au sens que Dickens lui-meme condamnait.' Vanfasse (2006) p.313.

<sup>31</sup> See Hill (1981) pp.28-29.

<sup>32</sup> See Hill (1981) pp.20-21.

<sup>33</sup> See Tambling (2009) p.237, or Litvack (2003) p.40.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Angus Wilson's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition: *ED* 17.

<sup>35</sup> Dickens's affection for this scene may be evidenced by the fact that, when the old Rochester Bridge depicted here was demolished, he salvaged one of the balustrades and had it made into the stand for a sundial in his garden at Gad's Hill. See Haslehurst et al (1919) part 4, p.10.

<sup>36</sup> It is also suggested indirectly by other pastoral passages, such as the clergyman's poem (see *PP* 74).

<sup>37</sup> See Slater (2009) p.11.

<sup>38</sup> Sanders (2010) p.178.

<sup>39</sup> Eitan Bar-Yosef has also referred to this class of 'land-boats in the Dickensian canon'. See Bar-Yosef (2002) p.224.

<sup>40</sup> Wherever possible, metal fittings on ships are made of brass. Not being magnetic, it will not interfere with a compass.

<sup>41</sup> As cited by Vanfasse (2006) p.314.

<sup>42</sup> See also the long initial description of this location on *DS* 121-2.

<sup>43</sup> Forster (1892) p.7.

<sup>44</sup> See Slater (2009) p.4.

<sup>45</sup> Ackroyd (1990) p.67.

<sup>46</sup> See Slater (2009) p.517.

<sup>47</sup> To John Forster, 30 January 1842 and 24 February 1842. See *Letters*, vol.3, pp.40-41 & 88-89. The *Britannia* carried 700 tons of coal, but weighed only 1,200 tons in all.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Tindall (2006) p.137 etc for a discussion of this.

<sup>49</sup> Sutherland (2006) p.121.

<sup>50</sup> See Page (1991) p.xiii.

<sup>51</sup> Information from the River and Rowing Museum, Henley.

<sup>52</sup> See notes to *Letters*, vol.1, pp.21-22.

<sup>53</sup> See Wilson (1993) eg pp.xi-xiv, and Bolland (1994) eg pp.13-19, for accounts of this trend.

<sup>54</sup> Bolland (1994) p.47.

<sup>55</sup> Gissing (1889) p.88.

## 2. The river as conduit of empire

In the nineteenth century the Thames below the Pool of London was a conduit of empire, in quite a literal sense, in that it formed the common terminal link in many of the trade routes which connected Britain's capital with its overseas possessions. However, the river also had considerable symbolic value as a signifier of the British nation and particularly its imperial influence. This symbolism is expressed in a complex literary conceit which has its origins at least as far back as the sixteenth century and had, by Dickens's time, accrued considerable power. In its earlier incarnations this conceit expresses a view of the empire which is confident and outwardly assertive, in that it signifies the influence which the British centre has upon the imperial periphery. By the Victorian period, however, it has begun also to express concerns about how the outer empire might revert back upon the centre, for better or worse, and is therefore more complex. This chapter will establish the nature of this literary conceit, and show how Dickens's writing uses it and contributes to it. It will show that through the conceit of the river Dickens does retain an optimistic vision of the opportunities of empire, but that he is also concerned with the effects of empire returning upon the centre, as evidenced by several of the novels but most particularly in *Great Expectations*.

### The river as national institution

Before the river could become a symbol of empire in literature, it was already a symbol of the pre-imperial nation itself, and of its power and monarchy. It had for centuries been a focus of monarchy and nationalistic pageantry as royal barges plied their way between Windsor Castle, Hampton Court Palace, Westminster and the Tower of London, while from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century the magnificent annual Lord Mayor's Show was also conducted on the water in London.<sup>1</sup> The nationalistic associations of the river encouraged by such events are expressed in many works of literature from the sixteenth century onwards. Examples include William Harrison's *Description of England* (1587) and William Camden's *Britannia* (1596), both of which are extensive topological, geographical and to a degree historical accounts of the nation. Both make extensive use of rivers as an organising principle to define the regions of the nation, and both accord respect to the primacy of the Thames. Wyman Herendeen has identified an entire 'recognised genre'<sup>2</sup> of nationalistic river poetry which he traces from John Leland (b. 1502) through a heyday lasting until the end of the first quarter of the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup>

A prominent example of this genre is *Prothalamion* (1596), in which Edmund Spenser invokes the Thames in order to celebrate the marriages of Elizabeth and Katherine, daughters to the Earl of

Worcester. As a celebration of aristocratic marriages this, and poems like it, are necessarily celebrations of the dynastic power of the establishment and therefore the nation. It is constructed around a pastoral idyll on the banks of the river, involving nymphs, swans and flowers, but also celebrating the power of London in the later stanzas. This poem personifies the river by addressing it in the refrain of the final couplet of each stanza which, with very slight variations on the first line, always runs thus:

Against the Brydale day, which is not long:  
Sweete Themmes runne softly, till I end my song.<sup>4</sup>

The confluence of rivers may be said to provide a natural metaphor for marriage because, as the rivers join together, their waters mingle, and together they assume a single identity and name. This is an idea which Spenser develops in *The Faerie Queene* (also 1596), where almost all of the 11<sup>th</sup> canto of book 4 (some 46 stanzas out of 53) is devoted to the marriage of the rivers Thames and Medway. This is one of four marriages in this part of the poem (the other three being human) and the marriage of the rivers is understood to be the most harmonious.<sup>5</sup> However, this marriage is also an allegory of national unity, because the rivers represent the different parts of the country from which they come, and their union therefore unites those regions: an idea which, in Spenser, is further reinforced by the fact that the ceremony is attended by rivers from other parts of the country as well.

Anthony Munday's masque, *The triumphs of re-united Britannia* (1605) is a good example of river literature written to celebrate the Lord Mayor's Show and this, too, expresses unity between the rivers of different regions. Performed by the Merchant Taylor's company on the occasion of Leonard Holliday's investiture in that year, it gives voices to the Thames, as 'Queen of all Britain's rivers,' together with the Severn and Humber, that they may: 'sing paeans and songs of triumph in honor of our second Brute, Royal King James'.<sup>6</sup> The next section contains a dialogue between Troya Nova, said to be the ancient precursor of London, and its river. Here Troya Nova addresses the swans and nymphs of the Thames, which in turn welcomes the king, and is echoed again by Severn and Humber.<sup>7</sup>

Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1613) may be seen as a further development of both Harrison's and Camden's geographical and historical work, being, as its title page declares: 'A Chorographicall Description of Tracts, Rivers, Mountaines, Forests, and other Parts of this renowned Isle of Great Britaine.' However, it is also far more allegorical, and develops the river more fully as a symbol of the nation. It consists of 30 extended 'songs', all in iambic hexameter couplets, preceded by maps and followed by prose 'illustrations' from history. Rivers form the

principal feature of the maps and a prominent one of the text, and here the personification of the rivers is extended beyond that of Spenser into a full genealogy. Thus in Song XV, which celebrates the marriage of the Tame and Isis, the Tame has for his parents the Chiltern hills and the vale of Aylesbury, while the father of the female Isis is Cotswold. In her progress towards marriage/confluence with Tame, Isis brings with her various other tributaries, representing other parts of the country, and thus creates a sense of geographical as well as political unity. When the two rivers are united, the muses sing to them:

Betwixt your beauteous selves you shall beget a Sonne,  
That when your lives shall end, in him shall be begunne.<sup>8</sup>

This son is the Thames (sometimes called Tamesis or Thamesis) and the marriage supplies an etymology for the name which, although almost certainly wrong, was current at the time.<sup>9</sup> The newborn Thames then makes his way towards Windsor, uniting the nation with its seat of power, and the song ends with his arrival in ‘that supreamest place of the great English Kings / ... / The Temple of Saint George.’<sup>10</sup> Song XVII then extends the genealogy to a subsequent generation, as the Thames becomes a suitor to the river Medway.

In Drayton, too, can be seen the beginnings of an image of the river flowing out of the nation which it represents, to engage with other nations as a sort of ambassador, and this idea is crucial to the later development of the river as a symbol of imperial influence. In Song XV the muses say:

The Skeld, the goodly Mose, the rich and Viny Rheine,<sup>11</sup>  
Shall come to meet the Thames in Neptunes watry Plaine.                      110  
And all the Belgian Streames and neighboring Floods of Gaul,  
Of him shall stand in awe, his tributaries all.<sup>12</sup>

This gives quite an aggressive account of the power exerted by the river on behalf of the nation over other nations, also represented by their rivers, and Drayton goes on to develop that power into an imperial one, using the voice of the Cherwell to assert the special geographical status of rivers:

Of any part of Earth, we be the most renown’d;                                      245  
That countries very oft, Nay, Empires oft we bound.<sup>13</sup>

Other poets, too, employ this conceit of the principal rivers of different nations acting as national representatives and engaging with those of other nations, though not always in an aggressive way. For example, when the eldest daughter of James I, Princess Elizabeth, married Prince Frederick of Bohemia in 1613, the wedding was celebrated by various works in which, as Herenden points out, the marriage ‘appears regularly in the form of the marriage of the Thames and the Rhine.’<sup>14</sup>

Six years later, when James’s Queen, Anne of Denmark, died, Patrick Hannay wrote two extended elegies on her death, in the second of which he depicts the river Forth as Scotland’s ambassador,





The poem references empire throughout, beginning with the presence of the Roman empire in Britain, and declares that: ‘in Augusta’s ample port, / Imperial commerce holds her court, / And Britain’s power sublimed’.<sup>23</sup> Here, however, the concept of commerce takes equal place alongside authority, and the section continues with an image of the Thames subduing foreign lands in order to bear the proceeds of imperial trade back into Britain:

To her the breath of every breeze  
Conveys the wealth of subject seas  
And tributary climes.<sup>24</sup>

By Dickens’s time, then, there is a very well established literary conceit in which the Thames is used as a symbol of Britain and British power, and an agent of its empire, expressed through a complex metaphor of expansion into other lands. In the earlier examples the image of empire created by this conceit tends to be militarily assertive and competitive, whereas in the later examples the emphasis has shifted away from military power to imperial trade, and the conceit of the river begins to be used in a way which reverses the flow of influence, bearing back to Britain the spoils of a mature commercial empire.

Historically, the spoils of empire in the nineteenth century are double-edged. On the one hand, a great deal of wealth was flowing back into Britain from an imperial commercial project which was more powerful than it had ever been before and, along with that wealth, all kinds of exotic consumer products which must have done much to reinforce the idea of the empire as a source of luxury and opulence. On the other hand, the empire at its largest was at its most unmanageable, and the threat of insurrection rebounding on the English centre was great. The American colonies had already been lost in a revolutionary war, while conflict in India reached its crisis in the Mutiny of 1857 – an event to which Dickens reacted with hysterical vengefulness against ‘you Hindoo gentry’, writing that he would wish: ‘to exterminate the Race from the face of the earth, which disfigured the earth with the late abominable atrocities’.<sup>25</sup>

In literature, this dichotomy is expressed mid-century with classic symmetry by Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). On one hand it is the money made by her uncle, John Eyre through his enterprises in Madeira, which gives Jane the independence finally to be happy with Mr Rochester. On the other hand it is Bertha, the daughter of a creole, who comes from Jamaica to cause all the trouble in Rochester’s, and potentially Jane’s, family in the first place. This threat from the foreign other is a pervasive feature of the Victorian psyche, finding full expression later in Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868) and in the Sherlock Holmes stories (from 1887), in which the criminal threat to English civilisation almost always has its origins in foreign parts (on two occasions for Holmes in the Indian

Mutiny itself). Right at the beginning of the Holmes stories, Doyle sets up the idea of the undesirable waste products of empire returning to the centre when Watson describes London as ‘that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the Empire are irresistibly drained,’ himself included.<sup>26</sup>

### **Dickens and the river of empire**

Dickens’s work engages thoroughly with the empire, as has been shown by two extensive studies: Wendy Jacobson’s *Dickens and the Children of Empire* (2000) and Grace Moore’s *Dickens and Empire* (2004). Journeys to other parts of the world form important plot movements in many of his novels, and they contain many characters in English settings who are, in one way or another, products of the empire, either for better or worse. Dickens therefore addresses both the project of empire overseas, and some of its consequences at home. Furthermore, he stands in relation to the long literary tradition described above by using scenes on the Thames in London to do it. He read Pope,<sup>27</sup> and had books on the progresses of Queen Elizabeth and King James.<sup>28</sup> It is also clear from passages such as the following one from *Household Words* that the very presence of the river stimulated his imagination to thoughts of foreign parts:

A very dark night it was, and bitter cold; the east wind blowing bleak, and bringing with it stinging particles from marsh, and moor, and fen – from the Great Desert and Old Egypt, may be. Some of the component parts of the sharp-edged vapour that came flying up the Thames at London might be mummy-dust, dry atoms from the Temple at Jerusalem, camels’ foot-prints, crocodiles’ hatching places, loosened grains of expression from the visages of blunt-nosed sphinxes, waifs and strays from caravans of turbaned merchants, vegetation from jungles, frozen snow from the Himalayas.<sup>29</sup>

The article which this opens has nothing to do with foreign travel; in fact it is entirely domestic, being about the river police. Yet all these images force themselves upon Dickens’s imagination, by an involuntary process which he had described elsewhere,<sup>30</sup> under the influence of the Thames. They are not all, strictly geographically speaking, images from the empire itself, but they are undeniably exotic: invoking ancient civilisations, dramatic landscapes, dangerous animals and even, through the reference to Jerusalem, the adventure of the Crusades. Meanwhile the ‘turbaned merchants’ provide a specific reference to imperial trade and prosperity. It is also notable as an expression of return to the centre: the wind is easterly and therefore blowing in an upstream direction, carrying the signifiers of empire back into Britain by way of the river.

A similar imaginative link between the Thames and the empire is created through a particular type of scene in which Dickens depicts ships on the river. These scenes often take a long view, often serving as a backdrop for something else, and the effect is once again to produce a romantic setting,

suggestive of the promise of a wider world where the ships are going or whence they come. This occurs twice in *The Uncommercial Traveller*. No.7 is an excitable, up-beat piece entitled ‘Going Abroad,’ in which the Traveller writes: ‘I was amply provided in all respects, and had no idea where I was going (which was delightful), except that I was going abroad.’ In fact the expedition is to France by way of the Dover-Calais ferry, but it is the view of ships on the Thames, seen from the road between Gravesend and Rochester on the way to Dover, which most excites his fantasy of foreign adventures: ‘So smooth was the old high road, and so fresh were the horses, and so fast went I ...and the widening river was bearing the ships, white-sailed or black-smoked, out to sea.’ This is the point at which he notices the ‘queer small boy’ in the well-known Gadshill episode and has the imaginary conversation with him about the house. (all *UT* 59) The boy is, of course, a version of his younger self, and the conversation is all about ambition and the fruits of enterprise. By using the backdrop of outward-bound ships on the river, Dickens effectively suggests wider horizons for the boy, and perhaps even compares the conquest of foreign lands with the future conquest of his readership

In No.11, entitled ‘Tramps,’ the Traveller is patronising enough towards his human subject matter, but is once again up-beat in his narrative tone as he celebrates the adventure of the open road. He writes of ‘this bright summer day – say, on a road with the sea-breeze making its dust lively, and sails of ships in the blue distance beyond the slope of Down’ and, observing this view: ‘walk[s] enjoyingly on.’ (*UT* 102) Assuming ‘Down’ to refer to the North Downs, the river here is more likely to be the Medway, and the ships therefore perhaps more likely to be those of the Royal Navy, out of Chatham, than traders on the Thames. The view therefore perhaps signals a different aspect of the imperial adventure, but the promise of their voyages out of the river has the same effect as a signifier of optimism – in this case the optimism of the Traveller himself.

The first of these *Uncommercial Traveller* pieces may further be compared with Dickens’s article, ‘A Flight’, in *Household Words*. Once again on his way to France, he describes with some sense of alarm the hurry of a railway journey from London to Folkestone, and references ‘the distant shipping in the Thames’ (*RP* 103), partly as a nostalgic point of contrast for the speed of the train, but also as a further marker of British progress. These examples all show the recurrence of the distant view of shipping on the river, and some of the uses to which it is put. The most important example of this view, however, occurs in *Our Mutual Friend*, where it is developed in a much more specific way as a marker of the empire.

This novel is partly driven by empire, in that John Harmon is not merely heir to a British fortune, but an imperial adventurer in his own right in South Africa, as Mortimer explains: “among the Cape wine: small proprietor, farmer, grower – whatever you like to call it.” (OMF 16) He is also the prize which comes to Bella from the empire, and fittingly it is Bella who imagines the potential of empire in an extended fantasy inspired by the sight of ships on the Thames when she is at Greenwich with her father. Apart from the Harmon marriage itself, the relationship between these two characters is the most affectionate one in the novel, and is itself a kind of fantasy of filial unity. As they travel by boat to Greenwich for their day out, everything is described as ‘delightful,’ and when they arrive they dine in a ‘little room overlooking the river.’ The window of this room supplies a certain distance and a framing effect which enhances the sense of unreality which Bella’s imagination then imposes upon the view, under the direct influence of the ships on the river: ‘And then,’ gives the narrator, ‘as they sat looking at the ships and steam-boats making their way to the sea with the tide that was running down, the lovely woman [Bella] imagined all sorts of voyages for herself and Pa.’ The fantasy which follows goes on for several hundred words, but some highlights may be quoted:

... the lovely woman imagined all sorts of voyages for herself and Pa. ... now, Pa was going to China in that handsome three-masted ship, to bring home opium ... and to bring home silks and shawls without end ... and they were going away on a trip, in their gallant bark, to look after their vines, with streamers flying at all points, a band playing on deck, and Pa established in the great cabin ... you saw that ship being towed out by a steam-tug? Well! where did you suppose she was going to? She was going among the coral reefs and cocoa-nuts and all that sort of thing ... to fetch a cargo of sweet-smelling woods, the most beautiful that ever were seen, and the most profitable that never were heard of, and her cargo would be a great fortune, as indeed it ought to be: the lovely woman who had purchased her and fitted her expressly for this voyage, being married to an Indian Prince ... who wore cashmere shawls all over himself, and diamonds and emeralds blazing in his turban, and was beautifully coffee-coloured and excessively devoted ... (OMF 331-2)

In the midst of this Bella also refers to herself as being ‘like a modern Cleopatra’ – another empress.

In the above passage the deictic pronouns (‘*that* handsome three-masted ship ... *that* ship being towed out by a steam-tug’) clearly reference the concrete details of the scene before them, while at the same time the exotica being superimposed upon the ships by Bella remove them to the level of fantasy and even fairy-tale. This process reflects what Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism*, that the idea of the Orient is an invention of the west, constructed for its own appropriation and consumption, to which end it is made to appear more luxurious and opulent than it really is.<sup>31</sup>

Discussing the significance of this scene, Michelle Allen has written: ‘Bella imaginatively plunders the empire, appropriating its wealth and cultivating its exoticism for her own girlish fantasies.’ She

goes on to suggest that these fantasies constitute a kind of ‘salvation’ for Bella, on the basis that by keeping her own potentially dangerous desires for money and status confined within the realms of fantasy, she renders them harmless and is even able to ‘exorcise’ them.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, however, Bella does not lose sight of the real money to be made from the empire: the tropical woods are ‘profitable’; the ship’s cargo ‘a great fortune.’ Through the river she therefore invokes both the periphery of the empire, through the spirit of adventure she expresses, and the consequences accruing to the centre, through the wealth flowing back into Britain.

Bella’s imperial fantasy is referenced again much later in the novel when she is finally betrothed to Harmon, still believing him to be the much poorer Rokesmith. She is now ironically referred to as ‘the mercenary young person,’ and her father evaluates her moral worth: “I admire this mercenary young person distantly related to myself, more in this dress than if she had come to me in China silks, Cashmere shawls, and Golconda diamonds.” (OMF 632) Later she reminds her father of their speculations at Greenwich and reflects on the absence of John Harmon from all the ships, to which he responds: ‘How can we tell what coming people are aboard the ships that may be sailing to us now from the unknown seas?’ (OMF 697), depicting again an empire sending its influence back into Britain by way of ships coming up the Thames. Finally, after their marriage, Rokesmith is employed in a ‘China house’ in the city, and Bella evokes the fantasy again, in equally exotic and unrealistic terms:

without pursuing the China house into minuter details than a wholesale vision of tea, rice, odd-smelling silks, carved boxes, and tight-eyed people in more than double-soled shoes, with their pigtailed pulling their heads of hair off, painted on transparent porcelain. (OMF 709)

Murray Baumgarten has argued that these passages are in effect reductive, that here Dickens has ‘degrad[ed]’ the imperial adventure to a series of ‘picturesque fantasies.’<sup>33</sup> While agreeing that these are fantasies (and Bella is in any case incapable of anything more realistic), I would suggest that they are more than picturesque: more significantly they are fantasies of exotica, and above all of wealth.

In Bella’s fantasy may be heard the echo of an earlier evocation of the trading empire in *Dombey and Son*. The firm of Dombey and Son itself is clearly involved in all kinds of business, much of it rather vaguely defined but much of it clearly to do with the empire:

The earth was made for Dombey and Son to trade in, and the sun and moon were made to give them light. Rivers and seas were formed to float their ships; rainbows gave them promise of fair weather; winds blew for or against their enterprises; stars and planets circled in their orbits, to preserve inviolate a system of which they were the centre. (DS 2)

This extravagant eulogy invokes a tradition of creation mythology to place the firm at the beginning of everything, while its planetary imagery places it at the centre of a radial empire which seems to encompass the whole world. The company's offices are not given a precise location but they are close to the river in the City of London, and closely associated with the empire:

Just round the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. (*DS* 34)

This fantasy of exotica is much like Bella's. However, while the fantasy may not be realistic, and while Mr Dombey himself may be a personally moribund figure, the real enterprise of imperial trade is positively evoked, and reinforced by the riverside scenes where it is seen to be actually going on. One of these is the wharf scene where Florence is rescued from her 'strange adventure' of being lost in London, which has already been quoted in Ch.1 above. For this episode, Dickens's third person narrator focalises the narration on Florence's own childish perspective of the river scene - as it is she who 'peeped into a kind of wharf or landing-place' – and in this way he is able to convey a sense of innocent wonder and excitement at all the activity and work involved in trading with the empire.

Also in *Dombey and Son* is the scene in which Walter leaves by way of the Thames for the firm's Barbados office. Much is made of this, and I want to suggest that it is representative of an entire genre of embarkation scenes in which Dickens uses the river to generate a sense of adventure which prefigures the imperial adventure for which the participants in such scenes are bound. This is Walter's:

... away they went, himself, his uncle, and the Captain, in a hackney-coach to a wharf, where they were to take steam-boat for some Reach down the river, the name of which, as the Captain gave it out, was a hopeless mystery to the ears of landsmen. Arrived at this Reach (whither the ship had repaired by last night's tide), they were boarded by various excited watermen, and among others by a dirty Cyclops of the Captain's acquaintance, who, with his one eye, had made the Captain out some mile and a half off, and had been exchanging unintelligible roars with him ever since. Becoming the lawful prize of this personage, who was frightfully hoarse and constitutionally in want of shaving, they were all three put aboard the *Son and Heir*. And the *Son and Heir* was in a pretty state of confusion, with sails lying all bedraggled on the wet decks, loose ropes tripping people up, men in red shirts running barefoot to and fro, casks blockading every foot of space, and, in the thickest of the fray, a black cook in a black caboose up to his eyes in vegetables and blinded with smoke. (*DS* 278)

The confusion here is affectionately rendered, but throws Walter abruptly into a situation with which he may or may not be able to cope. This produces a sense of adventure which is heightened by the mystery about the 'Reach' they are going to, by the drama injected as usual by Capt. Cuttle, by the reference in the 'Cyclops' to the adventure of Odysseus, and by the suggestion of

privateering inherent in the metaphor of the group becoming his 'lawful prize.' Even the black cook is, in a sense, a colonial exotic.

Jules Law has already linked Walter strongly to the empire through some of the earlier texts referenced above. He writes: 'much of the imagery associated with Walter throughout the novel is drawn from those great proto-capitalist anthems to the Thames as a vehicle of imperialism, "Cooper's Hill" and "Windsor-Forest"'.<sup>34</sup> In the same study he also quotes the historian Bill Luckin, who writes that in the 1850s (just a little after *Dombey and Son*): 'the Thames itself now came to be perceived in an explicitly imperial context'.<sup>35</sup>

Other embarkation scenes include that of Joe Willett in *Barnaby Rudge*, who enlists in the army and has his scene on the river in central London, which he leaves 'in a passage-boat bound for Gravesend, whence they were to proceed on foot to Chatham.' This is quite a busy episode, as Joe is accompanied by a recruiting officer, a corporal and seven other recruits, all of whom are described by the narrator as 'heroes' - albeit not very seriously, but the term still references the genre of adventure story. Some sense of optimism is also supplied by the following wind which helps them on their way. (See *BR* 246.)

Meanwhile in *David Copperfield*, Julia Mills has an embarkation scene on her way to India, again on the river. In the same way that Walter is accompanied on board by Sol Gills and Capt. Cuttle, to share in the excitement, Julia is accompanied by David and Dora. This scene evokes the exoticism of the empire through exotic foods: 'Miss Mills had sailed, and Dora and I had gone aboard a great East Indiaman at Gravesend to see her; and we had had preserved ginger, and guava, and other delicacies of that sort for lunch.' (*DC* 612) While this may seem unlikely enough ship-board fare, it does reinforce the myth described by Said of the empire as a place of promise and plenty.

*The Uncommercial Traveller* devotes a whole chapter to an embarkation scene when he visits an emigrant ship as it is loading and preparing to leave the port of London. The first part of this uses a repeating refrain of 'Down by the docks ...' to open each sentence, as the Traveller penetrates the docklands to find the ship, and here Dickens creates a river scene of busy prosperity, full of energetic waterside characters. The name of the emigrant ship, the *Amazon*, references bravery by way of classical mythology, and everything about it is full of energy and promise. He also describes the emigrants themselves in a very positive light, using three of his standard markers of domestic virtue: food, neatly ordered possessions and children:

... up and down these gangways, perpetually crowding to and fro and in and out, like ants, are the Emigrants who are going to sail in my Emigrant Ship. Some with cabbages, some with loaves of bread, some with cheese and butter, some with milk and beer, some with boxes, beds and bundles, some with babies – nearly all with children – nearly all with bran-new tin cans for their daily allowance of water ... nobody is in an ill-temper, nobody is the worse for drink, nobody swears an oath or uses a coarse word, nobody appears depressed, nobody is weeping ... (UT 216)

He later reveals that they are a newly assembled community of Mormons, presumably to explain why they are so well behaved, but that takes nothing away from the optimism of the emigration project here.

Of course Dickens's best known Thames embarkation scene is that of the Micawber family in *David Copperfield*, on their way to Australia along with Mr Peggotty, Mrs Gummidge, Emily and Martha. The whole of Ch.57 is devoted to this, as they first stay at the riverside inn by Hungerford Stairs, then transfer by boat down to Gravesend to board the ship, and remain there overnight. The accumulation of detail here serves to point up the importance of this embarkation as a plot movement and, as in the other examples above, the sense of occasion surrounding the departure is heightened by a visit on board the next day by David and Peggotty. In this part of the scene the ship is surrounded by a crowd of boats, a favourable wind is blowing, as it did for Joe Willett, and the signal for sailing is already at the mast-head. As the ship finally leaves it is actually cheered away, and the whole episode is described in extremely romantic and optimistic terms:

A sight at once so beautiful, so mournful, and so hopeful, as the glorious ship, lying still, on the flushed water, with all the life on board her crowded at the bulwarks, and there clustering, for a moment, bare-headed and silent, I never saw.

Silent, only for a moment. As the sails rose to the wind, and the ship began to move, there broke from all the boats three resounding cheers, which those on board took up, and echoed back, and which were echoed and re-echoed. My heart burst out when I heard the sound, and beheld the waving of the hats and handkerchiefs ... (DC 816)

For Micawber, the optimism of this scene is of course finally justified, as we learn from the newspaper brought back from Port Middlebay by Mr Peggotty, which report that Mr Micawber has prospered and risen to become a magistrate. (DC 874-877)

With some exceptions, Dickens's emigrants do generally meet with success, and this fact serves to heighten the optimism of the embarkation scenes. While Walter Gay may effectively have been banished by Mr Dombey, the Barbados project does represent a genuine opportunity for him. Arthur Clennam of *Little Dorrit* does business successfully in China for 20 years. The physician Allan Woodcourt of *Bleak House*, unable to afford to practise medicine in England, practises instead in both China and India, and makes his reputation in the shipwreck in the 'East-Indian seas.' (BH 504) On his return, he also has a disembarkation scene at Deal in Kent, in a reversed echo of

the genre of embarkation scenes described above. (See *BH* 624 etc.) Edwin Drood plans to seek his fortune in the Orient, and even the reprehensible Tom Gradgrind of *Hard Times* escapes to a better fate in America. In *Great Expectations*, both Herbert Pocket and Pip ‘did very well’ at the eastern branch of Clarriker & Co. in Cairo (*GE* 489), and Herbert indulges in an imperial fantasy of their opportunity there which may be likened to Bella’s in *Our Mutual Friend*:

... [he] would sketch airy pictures of himself conducting Clara Barley to the land of the Arabian Nights, and of me going out to join them (with a caravan of camels, I believe), and of our all going up the Nile and seeing wonders. (*GE* 395)

The idea here that they will journey out of the Thames and into the Nile is reminiscent of the way in which the imperial river is imagined to flow into other lands in some of the earlier literature explored above, and indeed also looks forward to the framing conceit of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.

## **Magwitch**

However, Dickens’s most successful emigrant of all is Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. To be able to afford the project of turning Pip into a gentleman in the long term, he must have done even better than Mr Micawber, and we know that his farming interests in Australia following his transportation are diversified. New South Wales was, after all, not just a penal colony but a fully functioning, trading part of the empire, where Magwitch can be, in his own words: “sheep-farmer, stock-breeder, other trades besides, away in the new world.” He celebrates the opportunity which the empire has offered him: “I’ve done wonderful well. There’s others went out alonger me as has done well too, but no man has done nigh as well as me. I’m famous for it.” (*GE* 302). Magwitch is very closely associated with the Thames, which is used in all three of the key scenes concerning him: his departure for Australia, his return to London and his attempted second departure. Not only is he so closely linked to the Thames, but he is also perhaps Dickens’s most important character in relation to the empire, so it is worth attending in some detail to his transactions with the river in those three scenes here.

At the beginning of the novel Magwitch comes to Pip literally out of the Thames, and ‘soaked in water’. (*GE* 2) The popular search for Dickensian originals, of both characters and settings, may sometimes be spurious, but this setting is particularly well documented.<sup>36</sup> What Pip describes as ‘the marsh country, down by the river’ is the Hoo peninsula between the Thames and Medway. The multiple infant graves in the churchyard are inspired by those in Cooling churchyard, the church itself perhaps being more similar to one at Lower Higham, and Gargery’s forge is perhaps modelled

on one at the village of Chalk. These places are all near to one another, all on the north-facing slope of the peninsula, where most of the ‘marsh country’ is in fact to be found, and all well known to Dickens on his walks from Gadshill. The river in the background, referenced five times in the short opening chapter, is therefore clearly the Thames (rather than the Medway to the south or anywhere else), and it is out of this that Magwitch has escaped from the prison hulk. The marsh where Pip finds him is also tidal, and therefore in a sense part of the river itself.<sup>37</sup>

When Magwitch is recaptured in Ch.5, he has an embarkation scene in which he is taken from the soldiers’ hut to a landing-stage and into a small boat, then rowed back to the hulk and taken up the side, all observed by Pip. While there is clearly little hope in this scene for Magwitch himself, as indeed Pip acknowledges in the closing words of the chapter, the whole pursuit which culminates in it is a great adventure for Joe, Pip and even Mr Wopsle, who have been allowed to accompany the soldiers. Pip injects a sense of excitement into this whole extended episode, and narrates that his ‘heart [was] thumping like a blacksmith’. (*GE* 31)

He also makes a striking reference to the hulk itself at the end of the chapter by likening it to: ‘a wicked Noah’s ark.’ (*GE* 37) Of course the real hulk is going nowhere, but the imagined Noah’s ark has a creative mission to populate a new world. In this simile, then, Pip’s childish imagination conflates the hulk with the ship which will actually carry Magwitch out of the country (he must know he is going to be transported), and furthermore invests it with the promise of new life in new lands after Noah’s flood – a promise which is actually realised by the success of Magwitch’s farming career in Australia. This scene does, therefore, contain some properties of the embarkation scenes of more hopeful characters described above.

When Magwitch returns to England many years later, it is to Pip and Herbert’s chambers at the Temple: ‘in Garden-court, down by the river’ (*GE* 297). This is on the Middlesex shore between Waterloo and Blackfriars bridges, and when the novel is set (and indeed written), prior to the construction of the Victoria Embankment in the late 1860s, it would have abutted directly on to the river. Pip says that this location was more ‘exposed to the river’ than latterly, and gives a description in which the elements of the river and sea play a dominant part:

We lived at the top of the last house, and the wind rushing up the river shook the house that night, like discharges of cannon, or breakings of a sea. When the rain came with it and dashed against the windows, I thought, raising my eyes to them as they rocked, that I might have fancied myself in a storm-beaten light-house.

...

I saw that the lamps in the court were blown out, and that the lamps on the bridges and the shore were shuddering, and that the coal fires in barges on the river were being carried away before the wind like red-hot splashes in the rain. (*GE* 298)

This description immediately precedes the arrival from Australia of Magwitch, who is described as appearing: ‘like a voyager by sea ... browned and hardened by exposure to weather’. (*GE* 299) He comes with the weather up the river, and represents the empire turning back upon its centre, in both positive and negative ways. On one hand, he has been returning wealth generated on the periphery of empire to the centre by making the payments to Mr Jaggers, and Pip’s prospects are genuinely improved by this, because he is now in London and can move in the same social circles as Estella. As a wealthy man, Magwitch also physically carries his own prosperity with him back into England on his return, simply by being its owner. On the other hand, his return represents a threatening aspect of the empire turning in on the centre, because he represents crime and because he is dangerous to Pip and Herbert. They hide him, disguise him, give him an alias and try to help him escape, all of which puts them on the wrong side of the law, too.

Shortly after the scene of Magwitch’s return, Dickens creates a further link between him and the project of imperial colonisation. Grace Moore and others have shown how Dickens and other writers of the period used the idea of foreign peoples being colonised by the empire abroad as a way of discussing the plight of the urban poor at home. The idea is that the poor in England are represented as being exploited and therefore colonised by the employer classes in the same way that native peoples of foreign lands are colonised by imperial explorers. Moore cites Tim Dolin, who writes: “The living conditions and habits of the lower classes were constantly being compared with those of savage races” and then goes on herself to observe that: ‘Dickens engages himself in a similar process of displacement when he reconfigures the urban poor as the colonised.’<sup>38</sup>

Magwitch is a product of social deprivation and he, too, uses the language of colonisation, and particularly slavery, to depict his early life in his passage of autobiographical narration in Ch.42: “I’ve been carted here and carted there ... and stuck in the stocks, and whipped and worried and drove,” he says. When imprisoned as a child, he says, “they measured my head” (*GE* 327-8) – a reference to the science of phrenology as used by criminologists,<sup>39</sup> but also, surely, to the practices of Victorian anthropologists investigating non-white races. Magwitch’s chief trouble stems from his exploitation at the hands of the socially superior Compeyson, who leads him into crime and succeeds in shifting most of the blame on to him on the strength of his lower status. As Grahame Smith has also noted in the same context,<sup>40</sup> Magwitch uses a striking metaphor to express their relationship: “that man got me into such nets as made me his black slave.” (*GE* 331) This image is of course the reverse of what he does in Australia, but it does much to reinforce the image of

Magwitch as a representative of the empire: at home he is colonised, while abroad he becomes a coloniser.

The denouement of the novel of course has Magwitch using the Thames to try to escape back to the empire and, throughout the long series of river scenes in which this plot movement is developed, he is seen to be very much in his element. First, he is moved to Bill Barley's house at Mill Pond Bank, in the Pool below London Bridge. When Pip finds him there he describes the setting in busily nautical picturesque terms, which gives this river setting something in common with the optimistic embarkation scenes described above. The escape plan is soon hatched, Pip's boat is moved to the Temple stairs, he and Herbert take to rowing below London bridge, and the shipping there forms an ever more prominent backdrop to the action. Here, and during the escape attempt itself, the trade and work of this part of the river are positively evoked:

Old London Bridge was soon passed, and old Billingsgate market with its oyster-boats and Dutchmen, and the White Tower and Traitor's Gate, and we were in among the tiers of shipping. Here, were the Leith, Aberdeen and Glasgow steamers, loading and unloading goods, and looking immensely high out of the water as we passed alongside; here, were colliers by the score and score, with the coal-whippers plunging off stages on deck, as counterweights to measures of coal swinging up, which were then rattled over the side into barges; (*GE* 413)

Here Dickens celebrates the commercial productivity of London's imperial river, and there is already an element of nostalgia in the description. The novel is, after all, set more than 30 years before its publication in 1861, and he mentions the prevalence of sailing ships and watermen's boats, along with the comparative scarcity of steam ships at the time (see *GE* 413). Given the risks they are running, the river scene is described in surprisingly placid terms. It is a scene within which Magwitch is completely at home, indeed at peace, and here he aligns the train of his thoughts with the flow of the river:

'We'd be puzzled to be more quiet and easy-going than we are at present. But – it's a flowing so soft and pleasant through the water, p'raps, as makes me think it – I was a thinking through my smoke just then, that we can no more see to the bottom of the next few hours, than we can see to the bottom of this river what I catches hold of. Nor yet we can't no more hold their tide than I can hold this. And it's run through my fingers and gone, you see!' holding up his dripping hand.

'But for your face, I should think you were a little despondent,' said I.

'Not a bit on it, dear boy! It comes of flowing on so quiet, and of that there rippling at the boat's head making a sort of a Sunday tune.' (*GE* 415-6)

The remainder of this chapter, 54, is concerned with the journey downstream of Gravesend; the overnight stop at the public house; the sinister report of the custom-house boat and appearance of two strange men in the night; the attempt to board the Hamburg steamer; the appearance of the four-oared galley which apprehends and overturns them in the path of the steamer; the consequent death of Compeyson, and the arrest of Magwitch. Although the moment of collision itself is clearly very

dramatic, the majority of this sequence is narrated with very little drama at all, and is far more concerned with the navigational considerations of negotiating the tideway than the danger in which they stand. The riverscape is described as peaceful, quiet and largely deserted; their progress through it almost serene. This serenity, together with the quiet, submissive disposition of Magwitch throughout these scenes can be simply attributed to the fact that he is in his element. He is a product both of the empire and the river, which itself represents the power of the empire, and which he is using to try to find his way back to the new world.

He is also trying to carry back with him the rights to his property which, as Wemmick correctly foresaw, would be ‘forfeited to the Crown’ (*GE* 425) if he is recaptured. When he is, the river also plays a key role in the disposal of his wealth, which is the wealth of the empire. While his disguise as Provis remains intact, his fortune is safe because it is believed to be held legitimately by Magwitch in Australia. Pip as narrator has been using his alias all along, and the point at which his name is changed back marks the point when he is exposed and his fortune lost. The official in the custom-house galley addresses him by both names, and ‘at the same moment’ they run aboard of Pip’s boat, sending Magwitch and Compeyson into the water. (*GE* 422) As soon as he reappears, Pip as narrator starts referring to Magwitch by his real name, so the timing of his immersion exactly coincides with the exposure of his identity and the loss of his fortune. Thus the fruits of his enterprise, which are really the fruits of empire, have in a sense disappeared into the river at the same moment that Magwitch fell into it, to be reclaimed by his native land.

This reading of *Great Expectations* in terms of the empire is similar to, and therefore perhaps validated by, the interpretation of Conan Doyle’s long Sherlock Holmes story *The Sign of the Four* by Joseph Childers, who writes persuasively about the relationship between the spoils of empire and the detritus of the river. It is therefore worth briefly comparing the episodes and considering the applicability of Childers’s reading to both.

In Doyle’s story the villain Jonathan Small and the Andaman islander Tonga are attempting to escape from England down the Thames tideway in the steam launch *Aurora*, taking with them the Great Agra Treasure. As Holmes and Watson begin to trace them, Doyle develops the river setting as a place of bustling activity, reminiscent of Dickens’s embarkation scenes. Holmes points out:

‘My dear fellow, it would be a colossal task. She may have touched at any wharf on either side of the stream between here and Greenwich. Below the bridge there is a perfect labyrinth of landing-places for miles. It would take you days and days to exhaust them, if you set about it alone.’<sup>41</sup>

The build-up to the chase on the river is charged with excitement. “I shall want a fast police-boat – a steam launch – to be at Westminster stairs at seven o’clock”, says Holmes and Watson reports that he ‘appeared to be in a state of nervous exaltation.’<sup>42</sup> As the detectives on the police boat give chase, the excitement continues to build with strong emphasis on the speed of the boats and the power of their engines, and the episode reads like a frenetic, modernised re-figuring of the pursuit in *Great Expectations*. Once the *Aurora* is overtaken and grounded, Tonga is shot, his body lost in the river, and Small gets stuck fast by his wooden leg in the mud of the river bank while still attempting to escape, having dumped the treasure into the water from where, being dispersed along the river, it can never be recovered. The Thames, which was the scene of such excitement moments before, now wears a bleaker aspect: ‘It was a wild and desolate place, where the moon glimmered upon a wide expanse of marsh-land, with pools of stagnant water and beds of decaying vegetation.’<sup>43</sup>

Childers has interpreted this episode in its relation to the empire, by attending to the mud in which Small gets stuck. He reads it as being filthy, and relates it to the pollution of the river and of London as a whole, which he sees as a malfunctioning heart of empire:

Rather than the pump that keeps men and materials moving along the arteries feeding the farthest-flung extremities of empire, it has become a backwash of imperial detritus, susceptible to infection from without and sepsis from the pool of filth that has accumulated within.<sup>44</sup>

When Small is trapped by the mud, Childers says that he has been: ‘actually captured by English muck,’ his analysis being that it is the corruption of London and the empire which imprisons him, and which is metaphorically represented by the mud of the river. In Childers’s account:

The quagmire of Small’s plotting, and for that matter England’s, is inescapable. A fen of filth, it not only corrupts but effectively castrates the villain, making him powerless and immobile. ... Small is one with the swampy filth that holds him fast. Like that mud, he washed up on the shores of England, a victim of his own devices.<sup>45</sup>

This reading may have some application in Dickens, too. As Michelle Allen has pointed out, in the ‘sanitary discourse’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the pollution of the Thames accrues many metaphoric meanings to express the ills of society, not least among them crime.<sup>46</sup> The scene off Gravesend the night before Magwitch’s capture is every bit as stagnant and muddy as Doyle’s:

... a little squat shoal-lighthouse on open piles, stood crippled in the mud on stilts and crutches; and slimy stakes stuck out of the mud, and slimy stones stuck out of the mud, and red landmarks and tidemarks stuck out of the mud, and an old landing-stage and an old roofless building slipped into the mud, and all about us was stagnation and mud. (*GE* 417)

This setting, too, could reflect the ‘backwash of imperial detritus’ which Childers describes, represented here by Magwitch as the returned criminal element.

On the matter of the treasure in Doyle's story, Childers has also pointed out that nobody in the story questions the right of Capt. Morstan's daughter or Maj. Sholto's sons to it, and nobody suggests that it should have been returned to its original Indian owner. He therefore concludes that the river has turned an Indian treasure into an English one, saying: 'the English taint upon the treasure has made it a permanent denizen of the river bottom.'<sup>47</sup> This reading is persuasive and can be extended to Tonga; for surely he, too, has been appropriated to England by the river. As a sort of slave, he is himself a product of the British empire and, through the river, Britain claims him: 'Somewhere in the dark ooze at the bottom of the Thames lie the bones of that strange visitor to our shores,' says Watson.<sup>48</sup>

Such a reading can also be extended to the fortune and indeed identity of Magwitch in *Great Expectations*. In both stories, the river functions as the conduit of empire, and it does so in similar ways. As both a route back into the centre and a potential escape route, Magwitch sees it as a link to Australia, and Small sees it as a link to India. It is the route by which not only people but also wealth is transmitted between England and the empire, and ultimately lost.<sup>49</sup> In both cases, the river captures and/or retains elements of the empire (Tonga, the treasure, Magwitch and his fortune) which have been either appropriated by or restored to England.

It is finally worth noting that Magwitch is not Dickens's only returned transport: there is also John Edmunds in an interpolated story within *The Pickwick Papers* (see *PP* 76 – 84), Kags in *Oliver Twist*, who appears, perhaps significantly, on Jacob's Island in a horribly polluted region of the Thames, and Alice Brown, alias Marwood, in *Dombey and Son*. All are undesirable to start with, Kags is physically damaged by his experiences (see *OT* 385), and the demoralised Alice is described as one of a class who are: 'Food for ... the river, fever, madness, vice, and death.' (*DS* 492) All clearly represent negative aspects of empire returning to the centre, and the final quotation on Alice links the river, by way of metaphorical pollution, to all the human ills which return with the convict.

Generally speaking, Dickens viewed the empire in a positive light: as an adventure, a commercial enterprise and a bright opportunity for ordinary English people. It was a fundamental principle of the Urania Cottage project that the fallen women it sheltered would all, once their rehabilitation was complete, emigrate and become the useful wives of colonists.<sup>50</sup> And the fact remains that Dickens dispatched five of his own sons to the outposts of empire in quest of the opportunities there: Sydney joined the navy as a cadet, Charley went to the east to trade in tea, Walter joined the East India

Company (in whose service he died), Frank the Bengal Mounted Police, while Alfred went to Australia.<sup>51</sup>

However, as this chapter has shown, Dickens expresses in his novels a complex view of the empire in which it can present both strength and vulnerability, opportunities and threats, and in which the consequences of empire which accrue back to Britain from it can be both beneficial and dangerous. Eitan Bar-Yosef has noted that Dickens: ‘condemn[s] some aspects of the imperial project but happily enjoy[s] others’, and concluded that there is an ‘ambivalence that lies at the heart of Dickens’s critique of Empire’.<sup>52</sup> This chapter broadly agrees with that view, but is concerned to point out that it is particularly through the river scenes that he explores his ideas about empire and expresses this ambivalence, drawing upon a long established literary tradition which sees the Thames as symbolic of Britain’s international identity and imperial influence. The two most important novels in which he does this are *Our Mutual Friend* and *Great Expectations*, and this chapter has shown that they express very different responses to the empire. The former expresses more optimism about it, through the Bella’s exotic fantasies and the ultimately triumphal return of John Harmon, whereas the latter presents a more troubling version of it, through the troubled, enslaved and ultimately dangerous figure of Magwitch.

## Notes to Ch.2

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<sup>1</sup> See Schneer (2005) pp.65-68.

<sup>2</sup> Herendeen (1986) p.183.

<sup>3</sup> See Herendeen (1986), pp. 187 & 318-9 etc.

<sup>4</sup> Example from stanza 1. Spenser (1596) p.257.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Herendeen (1986) p.245.

<sup>6</sup> Lines 243-248. See Kinney, ed. (2005) p.475.

<sup>7</sup> Lines 373-400. See Kinney, ed. (2005) p.476.

<sup>8</sup> Lines 103-4. See Drayton (1598-1622) p.306.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Ackroyd (2001) p.551.

<sup>10</sup> Lines 314-317. See Drayton (1598-1622) p.311.

<sup>11</sup> As Drayton’s own note supplies: ‘They al three, Rivers, of greatest note in the lower Germany, cast themselves into the Ocean, in the Coast opposite to the mouth of the Thames.’ Drayton (1598-1622) p.306.

<sup>12</sup> Lines 109-112. See Drayton (1598-1622) p.306.

<sup>13</sup> Lines 245-246. See Drayton (1598-1622) p.309.

<sup>14</sup> Herendeen (1986) p.268.

<sup>15</sup> Hannay (1622) p.210.

<sup>16</sup> Hannay (1622) p.211.

<sup>17</sup> Ricks (1999) pp.181-2.

<sup>18</sup> For all these quotations, see Pope, ed. Davis (1966) pp.37-50.

<sup>19</sup> Conrad (1902) pp.15 & 124.

<sup>20</sup> Peacock (1810) p.18.

<sup>21</sup> Peacock (1810) p.26.

<sup>22</sup> Peacock (1810) p.69.

<sup>23</sup> Peacock (1810) p.31.

<sup>24</sup> Peacock (1810) p.31.

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- <sup>25</sup> Letter to Emile de la Rue, 23 October 1857. See *Letters*, vol.8, p.473.
- <sup>26</sup> Doyle (1887) p.3.
- <sup>27</sup> Croly's 1835 edition of Pope's poems is in the May 1854 inventory of the contents of 1, Devonshire Terrace. See *Letters*, vol.4, p.717.
- <sup>28</sup> In the May 1854 inventory of the contents of 1, Devonshire Terrace. See *Letters*, vol.4, p.718.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Down with the Tide' in *Household Words* of 5 February 1853. See *RP*, pp.152-3.
- <sup>30</sup> See, for example, *AN* 193, but there are many other examples of these spontaneous imaginative transformations throughout the journalism
- <sup>31</sup> See Said (1978) all of Ch.2 but particularly pp.113-123.
- <sup>32</sup> Allen (2008) pp.104-5.
- <sup>33</sup> See Jacobson, ed. (2000) p.62.
- <sup>34</sup> Law (2010) p.41.
- <sup>35</sup> Law (2010) p.51.
- <sup>36</sup> See, for example, Angus Calder's notes to Ch.1 of the Penguin Classics edition. Calder (1985) p.499.
- <sup>37</sup> For an account of these locations see, for example, Angus Calder's notes to Ch.s 1 & 5 of the Penguin Classics edition. Calder (1985) pp.499 & 500.
- <sup>38</sup> Moore (2004) pp.34 & 38.
- <sup>39</sup> As pointed out by Angus Calder in his note to Ch.42 of the Penguin Classics edition. Calder (1985) p.508.
- <sup>40</sup> In Jacobson, ed. (2000) pp.45 & 47.
- <sup>41</sup> Doyle (1892) p.183.
- <sup>42</sup> Doyle (1892) pp.198-199.
- <sup>43</sup> Doyle (1892) p.207.
- <sup>44</sup> Cohen, ed. (2005) p.202.
- <sup>45</sup> Cohen, ed. (2005) p.210.
- <sup>46</sup> See, for example, Allen (2008) pp.14-15.
- <sup>47</sup> Cohen, ed. (2005) p.209.
- <sup>48</sup> Doyle (1892) p.208.
- <sup>49</sup> It is also worth noting that in Dickens, the rivers of foreign parts also sometimes provide escape routes back to the safety of England. In *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, the English captives escape from the pirates in the South American jungle by rafting down a river to the sea, while in *Martin Chuzzlewit* it is by river steamer that Martin and Mark escape from the horrors of Eden in the United States.
- <sup>50</sup> See letter to Miss Burdett Coutts, 26 May 1846, cited in Jacobson, ed. (2000) p.167. Also p.50.
- <sup>51</sup> See Slater (2009) pp.419, 471, 500, 533 & 551.
- <sup>52</sup> Bar-Yosef (2002) p.221.

### 3. The river as liminal space

This chapter will examine the ways in which Dickens uses the Thames in London, in the form of a boundary between its two banks and of a continuum between its upstream and downstream regions, to mark out different zones within the city, where different conditions obtain. It will show how he makes use of the river's status as boundary to give symbolic significance to river crossings, and to configure the space either on the river or over it (that is, on the bridges) as a liminal space within which normal conditions are suspended. Its primary focus will be on the structure of *Little Dorrit* which, I will suggest, is organized around very distinct zones of urban space, defined largely by the river, but it will also show how movement between such zones, particularly by means of river crossings, is significant to some of the other novels, too, in particular *David Copperfield* and *Barnaby Rudge*. In using the concept of zoning in the city Dickens to some extent anticipates the thinking of modern urban geographers, to whom it is a central precept in explaining the structures of urban space, so it is worth noting some theoretical positions at the outset.

The best established theories of urban structure are Burgess's concentric model, Hoyt's sector model, Harris and Ullman's multiple-nuclei model, and Mann's model which combines the concentric and sector principles, and is especially useful here because it relates specifically to British cities.<sup>1</sup> All of these models depict modern cities as being made up of at least nine discrete zones, defined chiefly by commercial activity and population demographics but also other things, which are sharply defined and can be accurately mapped.

A well established study by Harold Carter moreover suggests that this phenomenon has its origins in the Victorian and immediately pre-Victorian periods. He cites David Ward, who writes: 'Until the mid-nineteenth century, apart from the small exclusive residential quarters of the rich, the functional specialization of urban land uses was only weakly developed.'<sup>2</sup> He goes on to describe two phases of development: the first from 1840 to 1870 with the development of warehouse districts and financial areas; and the second from 1870 to 1900 with further specialization within existing areas. Alison Adburgham gives an earlier, and very precise date for urban change:

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the pattern of shopping was much as it had been for the whole of the previous century. The goods were sold by individual shopkeepers, who were proprietors of their own shops and lived on the premises, and who were often craftsmen making the goods they sold. Their customers came to them through word-of-mouth recommendation, and for the most part they lived in the locality. There was no clear demarcation between retailers and wholesalers. After 1815, a change began.<sup>3</sup>

Carter gives many reasons for the subsequent changes in urban land use, from changes in technology, society, political control, demographics and the housing market.<sup>4</sup> He attends

particularly to changing patterns of wholesale and retail activity, to the development of bazaars in the 1830s and 1840s including those centred on Oxford Street in London,<sup>5</sup> and writes: ‘from the mixed and intermixed uses of the early part of the century a complex central business district developed, itself characterized by quite distinct sub-districts with closely associated uses’.<sup>6</sup> He also points to increasing social segregation, with the development of ‘class-based residential areas’ during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and: ‘a progressively complex social structure being associated with progressively increased segregation by social class.’<sup>7</sup>

Anyone with the slightest acquaintance with modern London knows how specialized are its different areas of population and occupation, from the doctors of Harley Street, to the lawyers of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, to the jewellers of Hatton Garden, to the electronics dealerships of the Tottenham Court Road, to the booksellers of the Charing Cross Road and many, many more. Oscar Spate has suggested that this specialization was only just beginning to emerge in the eighteenth century, with distinct metal working and silk weaving areas on the north bank of the Thames and a leather working area on the south.<sup>8</sup> The other geographers cited above clearly show this specialization of urban land use coming to maturity in the early to mid-nineteenth century, though a notable example which predates all of this theory is that of the booksellers who congregated in St Paul’s church yard in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

If, however, the phenomenon of zoning was finding full expression for the first time in the early nineteenth century, then it is not surprising to find Dickens exploring it in *Little Dorrit* and elsewhere. Among the other novels, Andrew Sanders has noted a ‘north/south axis of Islington and the Borough’ in both *The Pickwick Papers* and *Oliver Twist*, and also comments on the way in which the distinction between City and Town is used in *Nicholas Nickleby*:

Dickens seems to insist on the still coolness of City Square in order to distinguish the honest commercial enterprise of the Cheerybles from that of a businessman like Ralph Nickleby, whose premises are in the West End.<sup>9</sup>

Later Victorian writers show a distinct interest in zoning in London. In *A Child of the Jago* (1896), Arthur Morrison sets very precise geographical limits on the district of the Jago itself, and equally precise limits on the contrasting ways in which the law operates respectively inside and outside it, and on what its inhabitants can and cannot achieve. Meanwhile George Gissing is concerned with the different levels of affluence and the strata of social classes to be found in different districts throughout London. Novels such as *The Nether World* (1889), *New Grub Street* (1891) and *The Odd Women* (1893) all involve characters who move from one London zone to another as their economic circumstances change.

The urban geographers do not pay particularly close attention to rivers, or indeed any other features of physical geography as boundaries between zones, but this chapter will show that Dickens makes considerable use of the river for that purpose, both physically and symbolically. In this he is not alone. Christine Huguet has conducted a study of the Thames throughout Gissing's work, and this includes some observations about the way in which it functions as a boundary between zones which bear comparison with Dickens's use of river crossings. She points out how the character of Ada Warren in *Isabel Clarendon* looks from the Chelsea embankment across at Lambeth which she sees as "a mysterious region of toil and trouble," while conversely Thyrza and Lydia Trent in *Thyrza* look in the other direction at "that happy London on the other side of Thames." Huguet goes on:

As for Will Warburton rashly crossing the river to explore nearby Battersea, he is only mistakenly hunting for picturesqueness amidst squalor. None of these characters ever consider settling for good on the other side. Northbound transit over the water, on the other hand, clearly highlights the distinction between the day and the night populations of one district since no East-Enders legitimately crosses the river if not to gain his place of toil.<sup>10</sup>

...

The river not only efficiently divides off the haves and the have-nots, the employers and their employees vertically; but it also makes up a line of horizontal separation between two further entities whenever it is treated as a natural highway for human traffic.<sup>11</sup>

Her use of the word 'legitimately' in the first of these quotations lends some support to the notion of the Thames as a boundary between legitimate and illegitimate spaces in *Little Dorrit* and elsewhere, which will form a central part of the argument of this chapter. The 'horizontal separation' Huguet writes of in the second quotation is between the upstream and downstream zones which I will also examine in relation to *Little Dorrit*, and she goes on to explore the different ways in which these are exploited as recreational spaces by the different social classes in Gissing's fiction. This reveals some similarities in the ways in which the two writers think about the river, but at the same time it plays a far less prominent a part in Gissing's work than in Dickens's, and Huguet acknowledges this when she writes: 'Gissing's view of the Thames is certainly less fascinating and more restrictive than Charles Dickens's.'<sup>12</sup> This shows how Dickens anticipates later writers in his view of London, and supports the larger case for the importance of the river in his work.

### **The Thames as boundary**

Historically, politically and geographically, the Thames does indeed represent a significant boundary between different conditions and jurisdictions, and its status as a boundary would have been more present to a Victorian imagination than a modern one, simply because of its closer

proximity to various historical factors which will have been present in the folk memory of Dickens's audience and to which I now turn.

Among the seven principal Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, the Thames formed the boundary between Wessex and Mercia.<sup>13</sup> These, along with Northumbria, were the dominant kingdoms throughout the period, and Wessex was to become the most important as its kings, beginning with Egbert, gained the status of the first kings of the whole country from the ninth century onwards. The greatest of these was of course Alfred of Winchester, a legendary figure in the national psyche, who ruled from 871 to 901. Following the Viking invasions in the north of the country, Alfred successfully defended Wessex and negotiated with the Danish king Guthrum the southernmost limit of the territory which was to be the Danelaw for the next two centuries. This boundary was, for much of the way, the Thames, and in this period it may be said to have had the status of a national frontier.<sup>14</sup>

To the Victorians, Alfred was something of a cult figure. 1849 saw national celebrations of the (approximate) millennial anniversary of his birth, and in 1877 a well-known statue of him was erected in the Oxfordshire market town of Wantage. Dickens himself participated in the cult of Alfred veneration, devoting a highly complimentary chapter to him in his *Child's History of England*, where he writes: 'under the great Alfred, all the best points of the English-Saxon character were first encouraged, and in him first shown. It had been the greatest character among the nations of the earth.' (*CHE* 19) The territory of Wessex is therefore a significant place in a Victorian and Dickensian perspective on English history, while the Gothic style of design and architecture which epitomizes the Victorian period also seeks to evoke the time before the Norman invasion and therefore that of the Saxon kings generally.

The Thames has continued to form boundaries between administrative districts to this day. It was the boundary between Middlesex and Surrey before the creation of the County of Greater London, is still the boundary between Kent and Essex and forms part of the boundary between Berkshire and Buckinghamshire. It also still marks the limit of every London borough which abuts it; there is no borough with territory on both sides of the river. For most of the history of London, when its limits were defined by its wall, the river also formed the southern boundary of the city itself, and to cross the river in this region was therefore to enter or leave London. Until 1750<sup>15</sup> London Bridge, along with the seven gates in the wall itself, formed one of only eight routes by which this could be done.

To enter or leave London has, for much of its history, been a significant thing to do, because the city has always had its own jurisdiction and different conditions have prevailed inside it from those

outside. William I granted a charter to London in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, giving the city rights beyond the royal prerogative. Ackroyd reports that ‘as late as the fourteenth century a clerk could term London a *respublica*’<sup>16</sup> in a document describing the raising of the city’s own citizen army. For 300 years after the Norman invasion, according to Ackroyd: ‘Londoners would assert their sovereignty as members of a city-state.’<sup>17</sup> From the middle ages onwards, citizens of London had rights not accorded to ‘strangers’, and London has always had a degree of political autonomy – vested for much of its history in the Mayor, aldermen and craft guilds – which is distinct from the rest of the country and has sometimes been at odds with the monarchy, as symbolized by the fact that the monarch is not allowed to carry a sword in the city. For example, after the great fire of 1666, the guilds successfully defeated the royal scheme to rebuild the city according to Wren’s plan, and kept control over their own territory.

On either side of the southern entrance to London Bridge there is still an image of a griffin, decorated in red and silver, which is an armorial emblem of the Corporation of the City of London, and the two griffins here signal the act of entering it by crossing the river. Up until the eighteenth century, the heads of executed rebels and traitors were displayed on spikes above the main gateway at this same point as a warning to those entering the city of the strict justice in force there. This practice continued almost into Dickens’s lifetime, up until 1802, though by then the heads had been removed to Temple Bar,<sup>18</sup> while the bodies of the hanged were still displayed at points of entry to the city, and at sites along the river such as Bugsby’s Hole.<sup>19</sup> There was also a custom of building prisons at the gates of the city, most famously at Newgate, as a further sign of the authority within, and to land from the river by way of Traitor’s Gate was of course to come under the utmost exertion of that authority.<sup>20</sup> The City of London still has its own police force, quite separate from the Metropolitan Police, to serve the area within the original city walls.

For much of London’s history taxes have been levied on various goods, principally foodstuffs, being brought into the city, and so would have been collected on London Bridge. Tolls were also charged to people crossing it, from 1280 up until 1782.<sup>21</sup> In Dickens’s time there was still a toll on Southwark Bridge, as he records in *Little Dorrit*; when Amy crosses ‘the Iron Bridge’ as it was then called, ‘it cost her a penny’. (*LD* 292) In ‘Down with the Tide’ he records the same toll being collected on Waterloo Bridge,<sup>22</sup> and he references the bridge tolls generally at the beginning of *The Old Curiosity Shop*. (*OCS* 2) Blackfriars Bridge (1769) and Vauxhall Bridge (1816) were also established as toll bridges, so river crossings generally had the status of financial transactions.

It is well known that enterprises needing to escape licensing and regulation have traditionally established themselves outside the jurisdiction of the city. Since mediaeval times prostitutes have been removed beyond the walls, and the first permanent theatres were all built outside the city, on both sides of the river.<sup>23</sup> The Bankside area around the south end of London Bridge is known not only for the famous playhouses of Elizabethan and Jacobean times, but for all kinds of other unregulated popular entertainment and recreation as well. Even in Dickens's time, up until the Theatre Regulation Act of 1843, only three theatres in London had the right to stage legitimate drama (as opposed to other entertainments, such as circus acts): the Theatres Royal of Drury Lane, Covent Garden and, in the summer, the Haymarket. All the others, though popular, were illegitimate, and their audiences crossed the river to get to many of them.<sup>24</sup>

A prominent example of such theatres was Astley's, located south of the river on Westminster Bridge Road, which was famously visited by Queen Caroline and makes at least two notable appearances in contemporary novels. In Austen's *Emma* (1816) John Knightley takes his wife and children there while, in Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Kit takes Barbara, both their mothers and various siblings there, to everyone's delight (see Ch. 39). Dickens also celebrates the pleasures of Astley's in one of the *Sketches by Boz*.<sup>25</sup> Other popular south bank theatres of the period were the Royal Circus Theatre in St George's Fields, the Surrey Theatre in Blackfriars Road, of which Dickens makes use as a setting in *Little Dorrit*, and the Coburg Theatre, which survives as the Old Vic. Jane Moody's account of these describes how: 'West End carriages swept across Waterloo Bridge', to visit them.<sup>26</sup> The south bank was also the setting of Vauxhall gardens: a scene of morally dubious pleasures which was popularly represented by Burney in *Evelina* (1778), whose protagonist goes there by boat, and later by Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1848).

By Dickens's time, as a result of its expansion, the limits of London had obviously become less starkly defined than they were before. However, it still had a distinctive administrative character, and indeed the great constitutional historian of London, Sir Laurence Gomme, has written that it 'retained a territorial and judicial identity' as late as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup> In Dickens's time, too, and to a degree even now, that identity belonged and belongs on the north bank of the Thames, so to cross the river was still to enter or leave London proper, and thereby to become subject to a different set of conditions – either literally, legally, politically, or at least in some imaginative sense produced by the folk memory of all the historical circumstances described above. Ackroyd argues persuasively for the different character of London on either side of the river throughout its history:

A London reporter, writing in 1911, remarked that to pass over London Bridge was to cross ‘that natural dividing line of peoples’; it is an interesting remark, suggesting an almost atavistic reverence for the natural boundary of the river which changes the essence of the territory on either bank. He then asked whether, having crossed that significant line, ‘the very streets changed in some subtle and unconscious manner, to a more sordid character; the shops to a more blatant kind – even the people to a different and lower type?’<sup>28</sup>

It is a large claim but not an unrealistic one, at least for its time, and the legendary refusal of London taxi drivers to go south of the river after midnight endures, perhaps, as a symbolic reminder of those historical circumstances to this day. There may be some practical sense to it – that they are unlikely to get a fare to pay for their way back again – but the cut-off point of midnight carries a hint of superstition with it, too. With the exception of a major section of the Northern Line, even the London Underground system barely extends south of the river.

### **River crossings**

If there was or is a superstition about crossing the river in London, it finds powerful expression in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Here the vampire cannot tolerate physical contact with the waters of a river, and cannot cross over a river if its waters are moving. He can therefore cross a tidal river, but only at slack water when the tide is fully in or fully out. When a confederation of all the main characters are trying to hunt him down in London, the Dutch vampire expert, Professor Van Helsing, who has travelled to London expressly to help them, makes use of this specialist knowledge to help them trace Dracula’s movements:

‘He will be here before long now,’ said Van Helsing, who had been consulting his pocket-book. ‘*Nota bene*, in Madam’s telegram he went south from Carfax, that means he went to cross the river, and he could only do so at slack of tide, which should be something before one o’clock.’ ... That he is not here already shows that he went to Mile End next. This took him some time; for he would then have to be carried over the river in some way.’<sup>29</sup>

A little later, when they deduce Dracula’s intention of escaping by ship from the Port of London, Van Helsing reassures the others:

‘In the meantime we may rest and in peace, for there are waters between us which he do not want to pass, and which he could not if he would – unless the ship were to touch the land, and then only at full or slack tide.’<sup>30</sup>

This superstition speaks quite loudly to the idea of the power of the river, and here specifically of the Thames, over those who would cross it.

A final reason why this act of crossing the river would have held a special significance for the Victorian audience is to be found in the prominent status in the period of Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678 & 1684), whose climactic movements are of course also river crossings. This was

very popular in the period, as William St Clair has shown in his *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. He lists it among the books produced in the largest numbers during the 'brief copyright window' from 1774 to 1808, and points out that it had been stereotyped by 1810. This whole-page printing plate process was at that time reserved for books 'expected to be long-term best sellers'. He also lists it among 'books most commonly produced to be sold cheaply in numbers' in the later romantic period. It had been produced in an abridged version,<sup>31</sup> and Margaret Drabble identifies it as: 'a children's classic, regarded by generations of parents as an aid to moral instruction and an aid to literacy'.<sup>32</sup>

The particular appeal to children and its use in education which Drabble points out here would have contributed to the book's popular profile in the Victorian period, with its heightened religious sensibilities. Dickens himself supplies an example of this, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. Little Nell has been brought up on *The Pilgrim's Progress* and, after she and her grandfather leave London, she recalls this:

There had been an old copy of the Pilgrim's Progress, with strange plates, upon a shelf at home, over which she had often pored whole evenings, wondering whether it was true in every word, and where those distant countries with all the curious names might be. As she looked back upon the place they had left, one part of it came strongly on her mind.

'Dear grandfather,' she said, 'only that this place is prettier and a great deal better than the real one, if that in the book is like it, I feel as if we were both Christian, and laid down on this grass all the cares and troubles we brought with us; never to take them up again.' (OCS 115)

The sense of the text's immediacy which Nell experiences here seems right as a childish Victorian response to it, and may be attributed to the degree of novelistic realism with which Bunyan enriches the allegory.

The river crossing at the end of part 1 gives Christian and Hopeful access to the celestial city, and this, too, is recounted realistically, with details of the depth of the water, when they can and cannot feel the bottom, how sound it is, and how they help each other struggle against the current. For example, Christian cries out: "'I sink in deep waters, the billows go over my head, all his waves go over me,'" while Hopeful says: "'I feel the bottom, and it is good'",<sup>33</sup> while there are similar scenes involving Christiana and various other characters at the end of part 2. These are much more than symbolic refigurings of the crossing of the Styx in death; partly because of the realistic details, and partly because they have the status of a Christian tale, rather than a Greek pagan one. They therefore perhaps reference the Jordan at least as much as the Styx and, either way, *The Pilgrim's Progress* provides a strong reason why Victorians, brought up on this story, would have thought of river crossings as having meaning.

In Dickens's time, also, crossing the river in London was a more significant thing than it is now, because it was more difficult to do. Not only were most of the bridges subject to tolls, but there were far fewer of them. At the beginning of Dickens's life there were only 7 bridges across the tidal river between Richmond and the sea, and in London proper there were only three: Westminster, Blackfriars and London Bridges. By the time he started writing in 1833 these had been joined by Waterloo and Southwark Bridges, and further upstream by Vauxhall Bridge, though this was still really beyond the built-up area. The total, up to Richmond, had risen to 11. The alternative to using the bridges in London was to take boat, and this meant dealing with the watermen. These comprised a notoriously unruly faction throughout the history of their presence on the river in London, noted for their dishonesty, their uncooperativeness, particularly to foreign visitors,<sup>34</sup> and their obscene profanity. Ackroyd reports:

... the watermen of the Thames, from the thirteenth century to the nineteenth, were known for their insulting and foul language. The violent and blasphemous abuse they used was known as water-language, to which anyone could be subject. Monarchs were often reviled in this manner when they took to the water and ... It has even been suggested that Handel's Water-Music was composed in order to 'drown the torrent of abuse that would have greeted the new king, George I, during his first river-progress' (1714).<sup>35</sup>

For a member of the public then, to cross the river by water was to enter a different and probably very intimidating social milieu. That, too, would have made it a more significant step to take.

During Dickens's writing career the status of river crossings was to undergo a dramatic transformation. By the time of his death in 1870, the number of bridges across the tidal river had precisely doubled from the 1833 figure cited above. Historically this is not surprising when it is considered that, of the 11 new crossings, eight were railway bridges. However, the fact remains that crossing the river became in the process very much easier, commoner and therefore less significant than it had been. From inside a speeding railway carriage, it might scarcely have been noticed.

During the period of their construction, on the other hand, the bridges themselves would have been perceived as very conspicuous river crossings being undertaken by the civil engineers and builders: crossings which would have been very present to the Victorian consciousness. Dickens's early life and career were also the period of the construction of the Rotherhithe tunnel. This vast undertaking took 16 years, being finally completed in 1841, was beset with difficulties and cost many lives.<sup>36</sup> This river crossing therefore had very much the character of an ordeal, and Dickens makes reference to it as a tourist attraction in a letter of 24 June 1838.<sup>37</sup>

Dickens tends to write about the earlier period of fewer bridges in preference to the later one of many. Where he specifies a setting in time, or one can be deduced, as it sometimes can from the dates of the bridges themselves, the setting of his novels is generally earlier than the time of writing. Among the novels treated in this section, he specifies that *Little Dorrit* is set in 1825, and that *Barnaby Rudge* begins in 1775, while its second part is set in 1780. The first part of *David Copperfield*, mentioned below, is set in the time of old London Bridge, as is one of the most significant river novels, *Great Expectations*, placing both of them before 1831.<sup>38</sup>

The early London phases of *David Copperfield* might in any case be expected to be contemporaneous with Dickens's own childhood, because these parts of the novel are so autobiographical. His time at Warrens was not only, as I have shown in the introduction above, his most poignant experience of the river, but also the time of his first and perhaps most significant river crossings. There is some uncertainty about the exact period of Dickens's employment at Warrens and, in the autobiographical fragment, he himself seems deliberately vague about it.<sup>39</sup> However, whichever version of the dates is consulted, this period certainly seems to have begun before and ended after the period of John Dickens's incarceration in the Marshalsea, from 20 February to 28 May 1824.<sup>40</sup> Shortly after his arrival there, the rest of the family, '(excepting Fanny in the royal academy of music)',<sup>41</sup> abandoned the rooms which had been the family home in 'Gower-street north,' and went to live in the Marshalsea as well. Meanwhile Charles was lodged with 'a reduced old lady ... in Little-college-street, Camden Town,' giving him better access to Warren's. The river now separated Charles and Fanny in the north from the rest of the family in the south, and Dickens's river crossings began, as the autobiographical fragment reports:

Sundays, Fanny and I passed in the prison. I was at the academy in Tenterden-street, Hanover-square, at nine o'clock in the morning, to fetch her; and we walked back there together, at night.<sup>42</sup>

Their most direct route from Hanover Square to the Borough would probably have been by the new Waterloo Bridge, but that carried a toll, so they may well have taken a slight detour via Blackfriars Bridge, which by this time was free.

Certainly the latter route was the one favoured by Dickens when he himself subsequently moved south of the river, and had to cross it daily to get back to Warren's. After he complained to his parents about his isolation at Camden Town, they relented and found him a lodging in Lant Street in the Borough, from where he would go to breakfast in the prison with the family before going to work, and return there for supper in the evening. 'My usual way home,' he reports, 'was over Blackfriars-bridge, and down that turning in the Blackfriars-road which has Rowland Hill's chapel

on one side ...'. Forster reports that during this period he had a 'lounging-place by London-bridge, [where] he would occupy the time before the gates opened,' talking to a servant who also attended the family in prison. On at least one occasion, after running an errand for his father, he also used Westminster Bridge to get home.<sup>43</sup>

These experiences established a pattern of movement through London and across the water which, I suggest, became significant for Dickens and is made to serve a symbolic purpose in several of the novels. Dickens was even more ashamed of his family's residence in the Marshalsea than he was of working at Warren's; so much so that he once went to elaborate lengths to shake off his workmate Bob Fagin when the latter tried to walk him home after he had been ill.<sup>44</sup> Warren's may have been grim, but at least it represented legitimate, gainful employment. Similarly Fanny's establishment at Hanover Square (near Oxford Circus) represented a respectable education. By contrast the prison on the other side of the river represented failure, the shadow of dishonesty and rejection by society, which is why the young Dickens could not allow Fagin to follow him over the bridge.

River crossings therefore come to represent in Dickens's own experience transitions between the legitimate and the illegitimate, between the functional and the dysfunctional in society. Nor is this contrast incompatible with the idea of a regulated, lawful existence within the city walls and on the north bank, as opposed to an unregulated, lawless existence without and on the south bank in earlier historical periods. Prisons may ostensibly be instruments of state regulation, but for Dickens they are always permeable, chaotic places whose use defies logic: witness the experiences of Mr Pickwick in the Fleet, Mr Micawber in the King's Bench or William Dorrit in the Marshalsea, to be explored below. In Dickens's own case and in his own time, of course, neither set of circumstances was particularly palatable, because of the conditions at Warrens, so it seems fitting that he should have been drawn to London Bridge for his 'lounging-place.' I suggest this is because, for Dickens, the bridges represent liminal spaces in which neither set of conditions applies.

The closest parallels to Dickens's youthful pattern of river crossings are to be found, unsurprisingly, in *David Copperfield*. In this novel, when David goes to work at Murdstone and Grinby's in Blackfriars, he also goes to live with the Micawbers at their house in Windsor Terrace on the City Road, both of which locations are on the north side of the river. When Mr Micawber is subsequently arrested for debt, he is 'carried over to the Kings Bench Prison in the Borough' (*DC* 165) and for David this precipitates a series of river crossings which echoes Dickens's own and prefigures the more developed scheme of *Little Dorrit*.

Like Dickens, and indeed Amy Dorrit, David also soon moves to the Borough (though unlike Amy not actually into the prison) and, also like both Dickens and Amy, commences a series of daily river crossings between a world of work on the north bank and a world of destitution on the south, narrating how: ‘I walked to and fro daily between Southwark and Blackfriars’ (*DC* 169). Again like both Dickens and Amy, he is most at peace on a bridge, in a liminal state between the two worlds, where he is identified with neither. For her it is the Iron Bridge; for him:

‘my favourite lounging-place in the interval was old London Bridge, where I was wont to sit in one of the stone recesses, watching the people going by, or to look over the balustrades at the sun shining in the water, and lighting up the golden flame on the top of the Monument.’ (*DC* 167)

The word ‘lounging-place’ here connotes a state of ease and is of course recognisable from the context of the autobiographical fragment – though interestingly in that context it was Forster’s word, not Dickens’s own.

Finally and fittingly, David’s escape from this double life involves a further dramatic river crossing as he goes to retrieve his box ‘at my old lodging over the water’ (*DC* 177). This proves a perilous crossing, however, because David loses both his box and his half-guinea to the ‘long-legged young man with a very little empty donkey-cart’ whom he tries to employ to help him. Before he makes off with David’s possessions, however, this character affects to suspect him. They stop by ‘the dead-wall of the King’s Bench Prison,’ and then:

‘Wot!’ said the young man, seizing me by my jacket collar, with a frightful grin. ‘This is a pollis case, is it? You’re a going to bolt, are you? Come to the pollis, you young warmin, come to the pollis!’ (*DC* 178)

This is clearly a bluff, to intimidate David out of resistance, but he might genuinely suspect him of something, and their destination in the environs of the prison on the south side of the river perhaps contributes to an aura of suspicion surrounding David’s movements in the eyes of the young man.

There is thus a clear dichotomy in the fiction, too, between representations of legitimacy on one side of the river and illegitimacy on the other, and the remainder of this chapter will explore this with reference to two main examples. Firstly, the dichotomy is played out on a grand scale at the beginning of the second part of *Barnaby Rudge*. This is the part which concerns the demonstration raised by Lord George Gordon on 2 June 1780 to protest against the passing of the Catholic Relief Act, and the violent riots into which it descended over the following few days. Historically and in Dickens’s version, the demonstrators assembled in St George’s Fields in Southwark, south of the river. They can all be identified by the blue cockades which they wear in their hats but, at this point in the narrative, they are unmolested by the authorities. Initially they are organized into four

columns, or 'divisions', as Dickens's narrator has it, but they soon resolve themselves into three groups according to the river crossings they will make:

... in a very short space of time after being put in motion, the crowd had resolved itself into three great parties, and were prepared, as had been arranged, to cross the river by different bridges, and make for the House of Commons in separate detachments. (*BR* 375)

The three bridges are the only ones available at the time: London, Blackfriars and Westminster. The most direct route by far is by Westminster Bridge, while the London Bridge route meant setting out in the wrong direction altogether. The narrator explains this long detour by saying that the London Bridge division will go 'through the main streets, in order that their numbers and their serious intentions might be better known and appreciated by the citizens.' (*BR* 375) Crossing the river therefore in a sense arms or activates the mob, giving it power over public opinion, and bringing it to the attention of the authorities; in this case effectively the army, who now oppose it. South of the river this illegitimate force can be tolerated because it is in an illegitimate space; north of the river it cannot.

The principles of legitimacy and illegitimacy are held finely in balance in the liminal space of the bridges, and particularly on Westminster bridge, where Dickens plays out their influences on the idiot Barnaby himself. When he and his mother return to London as fugitives to lose themselves in the crowds, the van drops them 'at the foot of Westminster Bridge' and they: 'sat down in one of the recesses on the bridge, to rest'. (*BR* 367) They have arrived by chance at the time when the main body of demonstrators is crossing on their way to assemble at St George's fields and, under the twin influences of the blind man in the country and the old man on the bridge, Barnaby is already excited by the prospect of the demonstration, accepting the blue cockade from a passing coach.

On the arrival of Lord George Gordon himself, accompanied by the secretary Gashford, a contention begins between Gordon and Barnaby's mother in which he tempts Barnaby to join the demonstration, as Barnaby himself wants to do, while she pleads with him not to. She also pleads with Gordon, giving Barnaby's impaired intellect as a reason why he should be left alone: "'there are reasons why you should hear my earnest, mother's prayer, and leave my son with me. Oh do. He is not in his right senses, he is not, indeed!'" Gordon then turns this into a political point to his own advantage:

'It is a bad sign of the wickedness of these times,' said Lord George, evading her touch, and colouring deeply, 'that those who cling to the truth and support the right cause, are set down as mad. Have you the heart to say this of your own son, unnatural mother?'

'I am astonished at you!' said Gashford, with a kind of meek severity. 'This is a very sad picture of female depravity.'

‘He surely has no appearance,’ said Lord George, glancing at Barnaby, and whispering in his secretary’s ear, ‘of being deranged? And even if he had, we must not construe any trifling peculiarity into madness. Which of us –’ and here he turned red again – ‘would be safe, if that were made the law!’ (*BR* 371)

It is one of the main points of this novel that, despite his impairment, Barnaby can later become one of the leaders of the mob, thus proving the derangement of its actions. At this point, however, he could go either way. Gordon may have the stronger influence over him, but he stands in a liminal condition between the option of safety and innocence with his mother, and the option of violence and lawbreaking with Gordon and the demonstrators. I suggest that the placing of this scene on the bridge, between zones of London defined by their legitimacy but inside neither of them, is significantly emblematic of this liminal condition and of Barnaby’s free choice.

The idea of the bridge being used as a liminal space here may be compared with an observation by Jeremy Tambling in relation to *Our Mutual Friend*. He refers to a scene in which Charley Hexam and Bradley Headstone cross Vauxhall Bridge together, and encounter Headstone’s deadly enemy Eugene Wrayburn. At this point, writes Tambling: ‘The bridge becomes the place of suspension of social identities, and a point of tension between safety and death by water.’<sup>45</sup> In just the same way, Barnaby’s ‘social identity[y]’ might be said to be ‘suspen[ded]’ while he is on Westminster Bridge, and he is indeed in a state of tension between safety and the danger of death by violence.

Finally, much later in this novel, after the riots have been quelled and Gordon arrested, he makes two further river crossings under guard. Having been convicted, he needs to be conducted from the Westminster area to the Tower but, fearful of stimulating further disturbances, the authorities avoid taking him through the main part of the city. Instead they cross into a different zone, choosing the obscurity and therefore relative safety of the south bank:

He was conducted first before the Privy Council, and afterwards to the Horse Guards, and then was taken by way of Westminster Bridge, and back over London Bridge (for the purpose of avoiding the main streets), to the Tower, under the strongest guard ever known to enter its gates with a single prisoner. (*BR* 575)

## **Little Dorrit**

I now turn to the second main example, *Little Dorrit*: the novel in which Dickens makes his most significant use of river crossings to define different zones within London, and of the bridges to create liminal conditions. Critical attention to the river in this novel attends chiefly to Amy Dorrit’s association with the ‘Iron Bridge’, where she likes to walk and take the air. I begin with this, but

will go on to suggest that the river and its crossings serve a wider function as an organizing principle in the novel as a whole.

Built in 1819, the Iron Bridge stood on the site of the present Southwark Bridge, and it would have been very new at the time the story is set. Although it was constructed as a road bridge (not merely a footbridge), the novel suggests that it was a quiet place: Arthur, we are told, ‘avoided London Bridge, and turned off in the quieter direction of the Iron Bridge,’ (*LD* 265) and he duly finds Amy taking refuge there. For Amy, it functions first of all as a retreat from the oppression of the Marshalsea. As her father observes: ‘Amy has gone for an airing on the Iron Bridge. She has become quite partial to the Iron Bridge of late,’ (*LD* 224) and during this particular airing she tells John Chivery: ‘I like this place where we are speaking, better than any place I know.’ (*LD* 228)

While this is the place where she finds peace, the river below the bridge is also used by Dickens to reflect the turmoil with which Amy’s life is surrounded. Here, for example, she is walking with Arthur:

Thus they emerged upon the Iron Bridge, which was as quiet after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country. The wind blew roughly, the wet squalls came rattling past them, skimming the pools on the road and pavement, and raining them down into the river. The clouds raced on furiously in the lead-coloured sky, the smoke and mist raced after them, the dark tide ran fierce and strong in the same direction. Little Dorrit seemed the least, the quietest, and weakest of Heaven’s creatures. (*LD* 99)

This passage uses the weather of the river to represent the troubles and dangers which beset her. It is similar to a later description of the river below London Bridge, with its ‘dark vapour’ and ‘little spots of lighted water where the bridge lamps were reflected, shining like demon eyes, with a terrible fascination in them for guilt and misery.’ (*LD* 181) This London Bridge location is where Amy and Maggy encounter the young woman, ‘far too young to be there, Heaven knows!’, who says she is “‘Killing [her]self.’” (*LD* 182) Here, Dickens’s reference to her age and the place not only reflects the tragedy of a young potential suicide, but also suggests that she is a prostitute; the area to the south of London Bridge, to which Amy and Maggy have just crossed, having been a regular haunt for such. The ‘demon eyes’ in the river in this description add an element of moral evil to that of trouble.

In these examples, the association of the river with turmoil and human suffering is brought about by simple symbolic juxtaposition. However, it is also refigured metaphorically in the Marshalsea, whose transient population is described as: “the turbid living river that flowed through it, and flowed on.” (*LD* 80) In the light of these associations of the river with turbulence and disturbance, it is perhaps not surprising that in this novel crises of various kinds occur either on bridges or beside

the river. It is on the Iron Bridge that Arthur and Amy's latent love is born (*LD* 270), and also there that Amy has to meet the crisis of John Chivery's attempted proposal of marriage and extricate herself from his affections. (*LD* 227) The un-named young woman reaches her state of desperation by the river as quoted above, and it is also by the river that Arthur stumbles on the shady assignation between Rigaud and Miss Wade.

Some of these observations may be familiar enough. Michael Greenstein has written about liminality in *Little Dorrit*, and Mark Hennelly about liminality in three other Dickens novels.<sup>46</sup> However, I would suggest that as well as supplying a simple refuge for Amy, the river also has a precise function in this novel in relation to the wider geography of London, as the twin axis around which the story is organized. The first axis is between the two banks of the river, and specifically between the City and the Borough. In the City are a number of key locations, all within less than a mile of each other. The Clennam family home is described as being 'between the river and Cheapside'; Arthur walks to it 'almost to the water's edge ... passing silent warehouses and wharves' (*LD* 32-33), so it would appear to be somewhere in the region of Upper Thames Street. The coffee house where Arthur stays at first is a short distance away to the north-west in Ludgate Hill, while Bleeding Heart Yard is off Greville Street, a little further on in the same direction. The house which Arthur later shares with Doyce is by London Wall, near the Bank of England, a little way north east of the Clennam house.

These City locations are all associated with honest endeavour and productivity. Despite Arthur's suspicions, a successful international trading house had centred on the Clennam family home for a long time, while Arthur himself is a force for good and works for both the Dorrit family interests and the Doyce business. Bleeding Heart Yard contains not only the manufactory of the ingenious and industrious Doyce, but also Plornish's plastering business and his wife's shop, and later the lodger Cavalletto, enemy to the scheming Rigaud and therefore another force for good. Because he collects the rents of Bleeding Heart Yard, it is also the principal sphere of action of Pancks, the right-minded agent of Casby, who also performs a good and useful action by solving the mystery which restores the Dorrit family fortune. (Pancks actually lives in Pentonville, some distance away to the north, but only one scene, in Ch.25 of Book 1, is set there.)

This City zone is clearly distinct from what might be called the Town, or west end, which is the scene of more dubious enterprises. The swindler Merdle, in whom so many unwisely invest, lives in Harley Street, Cavendish Square. The Circumlocution Office, which confounds all enterprise, is not given a location but, as a government department, it might be assumed to be somewhere in the

region of Whitehall. Certainly its presiding spirits, Mr Tite Barnacle and his son, live not far away from there at Mews Street, Grosvenor Square (see *LD* 112). Meanwhile the landlord Casby, guilty of a certain amount of sharp practice as exposed by Pancks, lives in an unspecified cul-de-sac off the Gray's Inn Road (see *LD* 149). This is a long road, so the position of the cul-de-sac is difficult to locate, but we know that it lies in the direction of Pentonville Hill, so it is likely to be at the northern end, perhaps in the St Pancras region: not exactly the west end, but well away from the City. The distinction within London between the City and the Town is important in literature from, at latest, the seventeenth century onwards, for example in plays such as Wycherley's *The Country Wife* (1675) or Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), and a Victorian audience would have been well aware of it. While its importance to the scheme of *Little Dorrit* needs to be acknowledged, the river is not really significant in marking it out, so it is not a significant focus of this chapter.

Across the river from the City is the Borough, and here the key location is obviously the Marshalsea prison, home to much of the Dorrit family for much of Book 1, in the Borough High Street, half a mile south of the Iron Bridge and actually on the same road that leads over London Bridge. However, it is not the only Borough location in the novel. Mr Cripples's Academy, where Frederick and Fanny Dorrit have their lodging, is 'very near' (*LD* 95), and the theatre where they work is also 'on that side of the river, and not very far away' (*LD* 242). It has been identified by Andrew Sanders as the Surrey Theatre in Blackfriars Road.<sup>47</sup> The Chivery family, father and son being turnkeys of the Marshalsea, live a quarter of a mile south of it in Horsemonger Lane (now a widened Harper Road), where there was at the time yet another prison: the Surrey County Gaol.

These Borough locations are all associated with confinement, penury, degradation and waste: the Chiverys by association with their employment at the prison, and William Dorrit's family obviously through his defaulted debt, imprisonment and the degrading way in which he has to beg for 'testimonials' from visitors and other prisoners. However, it does not end there. Frederick Dorrit is also an utterly broken-down figure: at the theatre, 'the carpenters had a joke to the effect that he was dead without being aware of it', and the narrator reports: 'he said nothing, never lifted up his bowed head, never varied his shuffling gait by getting his springless foot from the ground' (*LD* 245). Fanny, too, is a morally bankrupt figure; she does not believe in love, referring to it as a 'degenerate impossibilit[y]', (*LD* 613)<sup>48</sup> and marries the ridiculous Edmund Sparkler purely to climb socially into the Merdle family and avenge herself on his mother, who had patronised her.

The contrast between the City and the Borough can thus be seen as a contrast between two zones, once again respectively of function and dysfunction, of legitimacy and illegitimacy, as they are for David Copperfield and had been for Dickens himself as explored above. Amy crosses regularly between these two zones, between her home in the Marshalsea and her employment in the Clennam house, and she later goes to similar employment in the Casby house further north. Her functions in the two zones are completely disconnected: her father either does not know or refuses to acknowledge the fact that she works for their living, while Mrs Clennam does not know where she comes from, and even refuses to be told when Flintwinch tries to do so (see *LD* 191).

Amy therefore lives two separate lives on the two sides of the river: one of usefulness and productivity in the City; one of waste, degradation and humiliation (by her father) in the Borough.<sup>49</sup> Her tragedy is the internal conflict which this creates, and this explains more about her affinity with the Iron Bridge. It is a liminal space, belonging to neither world, where she can escape from both and therefore from the conflict. Arthur, too, makes many river crossings, often meeting or accompanying Amy in the process. He, too, therefore occupies both worlds, and is really the only other character to do so. This creates an affinity between them, and also symbolically prefigures their eventual union.

Michael Greenstein attends to the images of doorways, windows and staircases in the novel, to develop the idea of generic thresholds which characters have to cross to enter new conditions, and applies it both to Amy's 'rite of passage into adult society' and to Arthur's process of 'rekindl[ing] extinguished lights of employment and love'.<sup>50</sup> This seems right for these characters, but crossing the Iron Bridge is a much more potent symbol of such processes than the features of domestic architecture which Greenstein mentions.

Amy is in a sense transformed by her river crossings, and one of the ways in which Dickens achieves this is through the use of her name. In the Marshalsea she is referred to by her father as 'Amy', and by others such as the Chiverys as 'Miss Dorrit', but north of the river in the Clennam house she is always referred to as 'little Dorrit', which of course is also Arthur's name for her. Rigaud alludes to the duality of her identity when he refers to her as 'the little niece of Monsieur Frederick, whom I have known across the water.' (*LD* 817) It is as if to know her 'across the water' is to know someone different from the little Dorrit known at the Clennam house where he speaks these words.

Others are transformed by river crossings, too. John Nandy, Mrs Plornish's elderly father, is indulged, loved and respected within the Plornish household in Bleeding Heart Yard north of the river. Though he is a pauper and voluntary inmate of a workhouse: 'Mrs Plornish was as proud of her father's talents as she possibly could have been if they had made him Lord Chancellor.' (*LD* 379) He occasionally crosses the river to pay his respects to his imagined patron, William Dorrit at the Marshalsea, and an example of this is supplied in Ch.31. On this occasion he is accompanied by Amy, and Dickens has them pausing to rest on the Iron Bridge, where they talk about the shipping, and this foregrounds their progress as a river crossing. After that, as soon as he enters the Borough on the south bank, Nandy is transformed into something disgraceful by an encounter with Fanny:

'Why, good gracious me, Amy!' cried that young lady, starting. 'You never mean it!'  
'Mean what, Fanny dear?'  
'Well! I could have believed a great deal of you,' returned the young lady with burning indignation, 'but I don't think even I could have believed this, of even you!'  
'Fanny!' cried Little Dorrit, wounded and astonished.  
'Oh! Don't Fanny me, you mean little thing, don't! The idea of coming along the open streets, in the broad light of day, with a Pauper!' (firing off the last word as if it were a ball from an air-gun). (*LD* 382-3)

She has identified him by his workhouse livery, which carried no shame in the City, but has now become unacceptable in the eyes of the hypocritical Fanny, whose natural habitat is the actually more shameful Borough.

Finally, Mrs Clennam is dramatically transformed by her river crossing. Despite being confined to a wheelchair in one room for years, she recovers the use of her legs under the duress of blackmail by Rigaud, whereupon she: 'start[s] to her feet' and 'run[s] wildly' out of the house and across London Bridge to intercept Amy at the Marshalsea. (*LD* 817-8) They return together and Mrs Clennam has become a different person. A representative of the legitimate zone of the City, she has crossed into the illegitimate zone of the Borough, and this mixing of the two places, like a volatile chemical reaction, precipitates the final resolution of the novel.

The river thus provides an axis between its north and south banks, the crossing between which drives the novel forward. However, it also has a second axis, between its upstream and downstream zones. The locations discussed so far are all downstream, in London, where the key conflicts of the novel take place. However, they exist in stark contrast to the pleasant, rural, upstream location of Twickenham, where the Meagles family resides in their house on the banks of the river:

It was a charming place (none the worse for being a little eccentric), on the road by the river, and just what the residence of the Meagles family ought to be. It stood in a garden, no doubt as fresh and beautiful in the May of the Year, as Pet was now in the May of her life; and it was defended by a goodly show of handsome trees and spreading evergreens, as Pet was by Mr and Mrs Meagles.

...

Within view was the peaceful river and the ferry-boat, to moralise to all the inmates, saying: Young or old, passionate or tranquil, chafing or content, you, thus runs the current always. Let the heart swell into what discord it will, thus plays the rippling water on the prow of the ferry-boat ever the same tune. Year after year, so much allowance for the drifting of the boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet, upon this road that steadily runs away; while you, upon your flowing road of time, are so capricious and distracted. (*LD* 199)

Descriptions like this are all about harmony, which is what the Meagles family and their upstream zone represent. He is described as ‘honest, affectionate, and cordial Mr Meagles.’ (*LD* 203) They are a devoted couple who dote on their daughter Minnie (also called Pet), and whose share of the plot is chiefly concerned with their kindly attempts to provide a family home for the irascible foundling Tattycoram. It is here at Twickenham, too, that the harmonious business partnership of Doyce and Clennam has its genesis and here, too, that the marriage between Minnie and Henry Gowan is contracted - albeit not an altogether satisfactory one, but one which keeps Arthur free ultimately to be united with Amy. Henry’s mother, whose consent is needed for this, also has an upstream riverside location of her own, in institutionalised accommodation for military pensioners and their relicts, within the precincts of Hampton Court Palace. Whenever Arthur visits the Meagleses at Twickenham, in spite of his mixed feelings about Minnie, he is visited by a great sense of calm, which is communicated largely through idyllic descriptions of the river and its environs. See, for example, the long passage in Ch. 28:

Everything within his view was lovely and placid. The rich foliage of the trees, the luxuriant grass diversified with wild flowers, the little green islands in the river, the beds of rushes, the water-lilies floating on the surface of the stream, the distant voices in boats borne musically towards him on the ripple of the water and the evening air, were all expressive of rest. (*LD* 346)

- and much more to the same effect.

The guiding principles of the upstream zone are therefore ones of unity, belonging and wholesome family values, and these are clearly in contrast with the values of the downstream zone, where the key families on both sides of the river, in both City and Borough, are terribly dysfunctional. William Dorrit’s selfish treatment of Amy really amounts to abuse, and the house of Clennam is riven by conflict, as symbolized by its final, physical collapse. The arranged marriage of Arthur’s parents was always deeply unhappy, and Arthur himself turns out not to be Mrs Clennam’s son after all (see *LD* 807-9).<sup>51</sup> Arthur even alludes directly to this contrast along the upstream-downstream axis of the river at one point, while thinking about Amy on the Iron Bridge:

Now, was there some one in the hopeless, unattainable distance? Or had the suspicion been brought into his mind, by his own associations of the troubled river running beneath the bridge with the same river higher up, its changeless tune upon the prow of the ferry-boat, so many miles an hour the peaceful flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet? (*LD* 273)

Here, the other location is clearly identified with Twickenham by the reference to the ‘ferry-boat’ and by the precise use of the clause which runs from ‘so many miles an hour’ to ‘nothing uncertain or unquiet.’ These words had already been used on p.199 and previously repeated in exactly the same form on p.209, so they have become a kind of upstream refrain for Arthur. He is beginning to fall in love with Amy, but he confuses the feeling with those he had for Minnie at Twickenham, so at this stage the prospect of domestic harmony seems accessible upstream, but not downstream, where he stands on the Iron Bridge.

Thus the river has a more fundamental structural function in *Little Dorrit* than the simple use of the Iron Bridge as a refuge for Amy. I have shown that the many elements, scenes and characters of this complicated novel are organized around a geography of London which is itself defined by the river along two axes: firstly the zones of the north (City) and south (Borough) banks, and secondly the upstream and downstream zones of Twickenham and London. As an organizing principle, it goes a long way towards drawing together all the disparate strands of this extremely complex novel into a coherent whole.

Four other examples of significant river crossings in Dickens remain to be observed. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, crossing the river is equivalent to banishment. When old Arthur Gride proposes to buy Madeline Bray’s hand in marriage by releasing her father Walter from his debt, he plans to dispose of Walter in this way: “... the moment I am fast married he shall be quietly released, and have an allowance to live just t’other side the water like a gentleman (he can’t live long, for I have asked his doctor ...)” (NN 629) Here, to be ‘just t’other side the water’ is to be well out of the way, and in this case doomed anyway, and this would seem consistent with the idea of entering a different set of conditions.

In *Great Expectations*, Wemmick is famously transformed by his river crossings between his employment at Mr Jaggers’s office in Little Britain on the north bank, and his comfortable home in Walworth in the south. In Little Britain he is repressed and self-controlled, and this is emblemized by the way he sets his mouth: ‘His mouth was such a post-office of a mouth that he had a mechanical appearance of smiling. We had got to the top of Holborn Hill before I knew that it was merely a mechanical appearance, and that he was not smiling at all.’ (GE 161) In Walworth, on the other hand, he contemplates the Aged P. ‘with his hard face really softened’, (GE 196) and the contrast between the two conditions is foregrounded the next day when he turns his steps northward again: ‘By degrees, Wemmick got dryer and harder as he went along, and his mouth

tightened into a post-office again.’ (*GE* 198) His Walworth incarnation is clearly the more desirable state, but the same distinction between legitimate and illegitimate spaces applies, because at Little Britain on the north bank he has the legitimacy of gainful employment, and of the law itself in the employ of Jaggers.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the marriage between the supposed John Rokesmith and Bella Wilfer takes place in Greenwich, and much is made of her crossing over the river, after picking up her father from the city, by steam boat to get there on the wedding day itself. Following the ceremony all three of them go for the ‘marriage dinner’ to the same hotel, overlooking the Thames, from which Bella had surveyed the shipping as described in Ch.2 above. The river is thus prominently foregrounded in this episode, and Bella’s crossing of it signals the change in her marital status, with all the accompanying changes in her legal and social status which that would have entailed at the time. (See *OMF* 691-697)

Finally, *The Old Curiosity Shop* opens with an image of many people crossing all of London’s bridges, which Dickens uses once again to suggest the idea of liminal spaces:

Then the crowds for ever passing and repassing on the bridges (on those which are free of toll at least) where many stop on fine evenings looking listlessly down upon the water with some vague idea that by-and-by it runs between green banks which grow wider and wider until at last it joins the broad vast sea – where some halt to rest from heavy loads and think as they look over the parapet that to smoke and lounge away one’s life, and lie sleeping in the sun upon a hot tarpaulin, in a dull slow sluggish barge, must be happiness unalloyed – and where some, and a very different class, pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in some old time that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and best. (*OCS* 2)

At the time when this opening chapter was written, the story was intended to be presented at sporadic intervals in the periodical *Master Humphrey’s Clock* among a range of other, unrelated material: what Dickens refers to as ‘detached papers’.<sup>52</sup> The crowds of people on the bridges, diverse in their composition and concerns, can therefore be seen as imaginative material for characters in all kinds of potential stories where they have not yet taken their places. Their location on the bridges also means they have not yet arrived in any of the London settings where their stories might be acted out, and they are therefore in a kind of limbo. They are characters *in potentia*, and this is also a liminal condition, between their initial conception in imagination and their actualization in story. At the same time, they are united in their contemplation of the river, which therefore supplies a perspective from which Dickens considers the possibilities of an infinite range of characters.

This chapter has shown that the crossing of the Thames in London had been a very significant act for much of the city's history, and to a degree remains so today. For Victorians, it was significant for historical reasons, united with cultural reasons and reasons to do with the changing status of river crossings in the capital at the time. For Dickens, it had an additional significance supplied by his own childhood experiences, and he draws together all of these influences to make it a significant act in his fiction. Notably in *Little Dorrit* but also elsewhere, such crossings are used symbolically to signify transitions between different states, and the liminal conditions which consequently prevail upon the bridges are similarly used to create moments of tension in the novels.

### Notes to Ch.3.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Hall (2001) pp.6-7, or Whyne-Hammond (1979) pp.177-181.

<sup>2</sup> Carter (1983) p.162.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Carter (1983) p.158.

<sup>4</sup> Carter (1983) pp.184-9.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Carter (1983) pp.166-167.

<sup>6</sup> Carter (1983) p.163.

<sup>7</sup> Carter (1983) pp.189 & 198.

<sup>8</sup> Carter (1983) pp.164-5.

<sup>9</sup> Sanders (2010) pp.112-3.

<sup>10</sup> Huguet (2006) p.164.

<sup>11</sup> Huguet (2006) p.165.

<sup>12</sup> Huguet (2006) p.169.

<sup>13</sup> See Schneer (2005) p.23

<sup>14</sup> See Schneer (2005) pp.23-24 for an account of this. The Thames was again seen as a potential national frontier during the Second World War. A line of pill boxes was built along the left, or generally north, bank of the upstream reaches, in the hope of holding a line along the river against a possible German invasion from the south. Many of these defences are still there.

<sup>15</sup> When Westminster Bridge was built. See Cookson (2006) p.161.

<sup>16</sup> Ackroyd (2001) p.49.

<sup>17</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.47

<sup>18</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.291.

<sup>19</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.295.

<sup>20</sup> See Schneer (2005) p.45.

<sup>21</sup> See White (1900) p.12 and p.34.

<sup>22</sup> See *RP* 155.

<sup>23</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.170.

<sup>24</sup> See Moody (2000), particularly pp.33-46 for an account of these circumstances.

<sup>25</sup> 'Scenes', Ch.11, *SB* 98 – 104.

<sup>26</sup> See Moody (2000) pp.33, 35 & 37.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Ackroyd (2001) p.121.

<sup>28</sup> Ackroyd (2001) p.695.

<sup>29</sup> Stoker (1897) pp.324-5.

<sup>30</sup> Stoker (1897) pp.334.

<sup>31</sup> See St Clair (2004) pp.54, 73, 131, 515 and 568.

<sup>32</sup> Drabble (2000) p.791.

<sup>33</sup> See Bunyan (1678) pp.210-211.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Ackroyd's account of Giordano Bruno's experiences in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in Ackroyd (2001) pp.106-7, and Ch.6 p.2 below, for 19<sup>th</sup> century legislation attempting to regulate the watermen.

<sup>35</sup> Ackroyd (2001) p.553.

<sup>36</sup> See Ackroyd (2001), pp.562-3 for an account of this.

<sup>37</sup> See *Letters*, vol.1, p.407.

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<sup>38</sup> See *DC* 167 and *GE* 393 for evidence of this. *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities* are both dated on their opening pages, while *Little Dorrit*, begun in 1855, opens with the words ‘Thirty years ago’.

<sup>39</sup> See Forster (1892) p.16.

<sup>40</sup> See Ackroyd (1991) pp. 74 & 90 for these dates, presumably taken from the legal record.

<sup>41</sup> Forster (1892) p.11. See Forster (1892) 11-16 for all the other details of this episode.

<sup>42</sup> Forster (1892) p.12.

<sup>43</sup> Forster (1892) pp.13-14.

<sup>44</sup> Forster (1892) p.13.

<sup>45</sup> Tambling (2009) pp.205-6.

<sup>46</sup> See Greenstein (1990) pp.275-282 and Hennelly (2000) pp.199-215.

<sup>47</sup> Sanders (2010) p.194.

<sup>48</sup> This reference is slightly ambiguous. She could be responding to Amy’s suggestion, “If you loved any one” (in which case the point holds) or to her subsequent suggestion, “If you loved him” (Edmund) (in which case it is not quite so conclusive), or even to both.

<sup>49</sup> Of course it could be argued that she is actually more useful to her father than she is to Mrs Clennam, because her job is to some extent a ruse. However she does get paid. Like Dickens’s at Warren’s, the employment is therefore gainful and this gives it its legitimacy.

<sup>50</sup> Greenstein (1990) p.276.

<sup>51</sup> It should also, perhaps, be acknowledged that this simple contrast along the upstream/downstream axis does not apply to everyone. The Plornishes of Bleeding Heart Yard, for example, are a very happy family. However the three most prominent families in the novel by far are the Dorrits, Clennams and Meagleses, and for them the contrast along the axis of the river clearly holds true.

<sup>52</sup> At the beginning of the preface to the first cheap edition.

#### 4. The river as rebellious force

In his treatment of the river as explored in the foregoing chapters, Dickens has to some extent been writing within the confines of pre-existing traditions, either literary or in a wider sense cultural. Thus the Thames had already been a focus of the picturesque in its own literature and in the work of Gilpin. It had already been a symbol of the nation and by extension its empire, as evidenced by the Elizabethan and Jacobean texts cited above and, as I have shown, river crossings in London had long been important historically, so the Thames could already be perceived as a liminal space. Because the river figures so largely in his writing, Dickens develops these themes in some distinctive ways and perhaps more fully than previous writers, as the above chapters have shown, but he had not so far produced any completely new meanings or functions for the river, as defined by my chapter headings. The thesis now turns to three further functions of the river in Dickens which do, by contrast, appear to be distinctively Dickensian, and which are broadly united by a sense of threat, menace or doom. The first concerns Dickens's use of images of the river to evoke forces beyond the control of human agency, and specifically those of rebellion, which will form the subject of this chapter.

##### **Menacing nature**

Before turning specifically to the river, however, it is worth noting that such uses form part of a wider scheme of discourse in which Dickens conceives of nature itself as menacing, and indeed far more menacing than critics such as Robert Patten have noted.<sup>1</sup> One of the places where Dickens encountered nature at its most natural was in America, and Schwarzbach has already said of such encounters: 'When Dickens travelled west to the frontier and was confronted by the raw, untamed power of nature, he was quite simply terrified.'<sup>2</sup> Schwarzbach goes on to trace how this influence helped to shape the ghastly setting of Eden in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Stronger indications that Dickens actually felt haunted by nature are to be found in Dickens's travel book about this experience, *American Notes*. When travelling by coach across rough country, Dickens's attention is taken by the stumps of trees by the wayside and his imagination transforms them before his eyes into a series of grotesque human and animal figures. He writes: 'They ...never took their shapes at my bidding, but seemed to force themselves upon me, whether I would or no ...' (AN 193) As often happens in Dickens, the inanimate is here recast as animate, figures rise out of the murky landscape which he finds so repellent, and cannot be resisted by his imagination.

One of the ways in which Dickens expresses this sense of a haunted landscape is by populating the countryside with the spirits of the dead. There is a cultural precedent for this in the conventional idea of a conservative organic society, in which a sense of community and historical stability in the countryside is underpinned by the bodies of ancestors buried there. In England, this is expressed most famously in Gray's 'Elegy', where the bodies in the graveyard are actually very life-affirming because their spirits live on in their descendants. Thus the 'rude forefathers of the hamlet' merely 'sleep', and: 'Ev'n from the tomb the voice of Nature cries, / Ev'n in our Ashes live their wonted fires.'<sup>3</sup> However, Dickens's version of this trope is not like this, as Catherine Robson has noted: 'In contrast to ... evocations of the organic fusion of feudal agricultural society, Dickens has few positive emotions about that imagined locus of premodern England, the countryside.'<sup>4</sup> Very far from having any positive emotions about this tradition, I suggest that he actually has some very negative ones. When he places dead bodies in the landscape, they do not sustain the living world, but instead corrupt and contaminate it in a deeply morbid way.

Thus, in *Nicholas Nickleby*, a pleasant pastoral description of the scenery through which Nicholas and Smike pass on their way to Portsmouth is followed only four paragraphs later by a scene in which they walk past a hollow called 'the Devil's Punch Bowl', and Nicholas reads an inscription on a stone describing a 'foul and treacherous murder' which had been committed there: 'The grass on which they stood had once been dyed with gore, and the blood of the murdered man had run down, drop by drop, into the hollow which gives the place its name.' (NN 281) Similarly in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the crowd which is avenging itself on Foulon envisages nature contaminated by his decomposing body: "'Rend Foulon to pieces, and dig him into the ground, that grass may grow from him!'" they cry. (TTC 211) Yet again in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, the narrator says that the setting is:

'so abounding in vestiges of monastic graves, that the Cloisterham children grow small salad in the dust of abbots and abbesses ... while every ploughman in its outlying fields ... grinds their bones to make his bread. (ED 51)

Perhaps the most disturbing example of this effect is to be found in *The Battle of Life*, which is set in a fertile rural landscape with much of the action taking place in Dr Jeddler's pleasant garden. However, this place is also the site of an ancient battlefield, and its fertility is attributed to the decomposing bodies buried there. The story opens with an unusually long description of the countryside, of a conventionally pastoral type, but it then becomes very macabre:

... there were deep green patches in the growing corn at first, that people looked at awfully. Year after year they re-appeared; and it was known that underneath those fertile spots, heaps of men and horses lay buried, indiscriminately, enriching the ground. The husbandmen who ploughed those places, shrank from the great worms abounding there; and the sheaves they

yielded were, for many a long year, called the Battle Sheaves, and set apart; and no-one ever knew a Battle Sheaf to be among the last load at a Harvest Home. (CB 246)

Even years later Dr Jeddler, speaking to Alfred as they sit in the orchard, refers to: 'this ground ... where the fruit has just been gathered for our eating from these trees, the roots of which are struck in Men, not earth ...' (CB 257) In Dr Jeddler's and Dickens's imagination, the stereotypically pastoral landscape is still contaminated by the dead soldiers. I suggest that this is a very significant indication of Dickens's response to nature in general: he sees it as a haunted and indeed a haunting presence, inhabited by echoes of violence and death.

It is also surely significant that Dickens's characters often go into the countryside in order to die. This is true of both Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* and Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*, both of whom make, effectively, pilgrimages out of London to the rural midlands and Devon respectively, tended by Nell's grandfather and Nicholas, who guide them to their final resting places. It is also true of Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*, who leaves Coketown for the open country where the fatal mineshaft awaits him, and of Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, who leaves London for rural Berkshire where she, too, dies.

Alma Kadragic suggests that Dickens writes about three modes of nature, which she respectively terms cultivated, primal and transcendent; and that he moves, in order, between these three modes in the course of his career. She suggests that only his very early work contains cultivated nature, which is under human control, and he quickly moves towards a conception of primal nature which, writes Kadragic: 'frightens man for it is indifferent to him; it suggests that creation's triumph is limited and that everything slumps towards an inevitable entropy'.<sup>5</sup> She cites *Martin Chuzzlewit* and *Dombey and Son* as being particularly powerful examples of this effect, and goes on to suggest that transcendent nature is a kind of cathartic outgrowth from it. This analysis dates from the 1970s and uses the contemporary idea that early, mid and late Dickens represent discrete modes of writing, which admittedly may not be borne out by the complexity of the texts. However, its identification and characterisation of 'primal nature' does seem very useful. I would suggest that this is in fact Dickens's primary conception of nature and one which is particularly relevant to describing his writing about the river.

Such writing shares all the more menacing properties of his other nature writing, and more. He represents it, accurately, as a powerful kinetic force under the united influences of its own energy, the weather and the tide, for it is perhaps nature at its most dangerous, at least in England. This fact does not go unnoticed by other Victorian writers, such as Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, who

build the denouements of *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1880) on the fatal power of rivers. However, Dickens harnesses its forces with greater power in very many passages, and most powerfully of all in the drowning scenes of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Great Expectations* and *Our Mutual Friend*. The fact that the river is so far beyond human control clearly disturbs him and, if this is a distinctively Dickensian response, it may be attributed partly to his impulse towards orderliness.<sup>6</sup> However, the menace of the river is more than a physical one for Dickens. He is also haunted by it in imagination, which is why he writes in *Household Words* that he ‘trouble[s] his head . . . about the river at night’, (RP 149) so he perceives it as representing spiritual dangers, too.

In creating such menacing images Dickens may also have been responding to the prevailing physical conditions of the Thames in London, which was dramatically transformed at the beginning of his writing career for two separate but chronologically coincidental reasons, and transformed again at the end of it. There is thus a very close historical correlation between Dickens’s work and a very particular set of conditions on the river which have never prevailed either before or since his time and which, I suggest, influenced him significantly. They may therefore bear describing in some detail here.

The first reason for the transformation was the removal of Old London Bridge, which had stood in its place since 1209. This structure had 19 arches resting on 20 piers, which were surrounded by protective structures called ‘starlings’, consisting of pilings driven into the bed of the river all the way round each pier. These starlings were so large that they left only small gaps in between them, which had the effect of greatly restricting the flow of water under the bridge. In London the vast majority of this current is produced by the rise and fall of the tide rather than by the river’s own flow, so the result was a considerable reduction in the tidal range upstream, with the bridge acting as a partial dam or weir, keeping the level artificially high above it. For most of its course through London, then, the Thames had been effectively tamed since the middle ages, and this was how dozens of generations of Londoners, up to and including the young Dickens, would have known it. It was these conditions which allowed the river to freeze, as blocks of ice virtually sealed up the bridge and stabilised the level above it, so that the famous frost fairs could take place in very cold winters. (This would now be impossible, at least without the aid of the Thames Barrier.) It was also what made it necessary to ‘shoot the bridge’, which was like going over a waterfall, in order to get through it in a small boat at low tide, as Pip does in *Great Expectations*.

In 1831 the new London Bridge was completed according to a more modern design and the demolition of the old one begun, with the starlings being finally cleared away by the end of 1832. With the obstruction removed, the river in London regained its full natural tidal range which, at a typical seven metres, is one of the biggest in the world. It was therefore returned to its primitive condition, with much greater areas of mud exposed on the foreshore at low tide and much faster currents as the tide came in and went out.<sup>7</sup> To anyone who had seen it both before and after, as Dickens did at around the age of 20, the contrast must have been very striking, and there must have been a strong sense that the river was now indeed an untamed force.

The second reason for the transformation was the problem of pollution, which beset London's river in Dickens's time like never before. Up until the early nineteenth century, most houses in London had individual cesspits which were emptied by the nightmen. According to Jonathan Schneer's account, at the turn of the nineteenth century London had 200,000 cesspits serving domestic properties alone.<sup>8</sup> During the first half of the century these were gradually replaced by water closets feeding into new public sewers which emptied directly into the Thames. This change was complete by 1848, when the Metropolitan and City Sewers Acts placed all citizens under a legal obligation to dispose of domestic waste in this way.<sup>9</sup> This led to the well-known Victorian problem of a river polluted by sewage in the heart of the capital, and to the famous 'Great Stink' of 1858.<sup>10</sup> The increased extent of the foreshore at the time can only have made matters worse by exposing so much more of what was euphemistically termed the 'mud'.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Schneer has suggested that the removal of old London Bridge itself also contributed to the problem by allowing increased amounts of sewage from the more polluted downstream reaches to be carried back upstream above bridge on the flood of the tide, back into the heart of the city.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 6: *Monster Soup* by William Heath, 1828.

This problem of pollution was a serious one throughout the middle half of the century. William Heath's 'Monster Soup' cartoon shockingly draws attention to the state of water extracted from the Thames for domestic supply as early as 1828.<sup>13</sup> London suffered its first Cholera outbreak, attributable to the sewage problem, in 1832: an event which was to be repeated in 1849, 1854 and 1865.<sup>14</sup> Public concern about the state of the river at this time is a matter of extensive record. Punch, for example, insistently draws attention to it in words and cartoons in 1842, 1848, twice in 1850, in 1855, twice in 1858 and three times in 1859. Dickens addresses the issue directly through the leading article of *Household Words* on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1851, in which he mocks the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers (est. 1847) which had effectively caused the pollution of the river by abolishing domestic cesspits. Speaking in the voice of the old year, 1850, he refers to them ironically as 'the Honourable Board of Commissioners of Sewers', and goes on to call them: 'the most feeble and incompetent Body that ever did outrage to the common sense of any community, or was ever beheld by any member of my family' (i.e. any year).<sup>15</sup> In the year of the 'Great Stink' itself, Dickens reports on it in a letter to William de Cerjat:

You will have read in the papers that the Thames at London is most horrible. I have to cross Waterloo or London Bridge to get to the Railroad when I come down there, and I can certify that the offensive smells, even in that short whiff, have been of a most head-and-stomach distracting nature. Nobody knows what is to be done; at least, everybody knows a plan, and everybody else knows it won't do; in the meantime cart-loads of chloride of Lime are shot into the filthy stream, and do something – I hope.<sup>16</sup>

This last detail is of course recalled in *Our Mutual Friend*, when Eugene and Mortimer pose as lime merchants for their expedition to the Six Jolly Fellowship Porters by the east end riverside. (*OMF* 165)

Both sets of conditions – that of the extended foreshore and that of pollution - were transformed again the end of Dickens's writing career, when the river was effectively re-tamed by very dramatic human intervention. The construction of the embankments, which began in 1862 under the auspices of Joseph Bazalgette and was completed in 1874, made the river much narrower, and reclaimed fully 52 acres of land from it.<sup>17</sup> The tide remained strong, but the Thames now flowed within limits which were very much defined by human agency and from the perspective of Londoners it had been brought back under control. At the same time the pollution was diverted into the big, transverse sewers which were contained within the embankments and carried sewage parallel to the river and effectively out to sea, by way of timed release at Barking and Crossness on a falling tide. In Dickens's time, then, the Thames in London did indeed become literally a more menacing force than it had been before or would be afterwards: because of the increased power of the tide, the desolation of the exposed foreshore, and the fact that it was a recognised health hazard.

While these geographical facts are clearly likely influences on the ways in which Dickens uses the river to connote menace in his fiction, there is also a more abstract sense in which the very fluidity of the river, and indeed the concept of fluidity itself, may have been perceived as particularly menacing to the Victorians. This idea is set out in Jules Law's book, *The Social Life of Fluids: blood, milk and water in the Victorian novel*, which traces a Victorian anxiety about fluidity to contemporary medical, social and sanitary practices. As this thesis is, to a significant degree, a response to Law's arguments, it may be worth rehearsing some of the central ones here.

### **The menace of fluidity**

With regard to blood, Law argues that the popularity of vampire stories in the middle of the Victorian period arises partly out of anxieties about the transfer of blood from one body to another, made possible by the invention of the blood transfusion: a procedure which, as Law points out, also forms an element in the plot of George Eliot's story, 'The Lifted Veil' (1859). In fact the first transfusion was carried out in 1818, but the procedure remained hazardous throughout the period, until the discovery of blood groups by Landsteiner in 1900.<sup>18</sup> It is also worth noting that in this period donated blood was not stored but transferred directly from the donor to the patient.<sup>19</sup> The procedure thus brought about an element of bodily fusion as the same blood flowed through both bodies at the same time, and something of individual bodily identity could be thought to have been lost: an idea which chimes well with Dickens's uses of fluidity to subvert individuality, to be explored below. Finally with regard to blood, Law points out that new vaccination procedures, particularly for smallpox, stimulated popular fears about what he calls 'blood pollution'.<sup>20</sup>

With regard to milk, Law describes Victorian controversies about wet-nursing practices and the idea that this form of fluid substitution also subverted individual identity, as well as the widely expressed fears that wet nurses might transmit drugs or alcohol to babies. Law's starting point is George Moore's sensational novel, *Esther Waters* (1894), which explores the moral dilemmas involved in wet-nursing,<sup>21</sup> but of course the practice is also important to *Dombey and Son* (which Law also discusses), where the issue of identity is clearly signalled by the fact that Paul's nurse Polly Toodles is actually required to change her name when she takes up the position.<sup>22</sup> It is also perfectly possible to imagine Mrs Gamp, the alcoholic nurse in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, as having been in her youth exactly the kind of wet nurse that Victorians were so concerned about.

In those parts of his study which are concerned with water, Law argues that the Victorian anxiety about fluidity was stimulated by changes to the circulation of water in London. This was

consequent partly on the construction of sewers described above, and partly on changes in the water supply from the use of individual pumps and wells for properties or groups of properties, to the use of piped water coming from distant sources, including the Thames, and supplied by the new water companies. These two changes shared a consequence of greater connectedness between households, simply by way of plumbing, and Law identifies this, too, with a threat to the autonomy and security of the individual, because water was being shared, on its way both in and out of households. Londoners had in effect lost control over their choice of water supply, and it is clear that they became concerned about the dangers of fumes flowing back into households from the sewers.

The best account of these concerns is not by Law but by Michelle Allen, who has written about what she calls a ‘rhetoric of resistance’ to sanitary reform in the middle part of the century. She describes a remarkable degree of nostalgia for the lost work of the nightmen who emptied the cesspits, and popular opposition to the sewers; not because of the short-term problems of pollution they caused to the Thames before the construction of the main drains in the embankments, but because of their very connectedness. She writes: ‘The inability of householders to prevent the noxious fumes of the sewer from entering their homes reinforced their powerlessness and passivity, while at the same time suggesting the difficulty of achieving healthy isolation from a physically and morally tainted underclass.’<sup>23</sup> It is worth noticing at this point that, as Catherine Waters has shown, Dickens himself believed firmly in the theory that infectious diseases were: ‘produced by dirty air or “miasma”, and that typhus and cholera ... could be prevented through control of the environment’.<sup>24</sup> It is therefore reasonable to suppose that he, too, shared these same concerns about fluid connectedness.

Returning to Jules Law’s account of this historical movement, the management of water and waste in London becomes intrinsically bound up with the autonomy of the individual, while Victorian plumbing and sanitary practices influence the way people think about themselves in relation to the environment, society and even the state. In his sections on water, this enables him to say that, increasingly in the first half of the century: ‘the river [was] symbiotically connected to the domestic lives – and bodies – of ordinary Londoners’, whereas later: ‘the embankment establish[ed] the social circulation of fluids as the domain of the state’. He continues:

The embankment represented a shift in state disciplinary focus away ... from bodies and homes as input-outflow mechanisms to the river as the principal mechanism of social circulation. One might say that by the 1860s, attention had shifted from the management of personal to the management of public fluids ... [and] ... the embankment testified to the convergence of two themes: the regulation of bodily fluids and the management of public space.<sup>25</sup>

This kind of analysis re-casts physical processes as sociological movements, from which Law interprets the function and imagery of all three of the fluids he considers in various novels by various writers to show, among other things, that the idea of fluidity-as-menace has the status of a literary trope. The force and significance of this trope to the Victorians in his account can perhaps be illustrated by a selection of general quotations from his study. He claims that there was such a thing as a 'Victorian obsession with fluids' because they were 'regarded as the most alienable aspect of an otherwise inalienable human body'. The Victorians, he says, had 'fantasies about controlling fluids', which were 'inextricably bound up with fantasies of their infinite fungibility' (that is, in effect, interchangeability). He says there was a 'social anxiety over the instability of fluids', wrapped up with concerns about the ways in which a fluid could be possessed, and aspirations towards the 'limited circulation' of fluids, which also reflected 'a fascination with the dissolution of the individual body in the social body'. Furthermore:

... fluids in the Victorian period were not simply a metaphoric or symbolic means of negotiating the relationship of the individual to an increasingly complex and rationalized public space, but a principal (and highly contested) medium through which social relations were actually negotiated.

...

Fluids were thus for the Victorians a key medium in the articulation of the individual and the social, both threatening the autonomy of the individual, and at the same time allowing for symbolic gestures of conservation.<sup>26</sup>

These are adventurous claims, but they do seem right for the ways in which Dickens uses the concept of fluidity, especially where the 'threat[...] [to the] autonomy of the individual' is concerned. Law's discussion of Dickens, so far as the parts of his book devoted to water are concerned, is confined largely to *Our Mutual Friend*; however, I want to suggest that the fluidity-as-menace trope informs a much larger scheme of imagery throughout Dickens's work, and that this trope is developed mainly by means of the river.

Dickens is certainly alive to the dangers of fluids being out of balance within the human body: Mr Dombey is repeatedly described as being internally 'frozen', while the spontaneous combustion of Mr Krook in *Bleak House* is said by the narrator to be: 'engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself'. (BH 460) This fluidity-as menace imagery is in turn reflected in the menacing representations of the Thames explored in Ch.s 5 and 6 below, as well as in the fact, also shown there, that there is a distinctively Victorian trope of drowning, and also in the quality of mutability expressed in the power of the river to bring about transformations explored in Ch.s 3 and 5. Law's thesis that the menace of fluidity is very often a threat to individual identity is also borne out by Dickens's writing, in a way which may be illustrated and even perhaps emblematised by one very striking image from *Our Mutual Friend*.

When Eugene is regaining consciousness towards the end of the novel, his facial expression is described as being: ‘so evanescent that it was like a shape made in water’, (*OMF* 767) and throughout this scene his slipping in and out of consciousness is described as if he is by turns sinking and rising to a surface. The fluidity of his face in this passage expresses the complex psychological transformation which he is undergoing, and the effective suspension of his moral identity, as further explored in Ch.4 below.

A similar effect is produced in *Hard Times*, at the death of Mrs Gradgrind: ‘Louisa saw her lying with an awful lull upon her face, like one who was floating away upon some great water, all resistance over, content to be carried down the stream.’ Louisa speaks to her a little more, ‘to keep her from floating away,’ but she does not last long. (*HT* 179-80) I want to suggest that changing or lost identity, instability, mutability and, above all, the menace of uncontrollability are widely expressed by Dickens in fluid terms, using images of rivers, and that this is an important part of the legacy of the Thames in his fiction.

One kind of uncontrollability is psychological. Dickens sometimes felt the power of his own imagination to be beyond his wilful control,<sup>27</sup> and he similarly depicts many characters as being subject to extreme, uncontrollable psychological states, often agitated or dangerous ones, which are expressed using fluid imagery. Thus in *Dombey and Son* Paul’s thoughts ‘came on ... like rolling waves’, while Mr Dombey and Edith are ‘more divided than if seas had rolled between them’. Mr Dombey himself has a ‘sea of pride’ and other qualities which ‘set ... like many streams united into one,’ and Florence’s love is depicted as a ‘strong tide’. (*DS* 201, 398 575, 755 & 667)

Some of these images can be quite violent, so that when Lord Verisopht prepares for the duel against Sir Mulberry Hawk in *Nicholas Nickleby*, he is thrown into a state of fear and confusion such that: ‘now there was nothing in his ears but a stunning and bewildering sound like rushing water.’ (*NN* 679) The same kind of energy can be found in an image from *Dr Marigold’s Prescriptions*, where the narrator of the third part has a vision of the murder scene, described as: ‘a flash – rush – flow ... in which I seemed to see that bedroom passing through my room, like a picture impossibly painted on a running river.’ (*CS* 498) This may be a daydream, but the first words make it seem more like a visitation, of quite an aggressive and irresistibly fluid kind.

In *Barnaby Rudge*, John Chester expresses his loss of control over events when he advises Mr Haredale: ‘we must accommodate ourselves to circumstances, sail with the stream as glibly as we

can, be content to take froth for substance, the surface for the depth ...” (NN 94) Similarly, in *The Battle of Life*, the theme of quite a hostile conversation at the welcoming party is described as a ‘current,’ and Snitchey and Craggs as being: ‘content to be carried gently along it, until its force abated.’ (CB 293) A similar image is to be found in *Little Dorrit*, when Arthur Clennam symbolically relinquishes his love for Minnie Meagles by casting the flowers he received from her into the Thames at Twickenham. The chapter ends with:

... he put his hand in his breast and tenderly took out he handful of roses. Perhaps he put them to his heart, perhaps he put them to his lips, but certainly he bent down on the shore, and gently launched them on the flowing river. Pale and unreal in the moonlight, the river floated them away.

...  
While the flowers, pale and unreal in the moonlight, floated away upon the river; and thus do greater things that once were in our breasts, and near our hearts, flow from us to the eternal seas. (LD 352)

This also seems like an echo of the power of the river Lethe to carry things away into forgetfulness.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the image of a channel of water is used to signify the murderously obsessive character of Bradley Headstone as it is perceived by John Rokesmith. After Headstone hints to him of his ‘very strong feelings’ about the Hexams, the narrator gives: ‘The Secretary thought, as he glanced at the schoolmaster’s face, that he had opened a channel here indeed, and that it was an unexpectedly dark and deep and stormy one, and difficult to sound.’ (OMF 404) This is a particularly powerful use of river imagery for psychological characterisation, adding to the idea of uncontrollable fluidity that of hidden depths, and its sinister tone is characteristic.

This is just a selection of examples of a very insistent scheme of psychological fluid imagery which appears throughout Dickens’s work, and their consistently menacing tone is underlined by the fact that on only two occasions, both of them in the Christmas stories, does he use a river or fluid image to describe positive states of mind. The first is in the denouement of *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*, as the real river down which the prisoners are escaping is conflated with a metaphorical river of their rescuers’ spirits, while the second is in an interpolated story in *Somebody’s Luggage*, where Mr The Englishman leaves behind the French town: ‘and passed out where the flowing waters were and where ... the unwholesomely locked currents of his soul were vanquished and set free’. Even here, it is noticeable that the currents of his soul had been ‘unwholesomely locked’.

Fluid imagery is sometimes used to depict the irresistible impulses not merely of individuals but of whole institutions within society. Dickens was of course highly critical of inefficient or insensitive bureaucracy, which he satirises most famously in the Circumlocution Office of *Little Dorrit*, and

elsewhere he uses fluid imagery to express the idea of institutions being out of control. Thus in *Hard Times*, the river is a metaphor for Mr Gradgrind's education policy in relation to the library: 'a point whereon little rivers of tabular statements periodically flowed into the howling ocean of tabular statements'. (*HT* 55) Similarly, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, it is used to represent the law: 'Mr Stryver shouldered his way through the law, like some great engine forcing itself through turbid water, and dragged his useful friend [Sydney Carton] in his wake, like a boat towed astern.' (*TTC* 199)

Arguably the most irresistible and destructive force in human experience is the passage of time itself, and Dickens routinely uses fluid imagery to express it through his work. A selection of examples will illustrate their character:

Time, so soon to lose itself in vast Eternity, rolled on like a mighty river, swollen and rapid as it nears the sea. (*BR* 594)

The long vacation saunters on towards term-time, like an idle river very leisurely strolling down a flat country to the sea. (*BH* 275)

... the blooming days were like enchantment. Ah! They were running away, faster than any sea or river, and there was no tide to bring them back. (*CS* 214)

I stand upon a seashore, where the waves are years. They break and fall, and I may little heed them ... (*RP* 10)

On the afternoon of a certain fine Sunday when the waves of four months had rolled over the trial for treason, and carried it, as to the public interest and memory, far out to sea ... (*TTC* 84)

... the swift river ran, the day ran into evening, so much life in the city ran into death according to rule, time and tide waited for no man ... (*TTC* 104)

Yet the current of the time swept by, so strong and deep, and carried the time away so fiercely, that Charles had lain in prison one year and three months ... (*TTC* 260)

In these examples images of the river are mixed with those of the sea, and both are used to modulate the pace of narration, increasing or decreasing the sense of urgency in the passage of time. There is, for example, a striking contrast between the second, languid example from *Bleak House* and the last, frantic one from *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the difference in pace is achieved through the image of the speed of the water. All, however, express the relentlessness of time and its power over characters, while in *Dombey and Son* a sea image adds a sense of foreboding to the passage of time leading up to fundamentally damaging events. Before Dombey and Edith's wedding there are 'countless ripples in the tide of time that regularly roll and break on the eternal shore ... recording how the sea flows on', (*DS* 447) while 'tides of human chance and change' pass the year before the collapse of the company. (*DS* 829)

Dickens also uses fluid imagery to signify the progress of life towards death, so that the rhythms of life and death are brought into figurative alignment with the rhythms of water. This is a fairly conventional image, to which Dickens adds a nuance which is particular to the Thames: that of the innocence of youth as represented by the cleaner upstream regions becoming corrupted by human society as represented by the pollution of London downstream. This depends on what Barbara Hardy has referred to as Dickens's belief in the 'original virtue' of childhood,<sup>28</sup> and produces some prelapsarian, Edenic images of upstream rivers and their landscape settings.

For example in *David Copperfield*, during the final stages of David's courtship of Dora, he opens the chapter of their marriage as follows:

Weeks, month, seasons, pass along. They seem little more than a summer day and a winter evening. Now, the Common where I walk with Dora is all in bloom, a field of bright gold; and now the unseen heather lies in mounds and bunches underneath a covering of snow. In a breath, the river that flows through our Sunday walks is sparkling in the summer sun, is ruffled by the winter wind, or thickened with drifting heaps of ice. Faster than ever river ran towards the sea, it flashes, darkens, and rolls away. (*DC* 627)

The vague, dreamy tone of this passage is appropriate to David's state of being rather heedlessly in love, which he also perceives as a state of innocence and grace, so the idealised, Edenic image of the landscape he evokes is appropriate. The first river reference expresses the speed with which time seems to pass to David's abstracted perception, while the second presents to his imagination the prospect of their future life together. However, as it 'r[uns] towards the sea,' and most particularly in the use of the word 'darkens,' it also foreshadows Dora's early death, which occurs just 10 chapters later.

A similar effect is produced in the passage from *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* already referred to in Ch.1 above, where Lt. Tartar, his man Lobleby, Mr Grewgious and Rosa Bud are out on the Thames for a pleasure trip in Tartar's boat:

... all too soon, the great black city cast its shadow on the waters, and its dark bridges spanned them as death spans life, and the everlastingly green garden seemed to be left for everlasting, unregainable and far away. (*ED* 258)

Here again is the loss of innocence as the river enters London, and also the idea of death as destiny, literally hanging over it. There is also something Biblical in the pluralisation of 'waters,' and in the Edenic idea that the upstream countryside is a 'garden' which has become 'unregainable'. The progress of the river of life therefore takes on some qualities of the Fall in this passage.

Back in *David Copperfield* is perhaps Dickens's most striking river scene of all: that of Martha by the Thames, which is fully treated in Ch.6 below but also warrants consideration here for the way in which Martha herself metaphorically aligns the progress of the river with that of her life:

'Oh, the river! ... I know it's like me! ... It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it – and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable – and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled – and I feel that I must go with it!' (*DC* 682)

Here she makes the metaphorical use explicit, and furthermore personifies the river by attributing to it the properties of being 'miserable' and 'troubled'. She also uses the pollution of the downstream reaches of the river in London to signify the corruption of 'original virtue', as represented by the 'country places'. When she was first anonymously introduced industriously at work in the back-parlour of Mr Omer's shop, Martha was a picture of Protestant virtue and, as Minnie said, "'We are all pretty gay here, thank Heaven!'" (*DC* 126) Now, at the end of the novel, she has fallen from grace into prostitution in London, and her fluid discourse of the river, 'creep[ing] through the dismal streets, defiled as miserable' describes very well her own destitute and elusive figure as it is shadowed by David and Mr Peggotty. As Michelle Allen has noted in relation to *Our Mutual Friend*:

... just as the Thames runs from an up-country source through London and down to the sea, receiving the pollutants of the filthy capital on its way, so too is the innocence of youth jeopardised and sullied with the passage to adulthood.<sup>29</sup>

Dickens also uses the river to signify life as destiny, and the best example of this is to be found in the escape scene on the Thames in *Great Expectations*, already quoted for a different purpose in Ch.2 above. As the three men make their way downstream, Magwitch trails his hand in the water and says:

'I was a thinking through my smoke just then, that we can no more see to the bottom of the next few hours, than we can see to the bottom of this river what I catches hold of. Nor yet we can't no more hold their tide than I can hold this. And it's run through my fingers and gone, you see!' holding up his dripping hand. (*GE* 448)

This is a particularly effective image of destiny, conveying its mystery through the hidden depths of the river, its inexorability through the unstoppable force of nature in the river's flow, and the impossibility of mentally grasping it, as Magwitch is unable physically to grasp the water. The same image is picked up again a little later by Pip, after their capture when they are being taken back upstream in the police galley. He reflects: 'As we returned towards the setting sun we had yesterday left behind us ... the stream of our hopes seemed all running back', (*GE* 457) here signifying the reversal of their fortunes in a metaphorical reversal of the flow of the river.

Some of these fluid images are conventional, though Dickens's work is striking for the sheer quantity of them. There is, however, a much more distinctively Dickensian function of fluid and particularly river imagery, and this concerns the movement of large crowds of people through the streets of cities. The bustle and energy of London is a constant theme for Dickens, as are the ways in which it threatens characters such as Florence Dombey and excites those such as Barnaby Rudge,<sup>30</sup> and the use of water imagery to describe it is also present throughout his work. Thus when the mob pursues Bill Sikes to Jacob's Island in *Oliver Twist*, it is described as 'the current' and as 'the stream', which 'poured' back and forth across the bridges. (*OT* 392) When Nicholas Nickleby arrives in London, the narrator focalises a description through the excited perspective of Nicholas himself, who sees it all in liquid terms:

Streams of people apparently without end poured on and on, jostling each other in the crowd and hurrying forward, scarcely seeming to notice the riches that surrounded them on every side; while vehicles of all shapes and makes, mingled up together in one moving mass like running water, lent their ceaseless roar to swell the noise and tumult. (*NN* 415)

The same metaphor is picked up a little later when Nicholas, disorientated after being hurt in the scuffle with Sir Mulberry Hawk: 'was conscious of a torrent of people rushing quickly by'. (*NN* 425)

In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when Nell and her grandfather arrive in the industrial town generally associated with Birmingham, the 'crowded street' is described as being 'in the high tide of its occupation', and the travellers compared with: 'shipwrecked mariner[s], who [are] tossed to and fro upon the billows of a mighty ocean.' (*OCS* 323) The same metaphor of a 'human tide' is used for the crowd which intimidates Martin Chuzzlewit when he comes back from the pawnbroker's shop and which is 'stemmed' by him. (*MC* 234) It appears again in a very energetic image in a piece for *Household Words* entitled 'Out of Town,' where Dickens describes the people disembarking from a boat train: 'Now, there is not only a tide of water, but a tide of people, and a tide of luggage – all tumbling and flowing and bouncing about together.' (*RP* 80) The Uncommercial Traveller uses it, too, to describe the crowd coming out of a theatre: 'I came out in a strong, slow tide of them setting from the boxes.' (*UT* 36)

In *Bleak House*, the Thames itself and the metaphorical river of people are placed in close juxtaposition in an image of unstoppable energy. When Jo is moved on to Blackfriars Bridge, he sits down by: 'the river running fast, the crowd flowing by him in two streams – everything moving on to some purpose and to one end.' (*BH* 274) These are purposes and ends which Jo does not know and cannot control, so once again the river image represents an overwhelming force. A similar effect is created in the London of *Dombey and Son*, where there is a 'human tide', (*DS* 36)

and a 'stream of life ... like the broad river side by side with it', (*DS* 682) while in Paris: 'the turbid river held its swift course undisturbed, between two brawling streams of life and motion'. (*DS* 791) In *Hard Times*, the men of the trade union whipped up by Slackbridge are described as a 'thundering sea,' and again as 'something that occasionally rose like a sea, and did some harm and waste (chiefly to itself), and fell again'. (*HT* 126 & 142) Here the grammatical singularity of 'something' pointedly changes the men from a collection of individuals into a single, unified force. Meanwhile the inmates of the Marshalsea prison are perceived by Amy Dorrit as: 'the turbid living river that flowed through it and flowed on', (*LD* 80) expressing the inevitability of crime, debt and incarceration, together with Amy's powerlessness against them.

One of the most important reasons why river and water imagery works so well to express the menace of a crowd scene is because it converts the participants in the crowd from countable to uncountable nouns: from numbers of people into quantities of people. Uncountable nouns cannot form plurals and are therefore immeasurable, so the conversion makes the crowd seem less knowable and less controllable. It also erases distinctions between individuals, presenting them instead as a single, amorphous mass, amplifying humanity into something more menacing. The crowd therefore seems more overwhelming and dangerous than it would if expressed as a collection of individuals, and the use of water imagery to achieve this effect is surely a further expression of the fluidity-as-menace trope described by Jules Law. Dickens exploits the effect most powerfully of all in his two historical novels of civil disturbance, in which the crowds are explicitly hostile and to which I now turn.

### **Civil unrest**

*Barnaby Rudge* is all about the mindless, unpredictable power of the mob, and its central conceit turns on the fact that Barnaby, despite his mental impairment, can still become a leader of it. The Gordon Riots themselves form the main action of the second half of the novel, where many scenes involve the movement of large groups of people through the streets. These movements are very often likened to the movement of a river, or body of water, or sometimes the sea, in ways which much enhance their menace. As the riots begin the narrator reflects:

A mob is usually a creature of very mysterious existence, particularly in a large city. Where it comes from or whither it goes, few men can tell. Assembling and dispersing with equal suddenness, it is as difficult to follow it to its various sources as the sea itself; nor does the parallel stop here, for the ocean is not more fickle and uncertain, more terrible when roused, more unreasonable, or more cruel. (*BR* 401)

Here the water imagery is used primarily to convey the impossibility of controlling the mob. Similarly stressing the lack of organisation in the crowds after the first demonstration at Westminster a little later, the narrator gives: 'Each party swelled as it went along, like rivers as they roll towards the sea,' and the crowds are described shortly afterwards as: 'a moral plague [which] ran through the city.' (*BR* 408) Here the notion of 'plague' also links the river to physical and moral corruption, in a reminder of the poisonous character of the Thames itself.

When the mob breaks into Mr Haredale's house at Chigwell in order to burn it down, the narrator gives: 'the crowd poured in like water,' and follows this up by likening them to 'an army of devils'. (*BR* 428) When, in a subsequent scene, they set out to break into Newgate prison, the episode opens with: 'a vast mob poured into Lincoln's Inn Fields', (*BR* 486) and there follow scenes of great violence as the prison gates are finally breached, and the prisoners released. Among them are the condemned men, who: 'heaved and gasped for breath, as though in water, when they were first plunged into the crowd', and this also reiterates the image of drowning explored in Ch.5 below. Then, as the violence subsides and the episode draws to a close: 'the human tide had rolled away.' (*BR* 511) On the next and final night of the riots, the mob once again 'rose like a great sea' and then 'poured out of the City in two great streams.' (*BR* 522-3) A consistent strain of water, river and sea imagery is therefore sustained throughout the riot scenes in the second half, changing the meanings of both rioters and water, as the people become fluid and the water becomes hostile.

In several of these scenes, the liquid imagery is blended with images of fire to express extremes of violence and debauchery, so that, for example, the villainous secretary Gashford is also twice described as 'the man that has blown the fire' when he incites the riot. At the sacking of Mr Haredale's house:

The more the fire crackled and raged, the wilder and more cruel the men grew; as though moving in that element they became fiends, and changed their earthly nature for the qualities that give delight in hell.

...

There were men who rushed up to the fire, and paddled in it with their hands as if in water; and others who were restrained by force from plunging in, to gratify their deadly longing. On the skull of one drunken lad – not yet twenty, by his looks – who lay upon the ground with a bottle to his mouth, the lead from the roof came streaming down in a shower of liquid fire, white hot; melting his head like wax. (*BR* 429-30)

Here, the element of fire is once again used to link the rioters with fiends or devils, in a standard image of Hell and also as in the passage from *BR* 428 quoted above. The fire is also described as if it, too, is a liquid element, through terms such as 'paddled', 'plunging' and 'shower', and this makes it seem even more unstable and out of control than it already is.

At the scene of the final night's riot, the narrator says it seems to be 'the intention of the insurgents to wrap the City in a circle of flames,' and goes on to report that within two hours: 'six-and-thirty fires were raging – six and thirty great conflagrations.' (*BR* 522-3) As the episode develops and the crowd attacks and plunders the vintner's house, the elements of fire and water are again mixed, through the agency of the fiery spirits which enrage the people. As 'the crowd ... was pouring from the street into the vintner's cellars', the ringleader Hugh: 'fell down upon the ground like a log', and: 'crawled to a stream of burning spirits which was pouring down the kennel, and began to drink it as if it were a brook of water.' (*BR* 532) The reader already knows of Hugh's propensity; much earlier (and appropriately enough for present purposes), John Willet told Mr Haredale that: 'He'd drink the Thames up, if it was strong enough, Sir.' (*BR* 265)

Now, in the long description which continues the scene at the vintner's house, Dickens presents a nightmare image of liquid fire and death which bears being quoted at length:

The gutters of the street and every crack and fissure in the stones, ran with scorching spirit, which being dammed up by busy hands, overflowed the road and pavement, and formed a great pool, in which the people dropped down dead by dozens. They lay in heaps all round this fearful pond, husbands and wives, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, women with children in their arms and babies at their breasts, and drank until they died.

...

From the burning cellars, where they drank out of hats, pails, buckets, tubs, and shoes, some men were drawn, alive, but all alight from head to foot; who, in their unendurable anguish and suffering, making for anything that had the look of water, rolled, hissing, in this hideous lake, and splashed up liquid fire which lapped in all it met with as it ran along the surface, and spared neither the living nor the dead. (*BR* 533)

Here the liquid and fiery elements are blended both in the imagery and the literal description, and in this may perhaps be detected an echo of the death of Daniel Quilp in the immediately preceding novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, who drowns in the Thames in front of the scene of the burning wharf.

The 'circle of flames' in which the insurgents might want to 'wrap the City' as quoted above may also be likened to the classical idea of the river Phlegethon, one of the five rivers of the Greek underworld. This was described by Plato as 'a stream of fire, which coils round the earth and flows into the depths of Tartarus', and into this river were said to be thrown the souls of people who had committed acts of violence against their own kin, until they could obtain forgiveness. Similarly, for Dante it was a river of boiling blood into which sinners who had themselves shed blood were plunged for ever,<sup>31</sup> and both allusions are appropriate enough for a population of London which was turning on itself. The use of fire imagery in conjunction with those of water and the river in this novel also helps to reinforce the point that Dickens represents water as an element along classical lines, as suggested in the introduction above.

The trope in which crowds are represented as being fluid, like rivers or seas, is used even more insistently and systematically to depict the insurgency of the French Revolution in *A Tale of Two Cities*. One of the things that makes the metaphor so pervasive in this novel is the fact that Dickens uses it not only for the French scenes, but also for those in London, even when the crowds are not particularly menacing. In this way the theme of insurrection is sustained throughout the novel, and the English scenes are made to echo the French ones. Thus at Charles Darnay's first trial in London: 'All the human breath in the place, rolled at him, like a sea, or a wind, or a fire', (*TTC* 56) in an image which also reiterates the idea of water as one of the four classical elements. Then, when Jerry comes back at the end of the trial: 'a rapid tide of people setting up the stairs that led to the court, carried him along with them,' before 'the crowd came pouring out'. (*TTC* 72) Meanwhile, outside Tellson's Bank, Fleet Street is clearly depicted as a river, as Jerry sits, 'watching the two streams [of traffic] ... from Tellson's side of the tides to the opposite shore.' (*TTC* 144)

When the action first moves to France, the liquid metaphor is set up through an elaborately emblematic scene in which a cask is dropped and broken outside Defarge's wine shop, flooding the street with red wine. Thus the idea of liquid traffic in the streets is established at the outset, with its alcoholic nature additionally suggesting the potential for derangement, and indeed people do start frantically drinking it, in scenes which echo those from *Barnaby Rudge* cited above. They dam it into pools, scoop it up in containers and in their hands, soak it up in handkerchiefs, gnaw pieces of the cask and drink it mixed with the mud of the street, in a scene of hysterical celebration. (See *TTC* 25.)

Finally, one of them writes on a wall, in a finger dipped in the muddy wine-lees, the word, 'BLOOD', giving the narrator the opportunity to make this metaphor for the future riots heavily-handedly explicit: 'The time was to come, when that wine too would be spilled on the street-stones, and when the stain of it would be red upon many there.' (*TTC* 26) The wine in the street is therefore a liquid metaphor for the crowds of rioters in the streets later in the novel, and at the same time represents a river of blood, like Dante's Phlegethon. The wine cask episode will be referenced later, too, further reinforcing the link. When darkness closes this scene, the water metaphor for coming danger still persists in the street lamps, which: 'swung in a sickly manner overhead, as if they were at sea. Indeed they were at sea, and the ship and crew were in peril of tempest.' (*TTC* 28)

Having set it up so carefully, Dickens then goes on to deploy this water imagery in the revolutionary insurrection itself, in much the same way that he does in *Barnaby Rudge*, though more powerfully. There is an early hint of it in the road mender's description of the murderer of the Marquis St Evremonde who, after smuggling himself into the village before the crime:

“precipitated himself over the hill-side, head first, as a person plunges into the river.” (*TTC* 107)

When the action moves forward to the main phase of the revolution in 1789, the narrator says that events: ‘began to have an awful sound, as of a great storm in France with a dreadful sea rising’.

(*TTC* 200) The insurgents gathering a Defarge's wine shop are then described as ‘human drop[s]’ in ‘a whirlpool of boiling waters’, (*TTC* 202) in a prelude to the Bastille scene which is one of Dickens's most powerful pieces of writing:

‘... The Bastille!’

With a roar that sounded as if all the breath in France had been shaped into the detested word, the living sea rose, wave on wave, depth on depth, and overflowed the city to that point. Alarm-bells ringing, drums beating, the sea raging and thundering on its new beach, the attack begun.

Deep ditches, double drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke. Through the fire and through the smoke – in the fire and in the smoke, for the sea cast him up against a cannon, and on the instant he became a cannonier – Defarge of the wine-shop worked like a manful soldier, Two fierce hours ... (*TTC* 203)

This image of the crowd being a ‘living sea’ is referenced a further 22 times in the remainder of this scene, through terms such as ‘living ocean,’ ‘raging storm,’ ‘waters,’ ‘wave,’ ‘billows,’ ‘inundation’ and ‘spray,’ while the next chapter is entitled ‘The Sea Still Rises’. It is also at the ending of the Bastille chapter that the narrator refers back to the wine cask episode, with a finishing description of the rioters: ‘For, they are headlong, mad, and dangerous; and in the years so long after the breaking of the cask at Defarge's wine-shop door, they are not easily purified when once stained red.’ (*TTC* 208)

After these climactic scenes, Dickens sustains the same chain of imagery through the remainder of the novel, going on to describe three more years of ‘such risings of fire and risings of sea’, (*TTC* 221) once again referencing the classically elemental quality of the water image. After Darnay's first trial in Paris, the crowd which greets his release is compared, violently, with the Seine itself: ‘the very tide of the river on the bank of which the mad scene was acted, seemed to run mad, like the people on the shore.’ (*TTC* 272) The Seine is also used to prefigure the death of Sydney Carton, as explored in Ch.5 below, and finally at his execution the crowd is described as: ‘swell[ing] forward in a mass, like one great heave of water’. (*TTC* 357)

The use of water imagery to represent rioting crowds is not absolutely unique to Dickens, but it is very much more pronounced in his work than in that of other writers. A comprehensive survey is

impractical, but brief comparison may be made to two of the best known novels by other writers which deal with crowd violence. Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian* (1818) depicts the Porteous riots in Edinburgh of 1736 and, in Ch.4, when the audience assembles for John Porteous's intended execution, the narrator does three times briefly represent the crowd as being like a lake or the sea.<sup>32</sup> However, there is no such imagery attending the principal riot of Ch.s 6 and 7, when they storm the prison and actually assassinate him. Most of the time Scott writes about the people simply as people, and notably as individuals, collected together in grammatically plural expressions, which is a very different strategy from those employed by Dickens and described above.

Perhaps the most famous novel of crowd violence of all is Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831). The river is famously important to Hugo's plot: not only is the novel's focal point, the cathedral, located on the fairly small Isle de France in the middle of the Seine, but its whole action turns on the movement of individuals and ultimately large crowds of people between three distinct territories – the University on the left bank, the City on the island and the Town on the right bank – chiefly but not exclusively by means of the five bridges which connected them in 1482. One of its most dramatic moments is when Claude Frolo escapes from a house on one of these bridges by leaping from a window into the river itself, while his final escape from the riot at the cathedral with Pierre and Esmeralda is by boat, and the bodies of all the casualties are finally dumped in the Seine.

It might therefore be expected that descriptions of the Seine, and river imagery generally, would play a prominent part in this novel, but in fact the river goes largely un-noticed. The bridges, which are being crossed all the time, are generally named and described as if they are normal streets, without reference to what is beneath them. There is a thin scattering of borderline liquid images, so that streets are sometimes said to 'flow' into one another, people occasionally 'pour' down them and Pierre once 'plunged' down a street,<sup>33</sup> but that is all, and it does not amount to much in a novel spanning 11 books. Dickens, on the other hand, has fewer crowd scenes in each of the two historical novels, but his use of river imagery to describe them is very much more pronounced.

The mobs of *Barnaby Rudge* and *A Tale of Two Cities* are arguably the most rebellious forces depicted anywhere in Dickens's work, and his consistent use of fluid and river images to characterise them effectively transfers the same qualities of rebellion to the idea of the river in general and, by way of associations within Dickens's own experience, the Thames in particular. As I have shown above, these representations of the mob take their place alongside a whole series of river mages throughout his fiction which are used to depict forces which are volatile, unstable, mutable and uncontrollable, and these examples provide additional evidence in support of Jules

Law's description of the fluidity-as-menace trope in other Victorian literature. The next chapter now turns to Dickens's use of the river to depict a more specific kind of menace: that of death itself.

## Notes to Ch.4

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<sup>1</sup> As cited, for example, in the introduction above.

<sup>2</sup> Schwarzbach (1979) p.90.

<sup>3</sup> Lines 16 & 91-92 in Ricks, ed. (1999) pp.278-80.

<sup>4</sup> Robson (2006) p.236.

<sup>5</sup> Kadragic (1974) p.7235-A.

<sup>6</sup> As explored in the introduction above.

<sup>7</sup> For an account of this effect see, for example, Schneer (2005) pp.71-72.

<sup>8</sup> See Schneer (2005) p.145.

<sup>9</sup> See Allen (2002) pp.30-36 and Sanders (2010) pp.50-51 for accounts of this.

<sup>10</sup> Of the many accounts of this, see for example Ackroyd (2001), pp.343-345.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *The Times* of 17 June 1858, referenced in note to *Letters*, vol. 8, p.598.

<sup>12</sup> See Schneer (2005) p.146.

<sup>13</sup> Image and information from the River and Rowing Museum (2011).

<sup>14</sup> See Ackroyd (2008) p.274.

<sup>15</sup> Slater, ed (1993) vol. 2, p.311.

<sup>16</sup> *Letters*, vol. 8, p.598

<sup>17</sup> Jules Law's estimate. See Law (2010) p.49.

<sup>18</sup> See Horsley, ed. (1981) pp.168 & 169.

<sup>19</sup> See Horsley, ed. (1981) pp.168-9.

<sup>20</sup> See Law (2010) pp.87, 148 & 156.

<sup>21</sup> See Law (2010) pp.1, 148 and all of Ch.1.

<sup>22</sup> See *DS* 17.

<sup>23</sup> See Allen (2002) pp.382, 397 etc.

<sup>24</sup> Waters (2006) p.163.

<sup>25</sup> Law (2010) pp.47 & 52.

<sup>26</sup> See Law (2010) pp. xi, 2-4, 12, 18 & 19.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, his descriptions of the American landscape, such as in *AN* 194-195, cited above.

<sup>28</sup> See Slater, ed. (1970), pp.30 & 38.

<sup>29</sup> Allen (2008) p.112.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, *DS* 76-7 and *BR* 369 etc.

<sup>31</sup> See Radice (1973) p.194, and also Wikipedia entry.

<sup>32</sup> See Scott (1818) pp.40 & 42.

<sup>33</sup> See Hugo (1978) pp.78, 135 & 137.

## 5. The river as agent of death and rebirth

Rivers have long occupied a significant place in the iconography of both death and rebirth in many cultures. In western culture the most obvious example of this is the role of the river Styx of classical Greek mythology, which the dead have to cross in the care of the ferryman Charon in order to gain entrance to the underworld. Its role goes hand in hand with that of the river Lethe, also among the five rivers of the Greek underworld, which is literally the river of forgetfulness. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil connects this river with his ideas about reincarnation: the souls of the dead gather on its shores and drink its waters in order to forget their previous identities so that they can be born again with new ones.<sup>1</sup>

Other examples of this iconography include the role of the Egyptian Nile gods, and especially Osiris, who is a merciful judge of the dead in the afterlife, but is also closely associated with the annual cycles of nature, and particularly the renewal of vegetation brought about by the annual flooding of the river Nile.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile in the funeral ceremonies of Hindu culture, drops of holy Ganges water are often put into the mouths of the deceased to enable to their souls to attain liberation, and the Shmashana, or cremation ground, is traditionally located near or on the banks of a river.<sup>3</sup>

Dickens makes use of the image of the river Styx, superimposed on the Thames to signify a version of the underworld, and this chapter will show that he furthermore references Lethe, also superimposed on the Thames, as an agent of reincarnation. However, the chapter will argue that, despite the familiarity of these classical allusions, Dickens uses the river to signify death and rebirth in a fundamentally Christian way, founded primarily on the image of baptism. This idea owes much to the New Testament accounts of John the Baptist, who baptises Jesus and others in the river Jordan, according to Matthew and Mark, while the rather more vague accounts in Luke and John remain perfectly compatible with this literal interpretation.<sup>4</sup> Immersion in the river gives Jesus direct, immediate access to the Holy Spirit, and thus a new identity, as in Matthew's account:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptised by him. (3.13)

...

Then Jesus, when he had been baptised, came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon him. (3.16)<sup>5</sup>

The account in Mark is almost identical. There is also of course a straightforward association of baptism with naming, and the creation of a new identity in this way is perfectly compatible with the death of an old one.

The most prominent refiguring of the baptismal Jordan in English Protestant Christian culture is the river which features at the end of both parts of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678 and 1684), which Christian and Christiana have to cross, in the process symbolically dying, in order to gain entrance to the 'Celestial City', or Heaven. Here they are reborn, also appropriately following their immersion, which now becomes a type of baptism, as angels. *The Pilgrim's Progress* was highly accessible to Dickens's audience, as has been shown in Ch.3 above, so this image would have been a very familiar one. The progress of a river is also, of course, a standard metaphor for the progress of life, with its dissolution in the sea being symbolic of death, as has also already been shown.

The extent to which Dickens's association between rivers and death has a Biblical foundation may be demonstrated by a strangely evocative passage in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. At the unnamed town of Jarley's waxworks, Nell takes to following the Edwards sisters in their walks 'by the river's side' (OCS 238). This is not the Thames, because we know from other indications that their journey has been northward, but a generic, idealised river, and Nell is inspired by it. On one of these excursions, after the sisters have departed, Nell remains in the scene, first contemplating the stars and then:

She bent over the calm river, and saw them shining in the same majestic order as when the dove beheld them gleaming through the swollen waters, upon the mountain tops down far below, and dead mankind, a million fathoms deep. (OCS 308)

In this curious, spiritual image, the river seems to give Nell access to a vision of Noah's flood. The dove, the submerged mountains and the unconventional pluralisation of 'waters' are all present in the Biblical account in Genesis 7 and 8, while 'dead mankind' is easily read as the race of mankind which incurred God's displeasure, inspiring the flood, and which will be in a sense reborn through the line of Noah. While looking back to the Bible, the passage also seems to look forward, through the perspective of Nell, to a concept of death which belongs at the bottom of an impossibly deep river. This seems consistent with her character, as Nell is also specifically identified as a reader of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the denouement of the novel is of course her own death. While this is clearly a literal river that she is standing by, it also acquires connotations of the sea, expressed through the use of the term 'fathoms', and this is an instance of the occasional conflation of concepts noticed in the introduction above. Indeed the passage was inspired by Dickens's walking by night on the cliffs at Broadstairs.

The passage from *The Old Curiosity Shop* clearly operated strongly on Dickens's imagination, as he wrote to Forster about it:

I really think the dead mankind a million fathoms deep, the best thing in the sentence. I have a notion of the dreadful silence down there, and of the stars shining down upon their drowned eyes – the fruit, let me tell you, of a solitary walk by starlight on the cliffs.<sup>6</sup>

Here the addition in the letter of ‘drowned eyes’ to the image in the novel combines with the reference to ‘fathoms’ to create an echo of Ariel’s famous song in *The Tempest* about the supposed death of Alonso: ‘Full fathom five thy father lies. / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes.’<sup>7</sup> Whether conscious or not, this allusion is further evidence for the strength of the imaginative link for Dickens between death and the river or sea.

While such Biblical references may be quite abstract, Londoners before Dickens’s time sometimes saw their own river, the Thames, as a harbinger of doom in quite a concrete way. The river could do three unusual things which could be thought to be meaningful: it could freeze, or flood, or produce a misdirected whale or other great fish, easily mythologised into a sea monster. Joseph Ward has shown how providentialist responses to such events in the seventeenth century saw them as signs or warnings from God, foreshadowing disaster or death. He quotes a pamphlet published in 1680 about the appearance of three whales in the Thames that summer, which exemplifies the popular reaction:

... many among the common sort of people [believe that] such accidents never happen but they are presently followed by the Death or Fall of some great person or other: as there happened a like accident with this of the coming up of a great Whale into the Thames not long before the death of that much greater Monster, the Usurper Cromwell.<sup>8</sup>

If Dickens knew about such responses, they would only have helped to direct his attention specifically to the Thames as a mystical agent of death.

In the first place, Dickens does seem to have been morbidly preoccupied with death, even by Victorian standards. He attended at least one séance, practised table-spinning, was devoted to accounts of murders and was fascinated by ghosts, as the Christmas stories and books attest. In Peter Ackroyd’s estimation: ‘Dickens had an obsession [with death] which went beyond the conventional morbidity of his time.’<sup>9</sup> At the same time there is good evidence that the river held a fatal fascination for Dickens, that he was drawn to it by ‘the attraction of repulsion,’<sup>10</sup> and that it also inspired in him a sense of doom and even fear. This sense may have its origin partly in his childhood experience at Warren’s which, as I have argued above in the introduction, he associates closely with the river, and this effect on him is supported by the arguments of F.S. Schwarzbach cited there. However, regardless of where it begins, a profound sense of it persists throughout his work.

For example in an 1851 article for *Household Words*, he compares his own unbidden response to the Thames by Ratcliffe Highway to that of the unflappable police inspector Charley Field:

*He does not trouble his head as I do, about the river at night. He does not care for its creeping, black and silent, on our right there, rushing through sluice gates, lapping at piles and posts and iron rings, hiding strange things in its mud, running away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than midnight funeral should, and acquiring such various experience between its cradle and its grave. It has no mystery for him.* (RP 149, CD's italics)

Here the dead bodies are suggested to Dickens's imagination by the simple presence of the river, which he furthermore identifies with a funeral procession. He also knew that this was the scene of the notorious Ratcliffe Highway murders in 1811 – a subject which appealed to him so strongly that he was still recommending it to the *All the Year Round* contributor Walter Thornbury many years later. At Gad's Hill he even kept a picture of the executed body of the murderer, which he emotively described as: 'the horrible creature as his dead body lay on a cart, with a piece of wood for a pillow, and a stake lying by, ready to be driven through him,'<sup>11</sup> and he returns again to this Ratcliffe scene in a description near the beginning of *Our Mutual Friend* quoted in Ch.6 below. Perhaps most telling about the passage quoted above is the fact that Dickens admits to 'troubl[ing] his head' about the river - in other words, that it preys upon his mind. In another *Household Words* piece, from 1853, he writes that the Thames: 'looks ... so murky and silent, seems such an image of death in the midst of the great city's life,' (RP 153) and this further cements the metaphorical connection.

In *All the Year Round* in 1860, he writes an essentially autobiographical *Uncommercial Traveller* piece which conflates the morgue at Paris with the river Seine, and here the attraction of repulsion is strong. 'Whenever I am in Paris,' writes the traveller, 'I am dragged by invisible force into the Morgue. I never want to go there, but am always pulled there.' In the morgue he inspects the body of 'a large dark man whose disfigurement by water was in a frightful manner, comic.' Direct from the morgue, he proceeds to the Seine: 'and resolved to freshen himself with a dip in the great floating bath on the river.' The Traveller then goes on to relate the experience of swimming in this pool which is actually in the river:

I ... was in the full enjoyment of a delightful bath, when all in a moment I was seized with an unreasonable idea that the large dark body was floating straight at me.

I was out of the river, and dressing instantly. In the shock I had taken some water into my mouth, and it turned me sick, for I fancied that the contamination of the creature was in it. I had got back to my cool darkened room in the hotel, and was lying on a sofa there, before I began to reason with myself.

Of course, I knew perfectly well that the large dark creature was stone dead, and that I should no more come upon him out of the place where I had seen him dead, than I should come upon the cathedral of Notre-Dame in an entirely new situation. What troubled me was the picture of the creature; and that had so curiously and strongly painted itself upon my brain, that I could not get rid of it until it was worn out. (UT 62-63)

It is very clearly the experience of being in the river which recalls the dead body to his imagination, and he returns again to the Paris morgue in his article, 'Railway Dreaming'.<sup>12</sup> Both here on the Seine in Paris and on the Thames at Ratcliffe, then, the power of association between the rivers and death seems very strong indeed.

The Paris episode also of course specifically references drowning – and this is a theme to which Dickens returns again and again in his work, displaying nothing short of an obsessive preoccupation with it. The importance of this theme in Dickens is such that it may be well to take a survey of the drowning references in his work, both to establish their cumulative effect and to consider some of their characteristics.

### **Drowning**

Of course there are the high profile drownings of characters which form well known plot movements in the novels: that of Daniel Quilp in the Thames in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, those of Ham and Steerforth in the sea off Yarmouth in *David Copperfield*, that of Compeyson in the Thames in *Great Expectations* and those of Gaffer Hexam, Rogue Riderhood and Bradley Headstone, all of them also in the Thames, in *Our Mutual Friend*. To these may be added six further minor characters from the fiction: Watkins Tottle and Mr Warden in *Sketches by Boz*, who drown themselves respectively in the Regent's Canal and the Thames (*SB* 455 & 482-3); the son of the villain in the old man's interpolated tale in *Pickwick Papers*, on whom Heyling takes his revenge (*PP* 296-7);<sup>13</sup> the Cheap Jack's wife in the Christmas story, *Dr Marigold's Prescriptions*, who runs away and 'was found in the river'; (*CS* 481) the young housekeeper in the first of the *Christmas Memories*, who is betrayed by the 'cavalier in green,' and 'drowned herself in a pond.' (*CS* 584) and the mother of Rosa Bud in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, who was accidentally drowned 'at a party of pleasure'. (*ED* 105) Finally, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, one of the consequences of the insurrections of the French revolution is that: 'the rivers of the south were encumbered with the bodies of the violently drowned by night'. (*TTC* 260)

The preoccupation continues through Dickens's journalism. In 'Wapping Workhouse,' the Uncommercial Traveller finds himself 'on a swing-bridge looking down at some dark locks in some dirty water' which, being on his way to Wapping, must be part of the system which connects the Regent's Canal to the Thames and river Lee by way of Limehouse Cut and the Hertford Union Canal. He encounters a man, who he says looks like a 'drowned man' and further describes as an 'apparition' and then a 'ghost', as if he is a personification of death presiding over the scene. This

man tells him the place is called ‘Mr Baker’s trap’ (Baker was the coroner for Middlesex), and he then reflects:

‘A common place for suicide,’ said I, looking down at the locks.

‘Sue?’ returned the ghost, with a stare. ‘Yes! And likewise Poll. Likewise Emily. And Nancy. And Jane;’ he sucked the iron between each name; ‘and all the biling. Ketches off their bonnets or shorls, takes a run, and headers down here, they doos. Always a headerin’ down here, they is. Like one o’clock.’ (UT 18)

The Traveller returns to this subject of suicide by drowning in ‘Night walks,’ when he visits Waterloo Bridge, where: ‘the river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down’; (UT 124) and again in ‘The Morgue,’ where he observes the body of a young woman being extracted from the Regent’s Canal. (UT 188) The popularity of Waterloo Bridge as a scene of suicide is also explored at some length in Dickens’s article ‘Down with the Tide’ in *Household Words*, including a discussion of the best way to jump off it. (RP 155-6)

He also took a close interest in the case of a desperate young woman called Mary Furley, who threw both herself and her child into the Thames in 1844. She was rescued but the child died, so Furley was prosecuted for its ‘wilful murder’ and sentenced to death. Dickens wrote a satirical article for *Hood’s Magazine and Comic Miscellany* the following month condemning the judgement, and her sentence was later commuted to seven years’ transportation – partly, Michael Slater suggests, under the influence of the article.<sup>14</sup>

This prevalence of drowning in Dickens has been noted by Vybar Cregan-Reid, who asserts: ‘there were no other Victorian novelists who enjoyed drowning their characters quite as much as Dickens did’.<sup>15</sup> He suggests that, in the discourse of the nineteenth century, the act of drowning was connected with the act of sex, and that the water could be perceived as being gendered, in two possible ways: either it was female, and could seduce a male victim, in what Cregan-Reid calls a ‘mermaid-like metonym,’ luring him to his fate; or it was male, because it penetrated the body of a female victim: ‘not very much metaphorical or hermeneutical work is necessary to associate the oral and bodily penetration and saturation by the water with ... sexual acts,’ he writes. He suggests that the latter of these two metaphors was prevalent in the Victorian period, and that for Dickens: ‘a female drowning was ... too disturbing a subject to write [because] Victorian culture at large ... could not countenance the drowning body due to its connotations of sexual impropriety.’ This accounts for the basis of his article, which is that: ‘Dickens finds the idea of a woman’s death by water unwriteable’ and therefore that ‘all Dickensian drownees are male’<sup>16</sup>

While this may be true of the seven major characters first listed above, to assert it is to ignore the several drowned female characters from the Christmas stories, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, and from Dickens's journalism, also described above. Furthermore, in 'Wapping Workhouse,' the listing of girls' names emphatically foregrounds the fact that the victims are mainly female, while in 'Down with the Tide' three out of the four examples of suicides related by the toll keeper of Waterloo Bridge are women.<sup>17</sup> Cregan-Reid's thesis does not, therefore, stand up to scrutiny of the whole oeuvre, and I want to suggest that, for Dickens, drowning is a much more universal danger.

If the actual drownings in Dickens are numerous enough, the prospect of drowning is also ubiquitous, so readily does it occur to his characters' imaginations. When the 'shabby-genteel man' of *Sketches by Boz* disappears, the narrator's first thought is to: 'wonder ... whether he had ... thrown himself off a bridge.' (*SB* 253) When Bill Sikes takes Oliver Twist to Shepperton, Oliver thinks that he is going to be drowned in the river. (*OT* 159) In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Arthur Gride fantasises about Nicholas drowning himself when he thinks he (Gride) has taken Madeline from him. (*NN* 722) In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when Daniel Quilp disappears, other characters assume, for no very good reason, that he has drowned. (*OCS* 361-3) He himself fantasises in quite an evocative passage about drowning Sampson Brass, who has himself had the same fear. (*OCS* 502 & 455) In *Dombey and Son*, when Sol Gills disappears, Captain Cuttle looks for him among the unidentified drowned of the Thames (*DS* 367-8), while Mr Carker says Rob had better drown himself than try to play tricks on him. (*DS* 316)

In *Bleak House*, when Lady Dedlock disappears in London, Inspector Bucket says 'It looks like suicide' (*BH* 773) and the search immediately proceeds to the river. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the mob threatens to throw the whole funeral procession of the spy Roger Cly into the Thames. When the Uncommercial Traveller is floating in a boat down the Thames, his attention is automatically attracted to the drags hanging up by the stairs for the purpose of hooking drowned people out. In *No Thoroughfare*, Obenreizer contemplates drowning Vendale in the Rhine, which haunts him in its echoing phrase: "'Where shall I murder him, if I must?'" So, as he paced the room, ran the river, ran the river, ran the river.' (*CS* 2.82) When Edwin Drood disappears, the first thing they do is drag the river, and in the same novel Mr Crisparkle has actually been saved from drowning by Lt. Tartar, before the beginning of the action.

Then there are the characters who seriously contemplate suicide by drowning. In *Pickwick Papers*, there is the 'dismal man' on Rochester Bridge to whom "'drowning would be happiness and

peace.”” In *Oliver Twist*, Nancy predicts that this is how she will meet her end during the London Bridge meeting with Mr Brownlow and Rose, saying:

‘How many times do you read of such as I who spring into the tide, and leave no living thing, to care for, or bewail them. It may be years hence, or it may be only months, but I shall come to that at last.’ (*OT* 357)

The outcast Mr Rudge (Barnaby’s father) contemplates it, ‘paus[ing] upon the bridge to look down at the water’. (*BR* 127) In *The Chimes*, the alderman predicts that Meg may attempt to drown herself, and Trotty Veck dreams that she does actually go to do so, in a passage which powerfully and characteristically evokes the deathly qualities of the river:

To the rolling River, swift and dim, where Winter Night sat brooding like the last dark thoughts of many who had sought a refuge there before her. Where scattered lights upon the banks gleamed sullen, red, and dull, as torches that were burning there, to show the way to Death. Where no abode of living people cast its shadow, on the deep, impenetrable, melancholy shade. To the River! To that portal of Eternity, her desperate footsteps tended with the swiftness of its rapid waters running to the sea. He tried to touch her as she passed him, going down to its dark level ... (*CB* 152)

Edith Granger thinks about suicide as an alternative to marrying Mr Dombey (‘was there no drowning left?’ (*DS* 399)) while the destitute vagrants travelling to London past the Carkers’ house are said to be ‘Food for ... the river.’ (*DS* 492) In *David Copperfield*, Martha Endell is about to attempt suicide in the Thames when she is prevented by David and Mr Peggotty (*DC* 682), and there is a parallel episode in the Christmas story, ‘Mrs Lirriper’s lodgings,’ when the abandoned wife Mrs Edson is prevented from drowning herself in the Thames by the Major and Mrs Lirriper herself. (*CS* 422-4) In *Hard Times*, Stephen Blackpool considers drowning himself when he cannot get a divorce, and the narrator wishes the same fate on Tom when he is plotting to rob the bank. (*HT* 76 & 141) In *Little Dorrit*, the prostitute encountered by Amy and Maggy on London Bridge tells them she is ‘killing myself,’ (*LD* 182) while in *Our Mutual Friend* Betty Higden resolves to keep herself and her grandson Johnny out of the workhouse ‘while there’s enough water in England to cover us,’ (*OMF* 340) and in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* Neville Landless has ‘Some wildly passionate ideas of the river’ after his fight with Edwin. (*ED* 103)

The fact that a significant number of the examples so far come from the Christmas books and stories, with their overriding agenda of good cheer, speaks to the ubiquity of the idea of drowning in Dickens’s imagination. However, an even stronger indication is to be found in the fact that he can even joke about it. There are several instances of humorous passages in which affectionately portrayed, satirical characters flippantly threaten to drown themselves or others. Setting the light-hearted tone of such passages is perhaps the best example, from *Nicholas Nickleby*, where the effeminate and irresponsible Mantalini has his spending curtailed by his wife:

‘I am a demd villain!’ cried Mr Mantalini, smiting himself on the head. ‘I will fill my pockets with change for a sovereign in halfpence, and drown myself in the Thames; but I will not be angry with her even then, for I will put a note in the twopenny-post as I go along, to tell her where the body is. She will be a lovely widow. I shall be a body. Some handsome women will cry; she will laugh demnebly’ (NN 438)

(The humour of this turns mainly on the fact that the extravagant Mantalini wastes an entire sovereign on drowning himself, and that, in these days just before the introduction of the penny post with pre-paid stamps in 1840, his wife would have had to pay to receive the news, just as she had been subsidising him all along.) A similarly light tone is adopted in *Martin Chuzzlewit* by Mrs Gamp’s son, ‘offering to drown himself if that would be a satisfaction to his parents’, and by Mrs Gamp herself, who wishes the troublesome Poll Sweedlepipe ‘was drowned in the Thames afore I had brought him here’. (MC 420 & 487)

In *Sketches by Boz*, Watkins Tottle flippantly wishes that the troublesome Gabriel Parsons ‘had “dropped in” to the Thames at the bottom of the street instead of dropping in to his parlour’ (SB 420) while, in *Pickwick Papers*, Tony Weller threatens to drown ‘any vun o’ them lazy shepherds’ (referring to the congregation of the Emmanuel Chapel). (PP 754) In *Dombey and Son*, Rob the Grinder twice threatens to drown himself in his comically exaggerated despair. (DS 313 & 653) So does the child narrator of ‘The Haunted House’ (CS 256), while in ‘The Schoolboy’s Story’ the boys flippantly speculate that Old Cheeseman: ‘unable to bear it any longer, had got up early and drowned himself.’ (CS 20) ‘At the Sign of the Dolphin’s Head’ in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, the character of J. Mellows says that if anything went wrong: ‘I’d take and drown myself in a pail’ – a formula which he uses three times. (UT 241-2)

Then there are the characters who flippantly threaten to drown themselves out of unrequited love: Mr Winkle for the love of Arabella, as humorously reported by Sam in *Pickwick Papers*, (PP 562) all of Dot Peerybingle’s admirers in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, (CB 217) Master Harry for love of Norah in ‘The Holly-Tree Inn’ (CS 77 – see also 83) and Augustus Cooper in *Sketches by Boz*, when threatened with an action for breach of promise to Miss Billsmethi. (SB 249) Remarkably, Dickens even makes the same light-hearted threat himself. Joking about being in love with the Queen in 1840, he writes to Forster: ‘I begin to have thoughts of the Serpentine, of the Regent’s Canal.’<sup>18</sup>

There is therefore very considerable reference throughout Dickens’s work to drowning, particularly suicidal drowning, and this cannot be accounted for simply by the historical record. In her study, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, Olive Anderson concludes that drowning was not a

particularly popular method of suicide in London in the period even in, for example, the riverside borough of Southwark: ‘It was certainly not the Thames which was this borough’s usual gateway to suicidal death, as the Seine seems to have been for nearby Parisians,’ she writes. Where she does find records of suicides in the river, however, she finds them to be more common among women than men, who tended to favour poisoning or more violent methods.<sup>19</sup>

However, she suggests that the idea of the drowned (particularly female) suicide was popularised by the iconography of the day, most famous among the examples of which were Thomas Hood’s poem, ‘The Bridge of Sighs’ (1843) and G.F. Watt’s painting of it, ‘Found Drowned’ (1848-50). Hood turns suicide into melodrama by casting the victim as ‘one of Eve’s family’ and through the drama of his short, stark lines and challenging vocative voice which seems to address the guilty ‘Man’ who ruined her:

In she plunged boldly –  
No matter how coldly  
The rough river ran –  
Over the brink of it,                      75  
Picture it – think of it,  
Dissolute Man!  
Lave in it, drink of it,  
Then, if you can!<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, in Watt’s image the body of the woman is dramatized by casting an artificial light upon it, and by placing and framing it within the proscenium-like arch of the bridge:



Fig. 7: *Found Drowned* by G.F. Watts, c.1848-50.

It was the popularity of such productions which, argues Anderson, dramatized the female suicide and thus amplified its significance in the public imagination.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile the melodramatic

element in prose representations of human tragedy arising out of social problems has been noted by Jules Law, who writes: ‘looking at such writers as Edwin Chadwick, Charles Dickens and Henry Mayhew, it would be difficult to say where, for instance, social reform discourse ends and the discourse of melodrama begins.’<sup>22</sup>

Barbara Gates further suggests that people thought that women committed suicide more than they really did in the period, because they were more associated with insanity.<sup>23</sup> The motif of drowning in the river may therefore owe at least as much to imagination as to historical fact, and particularly so for Dickens, whose writing would only have contributed to this effect, for example through the emotive words of Nancy above and those of Martha Endell quoted in Ch.6 below. As Michelle Allen notes: ‘the river worked powerfully on Dickens’s imagination, and its role as a site of drowning and death, as a source of fear and dread, haunts the fiction.’<sup>24</sup>

There were two distinctive characteristics of deaths by drowning which may help to account for their power over the imagination of Dickens in particular, as opposed to any other writer, and some of the drowning references from his writing quoted above may be revisited in the light of them. Firstly, the body of a drowned person was often not recovered – especially from a river with a strong running tide – and this meant that often no funeral service or Christian burial could be carried out. Funerals were very important to Dickens as a means of giving access to the right kind of afterlife, and he was deeply concerned that they should be conducted with propriety. This is why he was so outraged at the state funeral of the Duke of Wellington in 1852, which he considered to be inappropriately lavish, ostentatious and worldly, as Claire Wood has shown.<sup>25</sup> On the eve of the event he wrote in *Household Words* that it was:

a system of barbarous show and expense ... which, while it could possibly do no honour to the memory of the dead, did great dishonour to the living, as inducing them to associate the most solemn of human occasions with unmeaning mummeries, dishonest debt, profuse waste, and bad example in an utter oblivion of responsibility.<sup>26</sup>

He was also very particular about the arrangements for his own funeral, beginning the relevant section of his final 1869 will with the words: ‘I emphatically direct ...’<sup>27</sup> The directions themselves may have been modest enough, but the emphasis once again was on unworldly respectability, and his emphatic insistence on their being followed to the letter shows their importance to him.

Even more telling is his earlier distress at not being able to be buried where he wanted to be. He had determined to be buried next to Mary Hogarth, whom he so venerated,<sup>28</sup> but this wish was defeated by the death in 1841 of Mary’s brother, who then occupied the only remaining space in the family’s plot. ‘It is a great trial to me to give up Mary’s grave,’ he wrote; ‘greater than I can

possibly express ... I cannot bear the thought of being excluded from her dust ... It seems like losing her a second time.'<sup>29</sup> He tried to buy an additional plot next to the Hogarths', but none was to be had, and even contemplated having Mary's body moved to some catacombs to get round the problem, despite the fact that the siblings' grandmother was also buried with them. Among the biographers, Forster knew from personal experience how deeply Dickens was affected by this episode: 'He suffered more than he let any one perceive,' he writes, 'and was obliged again to keep his room for some days.'<sup>30</sup>

This obsession with funeral arrangements throws further light on the 1851 passage from *Household Words* quoted above. Dickens writes that the river: 'run[s] away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than midnight funeral should.' (*RP* 149) The use of the word 'should' here indicates his view of the moral impropriety of not having a proper funeral while the reference to the speed of the river indicates his anxiety about the disposal of bodies being wrested from human regulation and control.

Secondly, if a body were to be recovered from the river, it was likely to be disfigured by immersion in water, and particularly by the polluted water of Victorian London. The most dramatic demonstration of this occurred just after Dickens's time in 1878, when the passenger steamer *Princess Alice* collided with a collier and sank off Woolwich, with the loss of at least 700 lives. The accident coincided with a discharge of the sewer outfalls at nearby Barking and Crossness about an hour before, and also with a fire at a Thames Street wharf the same afternoon, which had caused further petrochemical pollution to the river. The combined effect of the water and its pollutants on the recovered bodies was horrific: they were bloated, grotesquely discoloured and they decomposed unnaturally quickly. Their skin was coated in a strange kind of slime which, even after it was cleaned off, reappeared of its own accord, and there were even reports that the colours of some of the women's dresses were changed, from blue to violet. So bad was their disfigurement that 120 of the recovered bodies were never identified.<sup>31</sup>

It is reasonable to suppose that the fate of disfigurement would have held especial horrors for Dickens, because he was so concerned with his own personal appearance. Again and again, contemporary accounts of him point to the fastidious smartness of his clothes, and to his predilection for loud colours and jewellery. He himself admitted that he 'had the fondness of a savage for finery,' while Thackeray said he was 'as beautiful as a butterfly, especially about the shirtfront,' and one commentator in America said that he was: 'the most magnificently attired pedestrian that [he had] ever seen.' As Ackroyd says: 'Everyone noticed his dress, which was

colourful to the point of vulgarity.’<sup>32</sup> Also, when Dickens was stressed or ill, his main concern was always the effect on his appearance, so he writes, for example, on the strain of writing *The Chimes*:

My cheeks, which were beginning to fill out, have sunk again; my eyes have grown immensely large; my hair is very lank; and the head inside the hair is hot and giddy ... I was obliged to lock myself in when I finished it yesterday, for my face was swollen for the time to twice its proper size ...<sup>33</sup>

This exaggerated concern with grotesque facial bloating is also redolent of drowning, and it is one to which he returns from time to time, for example when describing Kate’s illness in America.<sup>34</sup> In another curious letter from America he describes at length minute details of his own facial expression, as produced by encounters with various people.<sup>35</sup> There is an extreme, self-regarding reflexivity about a letter such as this, and indeed the above quotation, and the preoccupation to which it testifies which seems to go well beyond the normal bounds of self-awareness. It further suggests that anything which disrupted personal appearance would have been alarming to him.

There is, too, evidence in much of Dickens’s writing cited above that he was disturbed by the prospect of disfigurement by drowning. When he writes that he finds the disfigurement of the drowned corpse of the ‘large dark man’ in Paris to be ‘in a frightful manner, comic,’ he can hardly be describing an amusing sight. Instead he is uttering a very nervous laugh, indeed. Again, after threatening suicide by drowning for love of the Queen in the 1840 letter to Forster, he affects to worry that ‘They might disfigure me with drags’,<sup>36</sup> and the drowning victims in the fiction are often similarly disfigured, like Mr Warden who becomes ‘a swollen and disfigured mass’. (SB 483)

### **The river as signifier**

Turning back to the major fiction, the most conspicuous passage in Dickens where the river is associated with death is, of course, the opening of *Our Mutual Friend*, where the Thames physically contains all the dead bodies from which the dredgermen Rogue Riderhood and Gaffer Hexam make their living. It is also literally the death of both men and, in the case of Gaffer, the river acts strongly as an agent of judicial retribution against him. As Mr Inspector reconstructs the events, the coil of rope is looped around his neck, the swell of the river topples him overboard and, in striking out, he ‘pulls strong on the slip-knot, and it runs home’. (OMF 180-181) He is therefore both drowned and hanged at the same time. One of the other characters who literally die in the river is Bradley Headstone, and through him it is also linked to blood. When he has one of his characteristic nosebleeds at the lock near the end, his blood contaminates the Thames: ‘bending low over the river, and scooping up the water with his two hands, [he] washed the blood away.’ (OMF 665) Later, of course, Rogue Riderhood shares Headstone’s death in the same Thames lock.

The river's association with death remains strong through many other aspects of the novel. John Harmon does not quite die in the river, but his reinvented self, John Rokesmith, thinks of him as if he has, and even creates an imaginary grave in which he mentally buries him:

So busy had he been all night, piling and piling weights upon weights of earth upon John Harmon's grave, that by that time John Harmon lay buried under a whole Alpine range; and still the Sexton Rokesmith accumulated mountains over him, lightening his labour with the dirge, 'Cover him, crush him, keep him down!' (*OMF* 394)

As a character, Rokesmith also bears no resemblance to Harmon. In one sense he never could, because the reader has never been introduced to Harmon in his own character, but he also fits into the subordinate role of Mr Boffin's secretary in a way in which the heir to the Harmon fortune would seem unlikely to, and appears actually to be a professional secretary, which Harmon was not. Thus he is not presented as Harmon in disguise, but as a separate character and, in the context of the novel form in which both are fictional constructs in the first place, in a way he is. There is therefore a sense in which, through the writing of the novel, Harmon has actually ceased to exist – or died – in the river.

The character perhaps most symbolic of death in this novel is Mr Venus, the taxidermist and articulator of skeletons, with which he is surrounded when seen most commonly in his shop. However, he also frequents the riverside, in order to meet sailors from whom to buy exotic animals for stuffing (see *OMF* 521) and it is here that he meets Pleasant Riderhood, daughter of the Rogue, who keeps drawing him back to the water and whom he eventually marries, cementing his relationship with the 'water-rat,' as Riderhood is called. (eg *OMF* 176)

The fatal fascination for the river which Dickens himself displays as shown above, is experienced in this novel by Lizzie Hexam. She has a close association with it from the start, being present in the famous opening to assist Gaffer as dredgerman, and using the skill she learns there to rescue Eugene near the end. These images of Lizzie in boats actually do much to unite both ends of the novel, and give it structural shape. For her the river is clearly deathly, for example when she is drawn to it and contemplates it when her father is first suspected of the Harmon murder:

And as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so, she stood on the river's brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death. (*OMF* 73)

She keeps getting drawn back to it, in spite of Charley's best efforts:

The boy looked doggedly at the river. They were at Millbank, and the river rolled on their left. His sister gently touched him on the shoulder, and pointed to it.  
'Any compensation – restitution – never mind the word – you know my meaning. Father's grave.

...

‘I am not here selfishly, Charley. To please myself, I could not be too far from that river.’

‘Nor could you be too far from it to please me. Let us get quit of it equally. Why should you linger about it any more than I? I give it a wide berth.’

‘I can’t get away from it, I think,’ said Lizzie, passing her hand across her forehead. ‘It’s no purpose of mine that I live by it still.’ (*OMF* 235-6)

Here the idea that she is drawn to the river against her will is reminiscent of the Uncommercial Traveller’s words in reference to the morgue in Paris, that he is ‘dragged by invisible force into’ it. For Lizzie, it is a fatal fascination which may also be interpreted as suicidal, given the depth of the shame which she feels about the suspicion falling on her father.

The other death in this novel is that of Betty Hidgen and this, while it does not take place actually in the river, is very closely associated with it, in a way which I suggest is symbolic. When she first appears in the novel, Betty is already by the river, living at Brentford (see *OMF* 202). When she weakens in old age and sets out on her travels on foot, she has no particular direction or destination in mind, except that she is determined to avoid being sent to the workhouse. In fact her progress is by the banks of the Thames, in an upstream direction and specifically through the villages of Chertsey, Walton, Kingston and Staines. The narrator gives: ‘The poor old creature had taken the upward course of the river Thames as her general track; it was the track in which her last home lay, and of which she had last had local love and knowledge.’ (*OMF* 525) At one point she sees a barge on the river and has a vision of her dead children and grandchildren actually in it, as if in Charon’s boat, and this causes her to faint. (See *OMF* 529.) A little later the narrator describes her progress as a ‘pilgrimage’ (*OMF* 533) and she finally comes to rest at the Mill town which may or may not be Henley-on-Thames.

Describing this same place much later on in the novel, the narrator gives: ‘one might watch the ever-widening beauty of the landscape ... away to where the sky appeared to meet the earth, as if there were no immensity of space between mankind and Heaven.’ (*OMF* 718) This Thames location is the furthest upstream to be used by Dickens in any of his fiction (whether it is Henley, or an imagined location rather closer to London<sup>37</sup>), and its connection with Heaven speaks for itself. Commenting on this passage, Michelle Allen has written: ‘To follow the Thames upstream is to return to a kind of golden age, an Edenic paradise’.<sup>38</sup> In his treatment of Betty’s ‘pilgrimage’, Dickens is following his standard practice of preparing good characters for death by bringing them into a state of grace, which he often does using images of light, the sky, or the heavens. (Compare Stephen Blackpool looking at the star in the sky from the bottom of the mineshaft in *Hard Times*, or Magwitch repeatedly fixing his gaze on the white ceiling of his prison cell in *Great Expectations*.) Here, the metaphor is supplied by the river. Betty is walking upstream, and is therefore

unconsciously drawn towards the source of the river just as, in her dying days, she is drawn towards the source of all things: her God.<sup>39</sup>

Turning to some of the other fiction, Dickens makes extensive use of images of the river to foreshadow, prefigure or in some way accompany the deaths of characters, and this makes it emblematic of those deaths. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Lord Verisopht meets his end in a duel at the hands of Sir Mulberry Hawk by the Thames in a meadow opposite Twickenham at dawn. Immediately after this death the narrator gives: ‘The sun came proudly up in all his majesty, the noble river ran its winding course,’ (NN 680) making it seem as if the river (and indeed sun) is presiding over that death.

In *Dombey and Son*, Paul’s death is prefigured, not only by the sea at Brighton, but also very insistently by the river in London when he returns there in his last illness. Mr Dombey’s house is located between Portland Place and Bryanstone Square,<sup>40</sup> both of which are quite a long way from the Thames and yet, once installed there, the dying Paul thinks continually of the river and even seems to see the surface of its water reflected on the wall of his room:

His fancy had a strange tendency to wander to the river, which he knew was flowing through the great city; and now he thought how black it was, and how deep it would look, reflecting the host of stars – and more than all, how steadily it rolled away to meet the sea.

...

His only trouble was, the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it – to stem it with his childish hands – or choke its way with sand – and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out!

...

he ... would fall asleep, or be troubled with a restless and uneasy sense again – the child could hardly tell whether this were in his sleeping or his waking moments – of that rushing river. ‘Why, will it never stop, Floy?’ he would sometimes ask her [Florence]. ‘It is bearing me away, I think!’

...

How many times the golden water danced upon the wall; how many nights the dark river rolled towards the sea in spite of him; Paul never counted ...

...

... the river running very fast, and confusing his mind.

...

‘How fast the river runs, between its green banks and the rushes, Floy! But it’s very near the sea. I hear the waves! They always said so!’

Presently he told her that the motion of the boat upon the stream was lulling him to rest ... Now the boat was out at sea, but gliding smoothly on. And now there was a shore before him. Who stood on the bank? (DS 229-234)

The above image of ‘the golden water danc[ing] upon the wall’ makes it seem as if the river is actually outside Paul’s window – which it clearly is not in London but is in Paul’s imagination – and there are four other references to this. (See also DS 228, 230, 254 and 360.) There are also other passages similar to those quoted above, mainly in Ch.16 but also elsewhere, linking the image

of the river to Paul's death, and this amounts to a very insistent chain of imagery. It seems sometimes to be an imaginary river conceptualised by Paul, but at the same time it is clearly based on the Thames, 'which,' as the narrator gives above, 'he knew was flowing through the great city'.

The final quotation above furthermore seems like a clear allusion to *The Pilgrim's Progress*, with God or Christ standing on the opposite bank. At such moments we are reminded that Dickens is a strongly religious writer, with quite a literal conception of Heaven, and a strong believer in the religiously privileged status of innocent children like Paul Dombey. This status proceeds from what Barbara Hardy has described as Dickens's belief in 'original virtue' and 'unfallen nature,' which is the opposite of original sin and manifests itself in a whole group of characters which includes Paul alongside others such as Oliver Twist, Little Nell and Amy Dorrit.<sup>41</sup>

The Thames is used in an arguably more concrete way to prefigure the death of Mr Tulkinghorn in *Bleak House*. The build-up to this is protracted from the separate departures of both him and Lady Dedlock from the Dedlocks' London house, right to the end of Ch.49, where he is discovered to be 'shot through the heart'. The danger to Tulkinghorn is established in the recurring refrain, 'Don't go home!', while the whereabouts of Lady Dedlock are unaccounted for, and the reader is invited to suspect she may be about to attack him, because he has just revealed to her his intention of disclosing her secret. Just before the gunshot is heard, the narrator supplies a long paragraph describing 'A very quiet night' in various scenes, foremost among which is the river:

... a still night ... on the river where the water-meadows are fresh and green, and the stream sparkles on among pleasant islands, murmuring weirs, and whispering rushes; not only does the stillness attend it as it flows where houses cluster thick, where many bridges are reflected in it, where wharves and shipping make it black and awful, where it winds from these disfigurements through marshes whose grim beacons stand like skeletons washed ashore, where it expands through the bolder region of rising grounds rich in cornfield, windmill and steeple, and where it mingles with the ever-heaving sea ... (BH 669)

Mr Tulkinghorn's house, where he meets his end, is in Lincoln's Inn Fields<sup>42</sup> and therefore, like Mr Dombey's, not by the river, so the connection is once again not a logical but an imaginative one. The progress of the river from the life of the countryside to the city where it becomes 'black and awful,' and beyond is being aligned with Tulkinghorn's progress towards his doom, and the metaphor of the beacons being 'like skeletons' is a further clear signifier of death.

A similar sense of foreboding is achieved using the river Seine in *A Tale of Two Cities*, in a deeply spiritual episode which prepares the way for the death of Sydney Carton. As his plan to substitute himself for the condemned Charles Darnay approaches its culmination and he walks through Paris, Carton remembers following his father's funeral procession, and calls to mind the words of the

service, which are presented in the form of direct speech: "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die." He crosses the river for a second time, and then performs an act of Christian charity by picking up a little girl and carrying her across the muddy street in company with her mother. He even asks the child for a kiss, in a moment which must seem either mawkish or menacing to a modern reader, but Dickens uses it to create the opportunity for a blessing to be conferred upon Carton.

The same quotation from the funeral service is then repeated, again in speech marks, though presumably he does not actually speak it to the child and, as he walks on, the same words are: 'in the echoes of his feet, and ... in the air. Perfectly calm and steady, he sometimes repeated them to himself as he walked; but, he heard them always.' Then, as he stands on a bridge near the cathedral at dawn, the narrator references the liturgy again, and refigures the bridge he is standing on as a vision of a bridge between earth and heaven:

... the glorious sun, rising, seemed to strike those words, that burden of the night, straight and warm to his heart in its long bright rays. And looking along them, with reverently shaded eyes, a bridge of light appeared to span the air between him and the sun, while the river sparkled under it.

The narrator then immediately shifts the focus back to the Seine:

The strong tide, so swift, so deep, and certain, was like a congenial friend, in the morning stillness. He walked by the stream, far from the houses, and in the light and warmth of the sun fell asleep on the bank. When he awoke and was afoot again, he lingered there yet a little longer, watching an eddy that turned and turned purposeless, until the stream absorbed it, and carried it on to the sea. – 'like me!'

A trading boat then sails past him and, 'As its silent track in the water disappeared,' he repeats the words, "I am the resurrection and the life." (all *TTC* 298 - 300) Throughout this episode Carton is drawn strongly to the Seine as if without his own volition, much like Lizzie Hexam, and observes it with an equally fatal fascination. Dickens therefore makes the river partake in a liturgy of death and a vision of heaven, in a passage whose language is intensely spiritual, while the image of the river of life is present in Carton's words, 'like me!', and the disappearance of the boat's wake in the water even seems to stand for his own impending dissolution.

Finally, in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, when Edwin is told by the mysterious old woman that he is 'threatened', he goes to walk by Cloisterham's river, and the last that is ever seen of him is when, in Jasper's words: 'He went down to the river last night, with Mr Neville, to look at the storm.' It is also in the river that Mr Crisparkle discovers Edwin's watch and shirt-pin. (See *ED* 179, 183 and 198.) Though of course it is not known what was actually intended to have become of him, the

river here foreshadows his disappearance and presumed death, and marks the spot where he might last have been.

Death is further signified by the kind of discourse which Dickens uses simply to describe the river, so that lexical choices in riparian passages are repeatedly made from a register which references death. Thus in 'Night Walks,' the Uncommercial Traveller says that buildings on the banks of the Thames are 'muffled in black shrouds', (*UT* 124) while in *Our Mutual Friend* Eugene remarks to Mortimer that the company names painted on its wharves "'looked ... like inscriptions over the graves of dead businesses.'" (*OMF* 177) Perhaps the most striking passage of this type is to be found in the search for Lady Dedlock in *Bleak House*. Suspecting her suicide, Inspector Bucket allows his imagination to carry him to: 'shadowed places down by the river's level; and a dark, dark, shapeless object drifting with the tide, more solitary than all, clings with a drowning hold on his attention.' (*BH* 774) He then sets out with Esther to a number of riverside locations which are described at length in Ch.57 by her as narrator in some darkly atmospheric passages. Bucket consults a 'found drowned' poster and 'an inscription about drags'. He calls a 'dark and muddy' man out of a boat and with him goes down 'some slippery steps' to look at 'something secret that he had to show'. They turn over 'something wet' on the foreshore, which may or may not be a dead body, then Esther hears the incoming tide breaking at the end of an alley, and fears that it 'would cast [her] mother at the horses' feet'. (all *BH* 778)

The possibilities and indeed expectation of suicide are vividly present throughout his passage, and at one point Bucket alights on a bridge and goes back after 'a shadowy female figure that had flitted past us.' Then: 'he gazed into the profound black pit of water, with a face that made my heart die within me.' There follows one of the most powerful and sinister descriptions of the river to be found anywhere in Dickens's fiction:

The river had a fearful look, so overcast and secret, creeping away so fast between the low flat lines of shore: so heavy with indistinct and awful shapes, both of substance and shadow: so deathlike and mysterious. I have seen it many times since then, by sunlight and moonlight, but never free from the impressions of that journey. In my memory, the lights upon the bridge are always burning dim; the cutting wind is eddying round the homeless woman whom we pass; the monotonous wheels are whirling on; and the light of the carriage lamps reflected back, looks palely in upon me – a face, rising out of the dreaded water. (*BH* 779)

The use of the river here contributes much to the drama and danger of the pursuit, and it is clearly representative of death: in this case the potential death of Lady Dedlock, even though she is elsewhere. The idea that lights reflected in the water represent the faces of the dead is later echoed again in the Uncommercial Traveller's 'Night Walks' piece already quoted above.

In all these examples a semantic field of death is invoked to describe the river, while in one final example Dickens does the reverse, using the language of the river to write about death. In *A Tale of Two Cities* the bank's messenger Jerry Cruncher is also a grave robber, and he describes his nocturnal missions in that capacity as 'going a fishing,' partly as a way of explaining his absences to his son, and partly as a metaphor which shows how he thinks of that occupation. (See, for example, *TTC* 149.)

## Identity

Related to the issue of death is that of the loss or change of identity, and I now turn to Dickens's use of the river to signify this. Firstly, a loss of identity is already implicit in the disfigurement caused by the drownings cited above. The reason why Dickens and others were able to visit the morgue at Paris was that the (often drowned) bodies there were unidentified, and at least the ostensible reason for putting them on display was that members of the public might be able to identify them. Similarly, in the 'Wapping Workhouse' piece quoted above, the ghostly man obviously makes up the drowning victims' names – 'Sue ... Poll ... Emily ... Nancy ... Jane' – at random, because he does not know who they really are, except that they are generally women, and this act of naming therefore ironically intensifies their anonymity. In *Sketches by Boz*, the body of the suicide Mr Warden in the river is 'unrecognised' (*SB* 483), and when Watkins Tottle drowns himself Dickens uses the very striking device of blank visiting cards to point up the removal of his identity. In his pocket they find: 'a card-case, which it is confidently believed would have led to the identification of the unfortunate gentleman, but for the circumstance of there being none but blank cards in it'. (*SB* 455)

Dickens's discourse also sometimes converts a drowning victim from a person to a thing, thus stripping them/it of human identity, which is why Mantalini, as quoted above, says 'I shall be a body.' (*NN* 438) However, the best example of this is probably to be found in the dramatic death of Daniel Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. After an extended passage of narration in which he struggles in the water and is referred to as 'he,' the personal pronoun gives way to 'a corpse,' and this follows (the first 'it' is the river):

It toyed and sported with its ghastly freight, now bruising it against the slimy piles, now hiding it in mud or long rank grass, now dragging it heavily over rough stones and gravel, now feigning to yield it to its own element, and in the same action luring it away, until, tired of the ugly plaything, it flung it on a swamp – a dismal place where pirates had swung in chains, through many a wintry night – and left it there to bleach. (*OCS* 506)

In this dramatic passage, the insistently impersonal pronoun 'it' is reinforced by Quilp's objectification as 'ghastly freight' and 'ugly plaything,' while the concomitant personification of the river by making it the purposeful agent which 'toyed,' sported' and 'flung' him effectively completes the reversal between person and thing. The bleaching of his body adds an element of disfigurement further to anonymise him.

The river can also remove one identity from a person, to replace it with another. Dickens expresses this idea, usually using the Thames, sometimes in a very straightforward way by having a character enter or go down to the river with one name and emerge or come back from it with another. The most obvious example is from *Our Mutual Friend*, where John Harmon enters the river as himself, as referenced above, and emerges from it with the alias of Julius Handford, later to be reinvented as John Rokesmith. He subsequently has to return to the Thames, and the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, in order to be identified by Mr Kibble and thus regain his original identity at the end of the novel. (See *OMF* 798.)

Straightforward naming is also used in the denouement of *Great Expectations*, for, when Magwitch falls into the Thames with Compeyson and re-emerges alone, he undergoes a kind of baptism. When he first returned, Magwitch had told Pip his real name, but Pip refused to use it, preferring his alias: 'Mr Provis (I resolved to call him by that name)' (*GE* 349). There is something a little strange in this, because Pip uses the name not only as a character helping to preserve his benefactor's disguise, but throughout the text as a narrator looking back on the events in retrospect. There is no need for the narrator to protect Magwitch's identity, so his use of the assumed name *in the narration* is incongruous and thus pointed. Then, at the crisis of the chase, Provis is re-named with marked formality by the customs officer:

"You have a returned Transport there," said the man who held the lines. "That's the man, wrapped in the cloak. His name is Abel Magwitch, otherwise Provis. I apprehend that man ..."

 (*OT* 454)

Then Magwitch is immersed in the river, and emerges to have his new, restored name confirmed by Pip: 'I managed to get some comforts for Magwitch – Provis no longer'. (*GE* 423) The sequence of events is much like a service of baptism, presided over by the customs officer in place of a priest.

Again in *Oliver Twist*, it is when Nancy goes down to the river on the steps below London Bridge to meet Mr Brownlow and Rose Maylie that she is offered a new identity by Mr Brownlow:

'Before the dawn of morning, before this river wakes to the first glimpse of daylight, you shall be placed as entirely beyond the reach of your former associates, and leave as utter an absence of all trace behind you, as if you were to disappear from the earth this moment.' (*OT* 356)

Here Nancy's new life presumably also involves a new name, and Mr Brownlow specifically references the river in his appeal to her.

Then there are identities in the form of disguises which are disposed of in the river. The best example is the disguise of Bradley Headstone in *Our Mutual Friend*. He is a man to some extent defined by his clothes, usually his uniform of a schoolmaster. (See, for example, the scene at the railway station where, as 'a young man of reserved appearance, in a coat and waistcoat of black and pantaloons of pepper and salt' (*OMF* 781) he is instantly recognisable to the reader.) However, he adopts the costume of a bargeman when he sets out on his mission against Eugene, and even imitates Riderhood's mode of dress, through the colour of his neck-cloth, in order to cast suspicion on the Rogue, should he be seen. When he returns to London after the attack, he pauses to undress and swim in the Thames, and then dresses himself again in the schoolmaster's uniform which he retrieves from a hiding place: 'And now gradually came the wonder that he stood up, completely clothed, another man, and not the Bargeman.' (*OMF* 737) At this point he is also observed by Riderhood, who accuses him later:

'I know how you come away from London in your own clothes, and where you changed your clothes, and hid your clothes. I see you with my own eyes take your own clothes from their hiding-place among them felled trees, and take a dip in the river to account for your dressing yourself, to any one as might come by. I see you rise up Bradley Headstone, Master, where you sat down Bargeman. I see you pitch your Bargeman's bundle into the river. I hooked your Bargeman's bundle out of the river.' (*OMF* 833)

The narrator further says that: 'he had risen, as it were, out of the ashes of the Bargeman' (*OMF* 825) and here the declarative mood of the verb is maintained: we are told not merely that Headstone *looks* like another person, but that he actually is one. His immersion in the river is therefore clearly linked to a change of identity, and there is even a suggestion that, as a man defined by his clothes, he has no identity at all when he is actually in the river.

A parallel episode occurs in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Jonas Chuzzlewit uses a disguise when he murders Montague Tigg, and afterwards attempts to lose it in the Thames. This mode of concealment is emphasised by being mentioned three times. Immediately after the murder, the narrator gives: 'He took off his disguise, tied it up in a bundle ready for carrying away and sinking in the river before night, and locked it up in a cupboard.' (*MC* 750) When he does so, he is seen by Mr Nadgett, who afterwards confronts him with the fact, referring to: 'those clothes which he afterwards sank in a bundle at London Bridge!' (*MC* 812) Then, a little later, Nadgett narrates the concealment itself:

'I saw him come out with a bundle. I followed him again. He went down the steps at London Bridge, and sank it in the river. I now began to entertain some serious fears, and made a communication to the Police, which caused that bundle to be –'  
'To be fished up,' interrupted Slyme. 'Be alive, Mr Nadgett.'

‘It contained the dress I had seen him wear,’ said Nadgett; ‘stained with clay, and spotted with blood.’ (MC 815-6)

The recovery of the disguise also occurs in *Our Mutual Friend*, as seen above, and the episode in *Martin Chuzzlewit* is furthermore accompanied by a strange and perhaps pointed drowning reference (not among those listed above). When Jonas alights from the coach before committing the murder, the guard is suspicious of him, and says: “‘If you want your fortune told, I’ll tell you a bit of it. You won’t be drowned. That’s a consolation for you.’” (MC 745) The implication here is that he will be hanged instead, but the reference also seems to prefigure the drowning of his false identity, as if to say that Jonas’s real self will not be drowned but his false self may be. (In fact, in his own character, he poisons himself.)

In *Oliver Twist* is to be found a dramatic scene in which not false identity but the evidence of Oliver’s true identity is lost into the river. This is not the Thames, but the river in the town where Oliver was in the workhouse, and where Mr Bumble operates throughout. From the topographical details supplied it is difficult to identify the town with anywhere in the right direction, and the opening of the novel specifically resists any such attempt. It can therefore be interpreted as any town and its river as any or perhaps every river – that is, river as concept rather than as geographical feature.

The scene is that of the crucial meeting between Edward Leeford, aka Mr Monks, Oliver’s half-brother, and Mr and Mrs Bumble, from whom Monks extracts the locket which contains the evidence of Oliver’s identity and threatens his own fraudulent inheritance. The setting has much in common with Jacob’s Island as described later in the novel, with its air of physical decay, the corrosive effect of the river, its poverty, moral corruption, and associations with maritime occupations. The forbidding physical setting is further complemented by a thunder storm, which induces in Monks a state of partial madness. He leads the Bumbles up a ladder to an upper room, where the negotiation takes place, and where the mood of the description continues very sinister. Once Monks has obtained the locket from Mrs Bumble, he suddenly puts the table aside and opens a trap-door at their feet, to reveal the river itself rushing beneath, and described in these dramatic terms:

The turbid water, swollen by the heavy rain, was rushing rapidly on below; and all other sounds were lost in the noise of its plashing and eddying against the green and slimy piles. There had once been a watermill beneath; and the tide<sup>43</sup>, foaming and chafing round the few rotten stakes, and fragments of machinery that yet remained, seemed to dart onward, with a new impulse, when freed from the obstacles which had unavailingly attempted to stem its headlong course.

‘If you flung a man’s body down there, where would it be to-morrow morning?’ said Monks, swinging the lantern to and fro in the dark well. (OT 288)

Here Monks supplies a further image of death in his final sentence, and Oliver's life really depends upon it, for, instead of a body, Monks flings down the locket. He concludes: "If the sea ever gives up its dead, as books say it will, it will keep its gold and silver to itself, and that trash among it." Oliver's very identity is therefore immersed and lost in the river, and with it his future prospects, as Monks himself later asserts: "the only proofs of the boy's identity lie at the bottom of the river." (OT 306)

A final example of this kind of symbolic loss to the river is from *A Tale of Two Cities*. In Paris, Madame Defarge dies of a gunshot wound in a lonely upper room in what is presented as an accident, but could easily be laid as murder at the feet of Miss Pross, with whom she has been fighting. Miss Pross returns to the room, collects her incriminating belongings, locks the room and hurries away, dropping the key into the Seine as she crosses a bridge. The identity of the scene of death is therefore lost to the river for the time being, and Miss Pross is free to make her escape. (See TTC 351-2.)

Less symbolic losses of identity come in the form of transformations of character, and in these the river can also act as an agent. Back in *Our Mutual Friend*, Eugene Wrayburn nearly drowns in the upstream Thames after he is attacked by Bradley Headstone, and for him the experience clearly becomes a transforming one. Up to this point in the novel he is a morally dubious character, whose infatuation with Lizzie Hexam motivates him only to try to seduce her. Lizzie herself rescues him from the river and this is where his transformation begins, so in a sense she rescues him from himself, too. The narrator then sets up an insistent chain of imagery which combines images of the river with the theme of forgetfulness.

During Eugene's convalescence at the Angler's Inn (with 'the river outside his windows flowing on to the vast ocean') he is very weak and keeps drifting away from an awareness of his surroundings. His 'faint expression' is described as being 'so evanescent that it was like a shape made in water' (all OMF 767), and he appeals to his friend Lightwood "to keep me here ... To prevent my wandering away I don't know where – for I begin to be sensible that I have just come back, and that I shall lose myself again" (OMF 769). The narrator says that: 'his spirit would glide away again and be lost', that: 'As the man rising from the deep would disappear the sooner for fighting with the water, so he in his desperate struggle went down again.' (OMF 771) Here the traditional influence of the river Lethe is evidently strong upon Eugene. He forgets and leaves behind his old, irresponsible, rakish self to become a fuller person who is capable of real love and can actually

marry Lizzie across the class divide, making an honest woman of her. It is a kind of reincarnation, brought about by his immersion in the river.

Eugene's transformation is clearly a spiritual one, and this accords with the other uses of the river explored in this chapter. While Dickens clearly calls on a classical iconography through his implicit referencing of the rivers Styx and Lethe, the deaths and transformations expressed through the river here carry a much more strongly Christian message. Of all the episodes referred to above, a few of the most strongly suggestive may be recalled to make this point. With their explicit use of naming, the experiences of John Harmon and Abel Magwitch above most clearly refigure Christian baptism and recall that of Christ in the Jordan. The 'dead mankind' perceived by Little Nell beneath the waters of her river is clearly the race eradicated by a wrathful God in Noah's flood as described in the Bible. Among the persistent images and visions of the river which surround Paul Dombey's deathbed, the last, when 'there was a shore before him' and the narrator rhetorically asks, 'Who stood on the bank?' strongly alludes to the endings of *The Pilgrim's Progress*: the opposite shore is Heaven and clearly a Christian God stands on the bank. Perhaps most insistent of all is the way in which Sydney Carton keeps repeating the words of the Christian burial service – "I am the resurrection and the life" – as he communes with the river before his own death in Paris.

Dickens's uses of the river as an agent of death and rebirth therefore serve as a strong reminder of how religious a writer he is. Forster personally attests to: 'the unswerving faith in Christianity ... which had never failed him at any period of his life',<sup>44</sup> and this is expressed in many ways in his writing. Next to the worldly misfortunes of the poor against which his fiction so strongly protests, the inaccessibility of God is always a greater one. To take the example of one of his most destitute characters, Jo, the crossing-sweeper in *Bleak House*, his ignorance of religion and the fact that he 'Can't exactly say what'll be done to him, arter he's dead,' (*BH* 149) is made to seem like his greatest misfortune (and incidentally disqualifies him as a witness at the inquest). As he looks up at the cross on the dome of St Paul's Cathedral, the narrator gives: 'From the boy's face one might suppose that sacred emblem to be, in his eyes, the crowning confusion of the great, confused city; so golden, so high up, so far out of his reach. (*BH* 274)

However, the religiosity of Dickens's writing is perhaps nowhere more evident than at the deaths of good or innocent characters, such as Jo himself, to whom the 'light ... is coming fast', (*BH* 655) and who repeats the Lord's Prayer as he dies, or Paul Dombey as seen above, or Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby* or Stephen Blackpool in *Hard Times*. The most famous example, that of little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, will serve to illustrate the tone of such scenes:

Then, when the dusk of evening had come on, and not a sound disturbed the sacred stillness of the place – when the bright moon poured in her light on tomb and monument, on pillar, wall, and arch, and most of all (it seemed to them) upon her quiet grave – in that calm time, when all outward things and inward thoughts teem with assurances of immortality, and worldly hopes and fears are humbled in the dust before them – then, with tranquil and submissive hearts they turned away, and left the child with God. (*OCS* 539)

The religious language of such a passage is self-evident, and it expresses a belief in the literal existence of heaven. Its prosody is also strongly liturgical, giving it the quality of a spiritual incantation, and it can be scanned regularly as poetry: a quality which, I would suggest, is shared with some of Dickens's most solemn river scenes, such as those of Paul Dombey, Esther Summerson, Sydney Carton, Lizzie Hexam or Betty Higden cited above. It is also, of course a funeral scene, and a decorous, controlled one at that, which serves as a further reminder of the importance to Dickens of that due process in Christian burial which could be snatched away by the river: 'running away with suicides and accidentally drowned bodies faster than midnight funeral should'. (*RP* 149)

Such passages also have properties in common with the language of Nancy, of Martha Endell, Lizzie Hexam and others, to be explored below. These are characters through whom Dickens further develops his idea of a river of death into one of a river representing, on various levels of discourse, a type of underworld for London, and this will form the subject of the next chapter.

## Notes to Ch.5

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<sup>1</sup> See Radice (1973) p.152.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia, accessed 14.3.12

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia, accessed 4.2.12.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 3, verses 6, 13 & 16; Mark 1, verses 5, 9 & 10; Luke 3, verses 3, 16 & 21 and John 1, verse 28.

<sup>5</sup> Revised Authorised Version (1982)

<sup>6</sup> To John Forster, 4 October 1840. *Letters*, vol.2, p.131.

<sup>7</sup> *The Tempest*, Act 1, Sc. 2, lines 400 - 402

<sup>8</sup> Ward (2008) p.74

<sup>9</sup> See Ackroyd (1990) pp.378 & 545.

<sup>10</sup> See Allen (2008) p.96, or Forster (1892) p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Letter of 15 September 1866 to Walter Thornbury in *Letters*, vol.11, p.247.

<sup>12</sup> See Wood (2012) p.7.

<sup>13</sup> The same tale refers to litigants who "'find a resting-place in the Thames.'" (*PP* 284)

<sup>14</sup> See Slater (1996) vol.2, p.67.

<sup>15</sup> Cregan-Reid (2005) p.71

<sup>16</sup> Cregan-Reid (2005) pp.72-4 & 78-9.

<sup>17</sup> See *RP* 152-162.

<sup>18</sup> Letter of 12 February 1840 in *Letters*, vol.2, p.24.

<sup>19</sup> See Anderson (1987) pp.43-4, 120-2 & 144-5.

<sup>20</sup> Internet source: <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-bridge-of-sighs/>

<sup>21</sup> Anderson (1987) pp.196-203.

<sup>22</sup> Law (2010) p.6.

<sup>23</sup> See Gates (1988) p.125.

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- <sup>24</sup> Allen (2008) p.96.
- <sup>25</sup> Wood (2012) p.2.
- <sup>26</sup> ‘Trading in Death’ in Slater & Drew, ed.s (1993 – 2000) vol.3, p.96.
- <sup>27</sup> Forster (1892) p.436.
- <sup>28</sup> See CD’s letter to John Forster of 11 December 1837, in which he writes of his ‘love and attachment’. *Letters*, v.1, p.341.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter to John Forster, 25 October 1841. *Letters*, vol.2, p.410.
- <sup>30</sup> Forster (1892) p.83. See also letter to Forster, 26 October 1841. *Letters*, vol.2, p.410.
- <sup>31</sup> See Schneer (2005) pp.149-157 for an account of this.
- <sup>32</sup> See Ackroyd (1990) pp.499, 651, 1069 and 211.
- <sup>33</sup> Letter of 29 October 1844 in *Letters*, vol.4, p.207.
- <sup>34</sup> He writes of her ‘hideously swoln face’, the result of toothache, which he describes as ‘horribly bad’. To John Forster, 17 February 1842. *Letters*, vol.3, pp.15 & 68.
- <sup>35</sup> To John Forster, 15 April 1842. *Letters*, vol.3, p.194.
- <sup>36</sup> Letter of 12 February 1840 in *Letters*, vol.2, p.24.
- <sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the provenance of this location, see Litvack (2003), particularly pp.40-44. The claim for Henley rests partly on the presence there of the Marsh paper mill, where Lizzie might have worked, and of the Red Lion Inn, which is identified with the novel’s Angler’s Inn where Eugene stays, and the assumption is therefore that Dickens’s Plashwater Mill Weir Lock is the actual Hurley Lock, which is the first you come to downstream. However, this area is too far from London. Riderhood tells Headstone that the lock is between 20 and 25 miles away, and they appear to be somewhere near Chelsea Bridge at the time he says it. (*OMF* 573) Even as the crow flies Hurley is nearly 30 miles away. Headstone walks the distance and more, starting in the east end of London, mostly in daylight, in a single winter’s day, which would clearly be impossible. (*OMF* 830) However, if the distance is measured by a convenient road route, it would bring them about as far out of London as the present M25. The nearest lock to there is Bell Weir Lock, constructed in 1819 in good time for the novel’s setting, and the similarity of names is sufficient to be noticeable. If so, then the inn could just as well be the Bells of Ouzeley, rather closer upstream near Runnymede, which would fit in well with Bradley’s walking times traced against hours of daylight when he makes the attack. Far more likely, of course, is that the location is an imaginary one, perhaps based partly on places known to Dickens.
- <sup>38</sup> Allen (2008) p.110.
- <sup>39</sup> Though interestingly this direction reverses the usual flow of the metaphor of the river of life as described in Ch.4 above, in which death is represented by the sea.
- <sup>40</sup> See *DS* 23.
- <sup>41</sup> See Slater, ed. (1970), pp.30, 38, 40 & 49.
- <sup>42</sup> See *BH* 131.
- <sup>43</sup> This does not have to mean actual tidal flow. It could just express the motion of the water.
- <sup>44</sup> Forster (1892) p.137.

## 6. The river as underworld

One of Dickens's most significant uses of the river throughout his fiction is to create and represent a type of underworld for London. That he should see Victorian London or Victorian society as a whole as being made up of world and underworld is neither distinctive nor surprising: it is a commonplace idea expressed, for example, in Disraeli's concept of 'the two nations' (the subtitle of *Sybil* (1845)) and in Gissing's of 'the nether world' (also the title of his novel) which he contrasts with 'the upper world'. In this idea the two worlds are separated by factors such as poverty, crime, morality and pollution. It is also notable that in novels such as these the two worlds are seen as discrete, so those factors which define them do not operate on a continuum or on continua, but define positions of binary opposition, with nothing in between, and in this opposition can be recognised the overarching idea of duality which characterises so much of the literature and culture of the period.

For Dickens, however, this duality is not straightforward. In his novels, the boundaries between the two worlds are not entirely secure, so it is possible, for example, for a character like Lady Dedlock to pass from one world to the other by the mere revelation of a secret. This contrasts with novels such as *The Nether World* (1889) and Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896), in which this does not occur. Dickens's campaigns for sanitary reform, and his enthusiasm for projects to assist the poor, such as Miss Burdett-Coutts's Urania Cottage project for the rescue of fallen women,<sup>1</sup> also suggest an optimism that the underworld may not be a fixture: that it may not be beyond the power of a benign overworld somehow to redeem it. In a major recent study of Dickens and the city, Jeremy Tambling has even gone so far as to suggest that Dickens does not even 'accept ... the existence of a criminal class.'<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will, however, take the opposite view. It will attempt to show that, through the use of the river, Dickens presents London's underworld as a distinctly other-worldly sphere, along mythic and even classical lines, and that he marks clear boundaries between a world and an underworld, which exists in relation to the world as the characteristic Victorian 'other'. Thus Lady Dedlock may pass from the former to the latter, but she cannot return. It will finally suggest that this representation may betray something of an underlying pessimism about the possibilities of social reform. It will begin, however, with the historical factors of crime and pollution, which in themselves are enough to make the river seem like an underworld by way of simple metaphor. The term 'underworld' was in fact first used in the sense of 'the lowest stratum of society' (*OED*) in 1859, during Dickens's time and interestingly just five years before he began writing *Our Mutual*

*Friend*, which will be one of the most important texts for this chapter. Dickens acknowledges the social factors implicit in the metaphor and to a degree reports them, but he also underplays the historical facts of riparian conditions, to develop instead a much more symbolic river which deals in abstract concepts and further separates the two worlds of London.

Firstly, then, the Victorian Thames was, in fact, a major focus of lawlessness, and therefore already a kind of criminal underworld. In his *Treatise on the Commerce and Police of the River Thames* of 1800, Patrick Colquhoun wrote that the river was particularly susceptible to: ‘acts of peculation, fraud, embezzlement, pillage and depredation’, and that there was, on the river: ‘a species of systematic delinquency, which in its different ramifications, exhibits a degree of turpitude as singular as it is unparalleled.’<sup>3</sup> The watermen themselves were seen as a lawless, uncontrollable faction. In 1822 *The Times* reports on a ‘society for promoting religion and morality amongst watermen, bargemen, and rivermen in general,’<sup>4</sup> while in 1840 Parliament felt the need to pass an Act: ‘To provide for keeping the peace on canals and navigable rivers’.<sup>5</sup>

The Thames river police, founded by Colquhoun in 1798, was actually the first regular police force in the country, pre-dating London’s Metropolitan force by fully 31 years: a fact which in itself testifies to the urgent need for it. Dickens was well acquainted with the river police and, in a *Household Words* article of 5 February 1853, he describes accompanying them to find out about the various kinds of crime associated with the docks. These were perpetrated by thieves such as the ‘Tier-rangers ... Lumpers ... Truckers’ and ‘Dredger-men’: all specialists in different ways of stealing things from ships, with exotic names which would naturally appeal to Dickens.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, like any docks, London’s port was inevitably subject to customs violations, and all of the more nefarious commercial activity connected with the empire. Dickens’s own knowledge of this is revealed in his ‘At a Dockyard’ piece in the largely autobiographical *Uncommercial Traveller*, when he meets the boy at the landing-place:

To him I am indebted for ability to identify a Custom-house boat at any distance, and for acquaintance with all the forms and ceremonies observed by a homeward bound Indiaman coming up the river, when the Custom-house officers go aboard her. (*UT* 253)

Transferring this idea to his fiction in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Dickens uses customs fraud to form a significant part of the business of Daniel Quilp, who:

had a share in the ventures of divers mates of East Indiamen, smoked his smuggled cigars under the very nose of the Custom House, and made appointments on ‘Change with men in glazed hats and round jackets pretty well every day. (*OCS* 27)

Because it is reclaimed by the waters twice a day, the foreshore along the river banks can also be seen as a literally ungovernable space. This would have been the natural sphere of the longshoremen: historically desperate characters who operated between the high and low water marks and lived by unofficial salvage, to which there was also a significant criminal element. There were even children among them, known as ‘mud larks’ who, as Ackroyd reports, would scavenge for pieces of coal or wood left behind by the tide.<sup>7</sup> (London still has its amateur longshoremen, but now they have metal detectors.)

There is therefore a natural association of the river with stealth and secrecy, and Dickens expresses this throughout his fiction. Perhaps the best example of its sustained expression is in *Barnaby Rudge*. This novel is very largely concerned with the control of London’s spaces, and many of its plot movements turn on the capture or surrender of space on land by the mob and the authorities respectively. Within this structure, the river is used as a space which cannot be controlled, and therefore allows characters the freedom to escape from situations and bring about change. Thus when Mr Haredale travels secretly from his lodgings in Vauxhall to Mrs Rudge’s house to keep his nightly vigils, he always travels from Westminster to London Bridge by water, becoming in the process an anonymous figure. (*BR* 330) When on one of these journeys he is attacked by the crowd at Westminster, he escapes from it in the same way. (*BR* 339) In these nightly excursions by river, Mr Haredale assumes some qualities of an other-worldly, mystical character, because he is always alone, nobody knows who he is, and his purposes are so shrouded in mystery. He may therefore be seen as a minor figure in a larger pattern of mystical underworld figures to be explored below.

When the full force of Lord George Gordon’s demonstration marches on the House of Commons, the two sides become deadlocked and it is only by water that a messenger can escape to summon help from the military. Following the ensuing conflict, Barnaby and Hugh again escape, again by water, from Westminster down to Blackfriars bridge, where they can take refuge at The Boot inn. Similarly, when the guilty Simon Tappertit is threatened with arrest, Gabriel Varden plans his escape: ‘to the Tower Stairs, and away by the Gravesend tide-boat, before any search is made for him.’ (*BR* 395) Though this plan is never brought into execution, it is perhaps significant that Simon is intended to go in disguise, as this heightens the sense of stealth and anonymity associated with a river passage. Finally Dolly Varden’s (also thwarted) escape is planned in the same way. Dennis intends to enlist the help of a fleeing rioter, and then:

Such a person found, he proposed to bring him there on the ensuing night, when the tall one was taken off, and Miss Miggs had purposely retired; and then that Dolly should be gagged, muffled in a cloak, and carried in any handy conveyance down to the river’s side; where there were

abundant means of getting her smuggled snugly off in any small craft of doubtful character, and no questions asked. (*BR* 549)

Here the theme of disguise is again developed by Dolly's being muffled in a cloak, while the 'doubtful character' of craft on the river, where 'no questions [are] asked' effectively captures the sense of stealth and borderline criminality with which the riparian space is associated throughout this novel. This theme of stealth on the river is also developed, obviously enough, in the whole escape plan of *Great Expectations*. Notwithstanding what has already been said above about the Haredale episodes, its representations so far may be seen as reasonably naturalistic, in that they seem to be true to the historically dubious status of the river in Dickens's time and, perhaps to a lesser extent, in the periods when *Barnaby Rudge* is set (1775 and 1780).

The condition of the river in Dickens's time, of which an account is given in Ch.4 above, would also greatly have enhanced its perception as an underworld. At precisely the time when Dickens was writing, from 1833 to 1870, the foreshore was greatly magnified as a feature of London's geography, and with it the ungovernable space described above and explored through *Barnaby Rudge*. The longshoremen accordingly flourished, and of course Dickens immortalises them in the figures of Rogue Riderhood and Gaffer Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend*.

### **Pollution and contagion**

The pollution of the river which, as also shown above, was at its worst in Dickens's time, is furthermore expressed through an associated theme of contagion which finds its way into the fiction through a range of unpleasantly under-worldly riverside settings. An example of those on the Thames would include that of the Christmas Story 'Going into Society', which is set: 'among the marsh lands near the river's level, that lie about Deptford ...near the mouth of a muddy creek ... [by] ... the foggy river, the misty marshes'. It is a familiar enough scene in Dickens. The Clennam house in *Little Dorrit* is swathed in 'the mists from the crooked river'; (*LD* 707) the Thames in *A Tale of Two Cities* is 'dark and dim', (*TTC* 83) while in 'Down with the tide' it is 'murky and silent'. (*RP* 153) Riverside settings are also sometimes described as 'rat-hole[s]'.<sup>8</sup>

Possibly the most striking example of this kind of setting is Quilp's wharf in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. The river is a very present element in all the scenes which take place at the wharf, and the descriptions of it and its environs are marked by squalor, decay and unhealthiness. For example:

In that low and marshy spot, the fog filled every nook and corner with a thick dense cloud. Every object was obscure at one or two yards' distance. The warning lights and fires upon the river were powerless beneath this pall, and, but for a raw and piercing chillness in the air, and

now and then the cry of some bewildered boatman as he rested on his oars and tried to make out where he was, the river itself might have been miles away.

The mist, though sluggish and slow to move, was of a keenly searching kind. No muffling up in furs and broadcloth kept it out. It seemed to penetrate into the very bones of the shrinking wayfarers, and to rack them with cold and pains. Everything was wet, and clammy to the touch. (OCS 499)

This description clearly owes something to early Victorian fears about unhealthy vapours, miasmas and what was thought to be their role in the spread of disease such as cholera. It is an environment which Quilp wholly embraces as he eventually moves in to the counting house of the wharf, where he also relishes the fact that it is infested with rats, whom he calls ‘fine stealthy secret fellows’, and in whose interest he ‘wish[es] cats were scarcer’. (OCS 465-6)

Quilp’s imagination often leads him to the contemplation of poisoning, for example when he thinks of finding a rat that looks like Kit and poisoning it, or when he spies on Mrs Jiniwin: “‘If I could poison that dear old lady’s rum and water,’” murmured Quilp, “‘I’d die happy.’” (OCS 362) Poison is perhaps suggested to his mind by the condition of the river with its pestilential vapours. However, on a more conceptual level, this also seems to show Dickens using the power of association to link the two elements: Quilp is intrinsically associated with the river and Quilp is in his own mind a poisoner, so the inference is that the river is poisonous.

Quilp also frequents a waterside tavern, sometimes referred to as ‘the Wilderness’, where he uses a ‘summer-house overlooking the river’ for some of his confidential meetings. It is much like the wharf, and described as follows:

The summer-house of which Mr Quilp had spoken was a rugged wooden box, rotten and bare to see, which overhung the river’s mud, and threatened to slide down into it. The tavern to which it belonged was a crazy building, sapped and undermined by the rats ...

...

The house stood – if anything so old and feeble could be said to stand – on a piece of waste ground, blighted with the unwholesome smoke of factory chimneys, and echoing the clank of iron wheels and rush of troubled water. Its internal accommodations amply fulfilled the promise of the outside. The rooms were low and damp, the clammy walls were pierced with chinks and holes, the rotten floors had sunk from their level, the very beams started from their places and warned the timid stranger from their neighbourhood. (OCS 159-60)

There are other polluted rivers in Dickens, too. In *Hard Times*, Coketown’s river famously ‘ran purple with ill-smelling dye’ (HT 19), while in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, it is Eden’s diseased river in America that makes Martin, and then Mark Tapley, so sick. Here it is described as a ‘putrid swamp’, where: ‘foul slime, and noxious vapour, with all the ill and filthy things they bred, prevailed. The earth, the air, the vegetation, and the water that they drank, all teemed with deadly properties.’ (MC 546-8) This is perhaps the most explicitly foul river description in Dickens and it

may be significant that he places it in mid-western America, at a safe distance from his delicate English readership.

Back in London, on the other hand, Dickens's descriptions of the polluted river stop some considerable distance short of the realities. For all his reforming zeal to expose the conditions in which the most disadvantaged in society lived, he also took care not to offend what he saw as the delicate sensibilities of his middle-class readers. As George Gissing writes in his *Critical Study*, Dickens exercised: 'a gentle avoidance of whatsoever may give offence to the pure of heart.'<sup>9</sup> There is direct evidence of this in a letter of 1838 about the Yorkshire schools which he visited and how he proposed to describe them in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Here Dickens writes: 'I have kept down the strong truth and thrown as much comicality over it as I could, rather than disgust and weary the reader with its fouler aspects.'<sup>10</sup>

This provides a clue to how he similarly 'keep[s] down the strong truth' of a river disgustingly polluted with sewage. The 'truth' is available through texts such as Edwin Chadwick's *Report on an Inquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), and Henry Mayhew's *Morning Chronicle Survey of Labour and the Poor* (from 1849). The latter describes a backwater of the Thames around Jacob's Island in Bermondsey in the following terms:

... indeed it was more like watery mud than muddy water; and yet we were assured this was the only water the wretched inhabitants had to drink. As we gazed in horror at it, we saw drains and sewers emptying their filthy contents into it; we saw a whole tier of doorless privies in the open road, common to men and women, built over it; we heard bucket after bucket of filth splash into it, and the limbs of the vagrant boys bathing in it seemed, by pure force of contrast, white as Parian marble. And yet, as we stood doubting the fearful statement, we saw a little child, from one of the galleries opposite, lower a tin can with a rope to fill a large bucket that stood beside her. In each of the balconies that hung over the stream the self-same tub was to be seen in which the inhabitants put the mucky liquid to stand, so that they may, after it has rested for a day or two, skim the fluid from the solid particles of filth, pollution and disease. As the little thing dangled her tin cup as gently as possible into the stream, a bucket of night-soil was poured down from the next gallery.<sup>11</sup>

This description bears quoting at length because it is the accretion of specific details that makes it so disgusting. Its use of the child is also highly emotive, and this is also something that Dickens, for all his sentimentality, would not do in such explicit detail.

Dickens of course uses this same location for the demise of Sikes in *Oliver Twist*. Of all the thieves' dens and hiding places in this novel, the house on Jacob's Island is the only one on the river, and it is described as being the worst. This is appropriate if a descent to the river is to be interpreted as a descent into a kind of underworld: in this case a criminal underworld, for Sikes has now committed his worst crime in the murder of Nancy and for him there is now no hope of

redemption. Dickens accordingly describes this setting as being very nasty, but judges that his readers would have no stomach for the specific details which would bring home to them the reality of it as Mayhew does. In his description there are a few vague details, such as ‘dust’, ‘smoke’ and ‘slime’, and even people lowering buckets, but no mention of what is actually in the water. Instead he resorts to abstractions, reporting that here is: ‘every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot, and garbage; all these ornament the banks of Folly Ditch’. (*OT* 383-4)

The river in Dickens is often associated with fog, as some of the above quotations attest, but most famously of course in the opening of *Bleak House*. This passage is so well known that it is perhaps not regularly interrogated, but it is not as logical as might at first appear. The fog is all described as being on the river:

Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city. Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwhales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little ‘prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (*BH* 1)

This literal description is then developed (along with the mud) into an extended metaphor for the delays, obstructions, obscurity and incomprehensibility of the proceedings of the Court of Chancery, which is said to lie ‘at the heart of the fog’. This is described as being ‘hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall’, which is now the law courts to the north of the Strand near its junction with Fleet Street. In the first place, this is not a riverside location, so it is really disconnected from the fog with which it is being metaphorically associated. In the second place, London’s fog was not produced by the river; it was smoke produced by burning coal on open domestic fires, and by the heavy industry which then was in the heart of the city. (A process of temperature inversion will produce a mist on the river at certain times of the day, but nothing like a Victorian pea-souper, or what Mr Guppy in the same novel calls a “London particular”. (*BH* 29))<sup>12</sup> The pollution of the built environment has therefore been displaced on to the river, which becomes not a literal setting for the opening episode of the novel, but instead a signifier for the idea of pollution, which in turn stands metaphorically for corruption, in this case in the legal system.

In the same novel, John Jarndyce repeatedly complains of an ‘east wind’ which he feels or anticipates at times when things look bad for the court case, or he is worried about something else

like the state of the Jellyby or Skimpole families, and which causes him to retreat into ‘the Growlery’. Here he explains this to the narrator, Esther:

‘Sit down, my dear,’ said Mr Jarndyce. ‘This, you must know, is the Growlery. When I am out of humour, I come and growl here.’

‘You must be here very seldom, sir,’ said I.

‘O, you don’t know me!’ he returned. ‘When I am deceived or disappointed in – the wind, and it’s Easterly, I take refuge here. (BH 95)

Because it is produced by the continental climate, an east wind is colder than Britain’s prevailing south-westerly, which is the main reason why it is likely to be unwelcome today. However, it was a much stronger cause of concern to Victorian Londoners, precisely because of the river. The further downstream you went, the more polluted the Thames became, simply because it accumulated more human waste the further it progressed through the city. The smell of the downstream regions was normally carried away by the prevailing winds in the direction of the north sea but, if the wind blew from the east, that smell would be carried back upstream into the more fashionable west end. This would not only have been unpleasant, but would have been feared as a health risk, as the sources of infections such as cholera were still thought most likely to be airborne.<sup>13</sup> As Peter Ackroyd has written: ‘Indeed an eastern wind was a token of harm.’<sup>14</sup>

For Jarndyce, though, the east wind bearing a smell back up the river is not really present, but is instead being used as a metaphor to signify his own feelings of disquiet and, in any case, his house is in St Albans, not in London. The same motif of an east wind which prefigures something foreboding is employed right at the beginnings of *A Christmas Carol* (CB 4) and *The Haunted Man* (CB 327), where its cold helps to introduce the characteristically bad weather of the Christmas books. The east wind is also present throughout the *Household Words* article, ‘Down with the Tide,’ contributing to the hostile environment essential to that piece.<sup>15</sup>

In *Bleak House*, then, Dickens refigures the pollution of the river as an abstraction which is then used as a metaphor for something else, rather than describing the condition of the river itself. This process may be compared to the ways in which he refigures the pollution of the river into Eugene Wrayburn’s fantasy of being a lime merchant, or Daniel Quilp’s of being a poisoner, as described above. I suggest that Dickens does this in matters of pollution generally, and further that this might be explained in terms of Freudian theories of displacement.<sup>16</sup> The riparian environment itself being too horrible to be confronted, the awareness of its qualities are transferred elsewhere: quite frequently into an abstract concept of morality. Perhaps the most explicit expression of this is to be found in *Dombey and Son*, the novel which uses the river most insistently as a metaphor. Following

a passage about the Dombey marriage, and Mr Dombey's unnatural behaviour towards Edith, the narrator meditates on the unnatural condition of society in general, using the motif of contagion:

Those who study the physical sciences, and bring them to bear upon the health of Man, tell us that if the noxious particles that rise from vitiated air were palpable to the sight, we should see them lowering in a dense black cloud above such haunts, and rolling slowly on to corrupt the better portions of a town. But if the moral pestilence that rises with them, and, in the eternal laws of outraged Nature, is inseparable from them, could be made discernible too, how terrible the revelation! Then we should see depravity, impiety, drunkenness, theft, murder, and a long train of nameless sins against the natural affections and repulsions of mankind, overhanging the devoted spots, and creeping on, to blight the innocent and spread contagion among the pure. (DS 662)

Here the narrator begins with the concrete fact of the 'noxious particles' which originate in the river, but then converts it into the abstract concept of a 'moral pestilence' which is vague enough to cover a multitude of sins.

Also in this passage, 'depravity' encompasses the degradation of extreme poverty, but also for Dickens sexual transgression and prostitution, which was a particular concern of his, as mentioned above in connection with the Urania Cottage project. There are estimated to have been about 80,000 prostitutes in London in the middle part of the nineteenth century,<sup>17</sup> out of a population of 2,000,000,<sup>18</sup> and the trade was publicly linked with pollution. As Ackroyd writes: '... the attempt to take prostitution off the streets of London was itself linked with the removal of excrement for the cleanness of the city,'<sup>19</sup> while Jeremy Tambling makes the same point about sanitary reform in Paris in the same period.<sup>20</sup> It was an understandable enough comparison to make. Pollution was linked to diseases such as cholera, while prostitution was linked to sexually transmitted disease: not the same thing, but united by the common fear of disease itself. The two things may also be connected by a Victorian fear of ubiquity: prostitution and its attendant diseases dangerously transcended class boundaries, just as the miasmas in the air pervaded all parts of the city, and this is also linked to Jules Law's ideas about the fluid threat to individual security.

The conflation of physical with moral pollution in the contemporary Victorian consciousness is evident in Henry Mayhew's 1851-2 report on one of the slum areas, where he writes that there is:

a ... marked manifestation of moral obscenity on the one hand, and physical obscenity on the other. With the low prostitution of this locality is mixed the low and bold crime of the metropolis ... And all over this place of moral degradation extends the stench of offensive manufactures and ill-ventilated sewers.<sup>21</sup>

Michelle Allen has attended to this sort of attitude in her important recent study, *Cleansing the City*. Here she writes about various of what she calls the 'metaphoric meanings that had accrued to filth in the nineteenth century'. She continues:

... within sanitary discourse a filthy environment was imagined to contribute not only to physical debilitation but also to moral degradation in all its forms – from profligacy to alcoholism, from adultery to prostitution. The causal link between filth and an immoral population, however, was frequently displaced by metaphor and metonymy. Thus, the people who lived in and suffered from an unsanitary environment – generally the poor – came to be identified with this environment: they did not merely live in waste, they were waste.<sup>22</sup>

She goes on to align metaphorical moral pollution directly with the river, when she writes that: ‘the nadir of the prostitute’s degradation ... is repeatedly represented as taking place on the Thames’, and that: ‘When a sexually suspect woman makes her figurative fall, she comes to a halt quite literally on the banks of the river.’<sup>23</sup> It is the metaphorical and metonymic displacement identified by Allen above that, I suggest, characterises much of Dickens’s writing about pollution, as shown in the examples cited above, and indeed in his writing about prostitution, to which I now specifically turn.

As Allen also acknowledges, one of the best examples of the type of Victorian prostitute’s river scene outlined above is to be found in *David Copperfield*, where Dickens again displaces the physical pollution of the river on to moral pollution. The plight of fallen women is one of this novel’s chief concerns, developed mainly through the seduction of ‘little Em’ly’ by Steerforth. However, the world of sexual transgression and indeed prostitution is more truly represented in it by the character of Martha Endell, and she in turn is powerfully associated with the river. There is an early hint of Emily’s danger, or at least vulnerability, through her association with Martha in Yarmouth, where they went to school together and worked together at Mr Omer’s. Having lost her virtue in obscure circumstances, Martha is shunned by the community and appeals for help to Emily, at which point the text brings the two into a sort of alignment. Martha asks Emily to “‘have a woman’s heart towards me. I was once like you!’”, and Ham reports that Mr Peggotty: “‘couldn’t, kind-natur’d, tender-hearted as he is, see them two together, side by side, for all the treasures that’s wrecked in the sea’”. (*DC* 337) This foreshadows the downfall of Emily herself, and Martha becomes emblematic of the worst fate that could befall her.

Martha disappears into London and, after escaping from Steerforth in Italy, so does Emily, and the two become associated with one another once again. Martha has become a prostitute, and Emily has a narrow escape from the same fate, as Mr Peggotty relates in his account of her arrival in London: “‘– alone – without a penny – young – so pretty ... all so desolate’” and “‘found (as she believed) a friend’” who offers to help her to a living, and how she then “‘stood upon the brink of more than I can say or think on.’” (*DC* 730-1) She is saved by Martha, but Martha herself is utterly abandoned.

When David and Mr Peggotty trace Martha in quest of information about Emily, they follow her down to the river by Millbank, where: ‘As soon as she came here, and saw the water, she stopped as if she had come to her destination; and presently went slowly along by the brink of the river, looking intently at it.’ (DC 681) Of course, there is an established connection between prostitution and the river, because of the prostitutes in the dockland area and because of the issue of suicide, as explored in Ch.5 above. However, Millbank is a very long way from the docks, and I suggest that in Martha’s interaction with the river Dickens achieves very much more than reportage.

There follows a long and sinister description of the desolate riverside scene, involving ‘fiery’ industrial processes, smoke, abandoned machinery, ‘slimy gaps and causeways’, rotted buildings, ‘ooze and slush’, handbills describing drowned men and the suspicion of a plague pit nearby: ‘the whole place ... looked as if it had gradually decomposed into that nightmare condition, out of the overflowings of the polluted stream’. This is the world to which Martha is drawn and with which she and her condition are closely associated throughout this extremely sinister episode:

As if she were part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay, the girl we had followed strayed down to the river’s brink, and stood in the midst of this night-picture, lonely and still, looking at the water. (DC 681)

David approaches her under cover of some stranded barges, and notes ‘the way in which she stood, almost within the cavernous shadow of the iron bridge, looking at the lights crookedly reflected in the strong tide.’ This ‘inspire[s] a dread within [him]’ and he realises that she is probably about to attempt suicide:

I know, and never can forget, that there was that in her wild manner which gave me no assurance but that she would sink before my eyes, until I had her arm within my grasp. (DC 682)

He struggles to save her, she screams and the two men carry her away from the water’s side. There follows a key passage which makes the river strongly emblematic of the sin and corruption of Martha’s world:

‘Oh, the river!’ she cried passionately. ‘Oh, the river!’  
‘Hush, hush!’ said I. ‘Calm yourself.’  
But still she repeated the same words, continually exclaiming, ‘Oh, the river!’ over and over again.  
‘I know it’s like me!’ she exclaimed. ‘I know that I belong to it. I know that it’s the natural company of such as I am! It comes from country places, where there was once no harm in it – and it creeps through the dismal streets, defiled and miserable – and it goes away, like my life, to a great sea, that is always troubled – and I feel that I must go with it!’  
I have never known what despair was, except in the tone of those words.  
‘I can’t keep away from it. I can’t forget it. It haunts me day and night. It’s the only thing in all the world that I am fit for, or that’s fit for me. Oh, the dreadful river!’ (DC 682-3)

She says ‘“I am bad, I am lost. I have no hope at all’, but still wants to clear herself of having had any part in Emily’s downfall. Again, the river symbolises that imagined guilt:

‘I should have been in the river long ago,’ she said, glancing at it with a terrible expression, ‘if any wrong to [Emily] had been upon my mind. I never could have kept out of it a single winter’s night, if I had not been free of any share in that!’ (DC 684)

Rose Dartle, however, sees Emily very much as Martha sees herself and, once again, polluted water is made to stand for sin and guilt. Having cornered Emily later on, Rosa accuses her of having been sold to Steerforth by her family as ‘a part of the trade of your home’, and goes on to call her a ‘piece of pollution, picked up from the water-side, to be made much of for an hour, and then tossed back to her original place!’ (DC 722)

I describe and quote Martha’s Thames episode at length because it is perhaps Dickens’s most important river scene, and for the same reason it may be well on this occasion to consider the illustration of it, by Hablot Browne:



THE RIVER

Martha, whom Mr. Peggotty and I had followed, stood at the river's brink, lonely and still, looking at the water.  
*Copperfield, chap. xlvii*

Fig. 8: *The River* by Hablot K. Browne, 1850.

Here Martha’s close identification with the river is expressed through her hair and shawl, which are drawn to resemble the vegetation and detritus in the water. Her figure is drawn in the same light and with the same intensity as the river’s surface, further harmonising her with it, while David and Mr Peggotty are comparatively shadowy figures in the background, and seem to belong to another world. In fact they are painted in the same shade as the city in the background to the left, and this helps further to separate Martha and the river to which she belongs from the environment to which the two men belong.

## The classical underworld

The Martha episode is also an example of Dickens's presentation of the river in what I suggest to be a classically mythic way. In the first place, there is a rhapsodic quality to Martha's words quoted above, particularly in the longer passage, which heightens the level of discourse beyond what is normal for this or indeed any character. She says that the river 'haunts' her and her repetition of the formula, 'Oh, the river!' is indeed a haunting refrain. Though Dickens spells it with an 'h', her 'Oh' at these points also echoes the vocative 'O', suggesting that she might even be addressing it, in some kind of incantation.

In the second place, as demonstrated above, a very close alignment is established between Martha's emotions and the river, suggesting that it, too, bears those emotional properties, and indeed may have a personality which may be addressed. This is a distinctly classical quality. Rivers form the principal topographical feature of the mythical Greek underworld where – perhaps simply because it is a mythical place, where magical conditions can prevail – the rivers are said to contain emotional and spiritual properties. Of the five rivers of the Greek underworld, Martha's interpretation of the Thames may be seen as being broadly similar to that of Acheron or Cocytus. The river Acheron is interpreted as 'the stream of woe', and similarly the river Cocytus is interpreted as 'the river of wailing' (or, perhaps more literally, 'lamentation'). There are other classical interpretations of the river, too: I have shown in Ch.5 above that, for Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*, the Thames is Lethe, while for others it is Styx.

In the third place, David and Mr Peggotty have had to go down to the river in order to learn secrets, in this case the secret of Emily's whereabouts, which Martha knows. This is a standard idea in connection with the classical underworld and a standard trope of epic, expressed most famously in book 11 of *The Odyssey*. Under the direction of Circe, Odysseus visits the underworld to learn from the dead, and particularly from the blind seer, Tiresias, the secrets of his own future and his way home. Without this visit, he is unable to make progress and he places himself in some danger in the process of making it, which Dickens's characters also do. The trope is reiterated by Virgil in *The Aeneid*, and would have been made even more familiar to parts of Dickens's audience by the visit to the Cave of Spleen in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* (1714).

There is some debate about the extent to which Dickens is influenced by the classics, and about his uses of learned literary allusion, so it may be well to consider that at this point. Of course he has no university education, which would have been the prime source of a writer's knowledge of the

classics in the period, and Forster inaugurates a genre of criticism which is dismissive of his classical influence, citing one contemporary who remarkably asserts: ‘he did not learn Greek or Latin there [at Wellington House] and you will remember there is no allusion to the classics in any of his writings’.<sup>24</sup> More recently Michael Slater has suggested that he makes comparatively little use of classical references in his work, instead drawing much more strongly on Shakespeare.<sup>25</sup> This is certainly understandable, given his passion for the theatre. On the other hand, there is evidence that Dickens won a prize for Latin while at the Wellington House Academy,<sup>26</sup> where he claims to have been ‘old enough to be put into Virgil’.<sup>27</sup>

Iain Crawford points out that he owned various Latin dictionaries, a five-volume set of Greek tragedies and a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and that he seems to have been particularly devoted to his copy of Dryden’s *Translations of Juvenal*.<sup>28</sup> He also had translations of Plutarch, various histories of Rome, and Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*.<sup>29</sup> Crawford makes a persuasive case for a pattern of classical ideas and motifs running throughout *Barnaby Rudge*, where Hugh is repeatedly represented as a centaur, and the rioters are Promethean, stealing fire.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile Pauline Fletcher ranges across the whole of Dickens’s output, and reveals what she justly calls a ‘surprising number of classical allusions’.<sup>31</sup> In this equally persuasive study, many of these copious allusions are drawn out by close reading and analysis. However, there are also several prominent examples with which most readers will be familiar; for example the liveried footmen of the Dedlocks’ London mansion in *Bleak House*, who are continually referred to as ‘Mercur[ies] in powder’<sup>32</sup> – aptly messengers of the gods, communicating with the humbler mortal world outside the mansion.

There is therefore good evidence that Dickens was substantially influenced by the classics (albeit in translation) and that this influence is present in his work. Classical frames of reference were also deployed in all kinds of discourse throughout Victorian culture generally. For example, when the Thames was at its deadly worst, it was being publicly compared to the river Styx by Disraeli, who famously referred to it as a ‘stygian pool’.<sup>33</sup> William Scheick has also suggested that, 30 years later, Jerome K. Jerome also saw the Thames in classical terms. He writes: ‘increasingly it seems as if they [Harris, George and J.] have entered some Hades-like underworld of shadows. In fact, their final impression of the Thames recalls the Acheron ...’,<sup>34</sup> before going on to quote a long passage from Ch.19 which does indeed have that effect:

But the river - chill and weary, with the ceaseless raindrops falling on its brown and sluggish waters, with the sound as of a woman, weeping low in some dark chamber, while the woods, all dark and silent, shrouded in their mists of vapour, stand like ghosts upon the

margin; silent ghosts with eyes reproachful, like the ghosts of evil actions, like the ghosts of friends neglected - is a spirit-haunted water through the land of vain regrets.<sup>35</sup>

Taking all of these indications into account, it does not seem unreasonable to conjecture that Dickens, too, might sometimes have thought about the river in classical terms, as a river of the underworld. Indeed, on a more general level, it is reasonable to suppose that, with a more traditional education system, an awareness of the classics was simply much more a part of Victorian culture than it is of present-day culture. Victorians would therefore have been more likely to see anything in classical terms, just as they would have been more likely to see anything in Biblical terms.

Returning to Dickens's fiction, there are at least three other good examples of situations where characters, like David and Mr Peggotty above, have to go down into the river to learn crucial secrets, and I would suggest that all these scenes are presented in an under-worldly way. In *Little Dorrit*, the episode surrounds the shady and villainous Rigaud, sometimes called Blandois, sometimes Lagnier. The circumstances are appropriately mysterious, complex and never fully explained, but the scene concerned is where Rigaud meets Miss Wade on a terrace overhanging the river at the Adelphi, in order secretly to sell to her the suppressed will which can prove Amy's fortune and which he has stolen from Flintwinch's brother, murdering him in the process. (Flintwinch had in turn stolen it from Mrs Clennam.) Rigaud is guided to his assignation by Tattycoram, who seems to present him to Miss Wade before falling away, and the whole proceeding is observed from a distance, unknown to the participants, by Arthur. This setting at the Adelphi would have been a lonely enough spot before the construction of the Victoria Embankment, as evidenced by a contemporary painting by Henry Pether:



Fig. 9: *York Water Gate and the Adelphi etc.* by Henry Pether, c.1850.

This image dates from about six years before Dickens was writing. York Water Gate is in the foreground, and the meeting would have taken place on the terrace behind it. Dickens's narrator describes this as an even more desolate, faraway and empty place, as if normal life is suspended on or by the river. Once it has been established that it is 'nightfall' and that 'the street-lamps [are] blurred by the foggy air' (*LD* 550), this description follows:

There is always, to this day, a sudden pause in that place to the roar of the great thoroughfare. The many sounds become so deadened that the change is like putting cotton in the ears, or having the head thickly muffled. At that time the contrast was far greater; there being no small steam-boats on the river, no landing-places but slippery wooden stairs and foot-causeways, no railroad on the opposite bank, no hanging bridge or fish-market near at hand, no traffic on the nearest bridge of stone, nothing moving on the stream but watermen's wherries and coal-lighters. Long and broad black tiers of the latter, moored fast in the mud as if they were never to move again, made the shore funereal and silent after dark; and kept what little water-movement there was, far out towards mid-stream. At any hour later than sunset, and not least at that hour when most of the people who have anything to eat at home are going home to eat it, and when most of those who have nothing have hardly yet slunk out to beg or steal, it was a deserted place and looked on a deserted scene. (*LD* 551)

Dickens chooses low tide and therefore an exposed foreshore for the scene, adding to its desolation, while the use of words like 'deadened', 'funereal' and 'silent' obviously give it a deathlike quality. The idea that people feel in this place as if they have cotton wool in their ears, or as if their heads are muffled, also creates a striking sense of sensory deprivation and disorientation, as if some new realm is being entered. The secrets here are threefold: Miss Wade discovers the identity of Rigaud and obtains the secret document, while Arthur tries and fails to penetrate the secret of what is going on. It is also mysterious to the reader, who only discovers much later that the document must have changed hands at this point. At about the crucial moment, Miss Wade significantly 'looked away at the River' (*LD* 552) and the unusual capitalisation is noticeable. The presence of the sinister, shape-shifting Rigaud only adds to the effect. As Arthur puzzles over this enigmatic meeting shortly afterwards, he ponders the theme of secrets generally, and in doing so cements the link between secrets and the river:

As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses ... the banking-houses ... the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill [of London] ... the secrets of the lonely church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in their turn similarly hoarded ... and then the secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning wildernesses of secrets, extending, thick and dense, for many miles ... (*LD* 563)

The second example is from *Oliver Twist*, when Nancy contracts to meet Rose Maylie on London Bridge, to communicate more information about Oliver's history and conspire against Monks. (*OT* 309) (Nancy already has an association with the river because she comes from Ratcliffe, by Limehouse Basin). At the second attempt the assignation is met, Rose accompanied by Mr

Brownlow, but they are followed and overheard by Noah Claypole, who is in the pay of Fagin. The resulting scene, which occupies the whole of Ch.46, is remarkable for the way in which it uses the river. First the setting is described, in a mysterious and sinister way:

A mist hung over the river, deepening the red glare of the fires that burnt upon the small craft moored off the different wharfs, and rendering darker and more indistinct the mirky buildings on the banks. The old smoke-stained storehouses on either side, rose heavy and dull from the dense mass of roofs and gables, and frowned sternly upon water too black to reflect even their lumbering shapes. The tower of old Saint Saviours's Church, and the spire of Saint Magnus, so long the giant-warders of the ancient bridge, were visible in the gloom; but the forest of shipping below bridge, and the thickly scattered spires of churches above, were nearly all hidden from the sight. (OT 350)

Death is then referenced, as the bell of St Paul's 'toll[s] for the death of another day' and midnight is imagined settling on 'the rigid face of [a] corpse'. Nancy will not speak to her visitors in the open street, but takes them down some steps, built into the bridge, which form a landing stage to the river. Noah gets there first, and conceals himself on the lower steps, below high water mark, which are wider than those above.

Mr Brownlow calls the place "'this dark and dismal hole'", and will let Nancy go only so far into it. "'This is far enough,'" he says: "'I will not suffer the young lady to go any farther. Many people would have distrusted you too much to have come even so far.'" (OT 352) The 'young lady' here is Rose. It is as if Mr Brownlow fears that by going too far down to the river, she may be drawn into something, some wickedness or danger, from which she will be unable to return, and this is strongly suggestive of the conventional underworld visit trope. Here Nancy describes the fears which haunt her:

'Horrible thoughts of death, and shrouds with blood upon them, and a fear that has made me burn as if I was on fire, have been upon me all day. I was reading a book to-night, to while the time away, and the same things came into the print ... I'll swear I saw "coffin" written in every page ... (OT 352)

The episode does indeed lead directly to Nancy's death, because she is condemned in Bill Sikes's eyes by the information carried back by Noah. Mr Brownlow offers her a new life in return for her information, but she rejects the offer, is once again overcome by her fears, and then, after Rose and Mr Brownlow leave, sinks down upon the steps for a time in tears before climbing back up, followed in due course by Noah.

The meeting is made additionally mysterious by the position of the narrative point of view, from which the three people involved cannot be seen. The conversation itself is reported as overheard by Noah in his place of concealment below, from which the speakers are merely disembodied voices, like ghosts. Meanwhile the participants' progress down and up the stairs is described from a

position above, at street level. This method of narration, combined with the sinister description of the river, Nancy's fears and the references to death, all contribute to the idea of an underworld, embodied in the river, and prefiguring Nancy's own fate.

The third example is from *Our Mutual Friend*. The river of the opening scenes of this novel is clearly an underworld in the sense that it is literally inhabited by the dead. Gaffer, Lizzie and Rogue Riderhood all make their living by looting the dead bodies which they find floating in it. The Thames at Limehouse is also the scene of the disappearance and supposed murder by drowning of John Harmon. This is the underworld of the river to which Eugene Wrayburn and Mortimer Lightwood must descend in order to begin to penetrate the mystery of what has happened to him. Their journey is described in these terms:

The wheels rolled on, and rolled down by the Monument, and by the Tower, and by the Docks; down by Ratcliffe, and by Rotherhithe; down by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river. In and out among vessels that seemed to have got ashore, and houses that seemed to have got afloat – among bowsprits staring into windows, and windows staring into ships – the wheels rolled on, until they stopped at a dark corner, river-washed and otherwise not washed at all, where the boy alighted and opened the door. (*OMF* 21)

Here, the rolling of the wheels creates a haunting refrain, perhaps a little like Martha's speech, as does the formula of 'down by ...', repeated three times and echoed three times more in ellipsis before the words 'by the Tower', 'by the Docks' and 'by Rotherhithe.' Of course they are not literally descending – their journey does not take them downhill – but they are moving in incremental steps down through different levels of London society. Each successive 'Down by' almost seems to count them down through the enumerated circles of Hell. Through the idea of 'moral sewage', this passage also displaces the pollution of the river on to the morality of the population, as has already been described above. This displacement is furthermore linked to the fear of banishment to a moral underworld which Lizzie fears when the Hexams subsequently become suspected of the Harmon murder and she, too, sees this moral underworld as being represented by the river as she stands on its bank. (See *OMF* 73.)

The most famous river of the classical underworld is also referenced later in the novel when, in Bk 2, Ch.13, John Harmon recalls what actually happened to him in the beginning. He makes much of the fact that he came out of the river on the opposite side from that where he went in to it:

'As to this hour I cannot understand that side of the river where I recovered the shore, being the opposite side to that on which I was ensnared, I shall never understand it now. Even at this moment, while I leave the river behind me, going home, I cannot conceive that it rolls between me and that spot, or that the sea is where it is.' (*OMF* 385)

In this part of the river, with its wide meanders and eddies caused by the strong running tide, this is in fact not surprising at all. By having Harmon draw so much attention to the circumstance, Dickens foregrounds it as a river *crossing*, rather than merely an immersion, and this surely echoes the mythical crossing of the Styx. This idea is supported by the fact that Harmon has also in one sense died at this point, as explored in Ch.5 above.

The idea of people visiting an underworld of the river, placing themselves in danger in order to discover secrets, can also perhaps be seen in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, where various characters visit Quilp at the wharf and the 'wilderness'. These characters include Sampson and Sally Brass, Kit, Little Nell and Mrs Quilp. However, they go on a variety of missions, the secrets they might find are not so clearly defined, and the classical elements not so well developed as in the four main examples given above.

### **The supernatural characters**

An additional factor in the presentation of the river as underworld is the presence there of supernatural elements. This point goes beyond the debate about whether Dickens's characters are naturalistic in the first place. Critics in the tradition of Henry James have said that Dickens's characters are not realistic; James called them 'inhuman'.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile those in the tradition of John Ruskin have acknowledged that Dickens may have a fantastical method of describing character, but say that at heart his descriptions are, in Ruskin's words, 'truthful and accurate'.<sup>37</sup> This is similar to the position Dickens himself took in defence against the charge of caricature: that some of his characters' traits may represent the furthest extremes of human nature, but that they were all actually present in human nature.<sup>38</sup>

This study shares the latter view with regard to the majority of Dickensian characterisation. It accepts John Romano's position that: 'Dickens's "exaggerations" are faithful imitations of reality's own exaggerated specimens',<sup>39</sup> but with significant exceptions. Northrop Frye places Quilp in the same category of 'monsters' with Uriah Heep,<sup>40</sup> but I suggest there is a fundamental difference. Heep may be a very extreme character type, but there is nothing actually supernatural about him, whereas there is about Quilp. He is one of two characters belonging to river settings who fall outside the scope of human nature and are presented as if they are actually supernatural, which greatly strengthens the impression of those settings as types of a classical underworld. The other is Rogue Riderhood, of *Our Mutual Friend*, with whom I shall begin.

Rogue Riderhood is developed as a supernatural character through his accident with the river steamer, which has nothing to do with any of the plots of the novel, but is there merely to make him what he is. His boat cut in two when run down by the steamer, he is plunged into the river and nearly drowns, but is grappled out again and taken to the Fellowship's, where the doctor succeeds in reviving him. Though unlikely, these events in themselves are not impossible. A person whose lungs have filled with water can recover if it can be got out again fast enough. The proceedings of the doctor are vague, but the term 'artificial respiration' is at one point used.

However, Rogue's case is different from this, and the difference is in the narration. The event is described not as a near-drowning but as an actual drowning, and Rogue is repeatedly referred to as if he is actually dead. Tom says 'He's been under water a long time, Miss; but they've grappled up the body.' Miss Abbey, too, refers to him as 'the body', and as 'it' rather than him. The narrator also adopts the impersonal pronoun, and refers to him as 'the burden', 'the outer husk and shell of Riderhood', 'the body', and as 'the empty form that lies upon the bed'. He is carried on a 'bier'; the doctor examines 'the dank carcase'; Tom is afraid "'to speak ill of the dead'" about him; and, *in the words of the narrator*, Captain Joey carries 'the drowned man's neckerchief'. (all from *OMF* 459-463) Throughout this episode the narrator maintains the declarative mood of the verb and, as Rogue revives, a strong impression is therefore maintained that he is literally coming back from the dead:

He is struggling to come back. (*OMF* 462)

And now he begins to breathe naturally, and he stirs, and the doctor declares him to have come back from that inexplicable journey where he stopped on the dark road, and to be here. (*OMF* 464)

The low, bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river, or what other depths, to the surface again. (*OMF* 464)

Having, in fact, returned to life ... (*OMF* 465)

The mode of narration has therefore turned this episode into a supernatural event. Accordingly, from this point in the novel onwards a strange superstition attaches to the Rogue and everyone, down to the most desperate characters of Limehouse Hole, becomes afraid of him. His daughter, Pleasant Riderhood, hopes that his resurrection might have transformed him into a different kind of person morally. She has: 'some vague idea that the old evil is drowned out of him,' (*OMF* 463), but in this idea she is soon to be disappointed. Later on it works for Eugene, but not for him. Because of this experience, Riderhood also superstitiously believes himself to be immune from drowning a second time, which is why, at the end, he faces Bradley Headstone on the lock side with such confidence: "'Stop! What are you trying at? You can't drown Me. Ain't I told you that the man as

has come through drowning can never be drowned? I can't be drowned.'" As they plunge into the lock, of course, Headstone breaks this spell by combining Riderhood's murder with his own suicide.

Having been through the mode of narration actually drowned the first time, Rogue might be said to occupy a condition of being both dead and alive at the same time, throughout the period between his two drownings, and this is an idea which has been developed in a study of the novel by Daniel Scoggin. He postulates a state of 'living-deadness', though he applies it to John Harmon rather than to the Rogue. The extent to which Harmon may be considered to have died when he is converted into Julius Handford has been considered in Ch.5 above, but the idea of 'living-deadness' does seem a useful one to apply also to the Rogue. Scoggin identifies the state of 'living-deadness' with that of the vampire, and suggests that Dickens may have been influenced by the popular vampire fiction of the period: particularly John Poldori's *The Vampyre* (1819) and Malcolm Rymer's *Varney the Vampire* penny dreadfuls of the 1840s.<sup>41</sup>

Scoggin's study goes on to suggest that the economy of *Our Mutual Friend* is 'vampiric', as he puts it in his title, on the basis that many of the financial speculations of the novel are essentially parasitic. He also draws a comparison with the lawyer Vholes in *Bleak House*, who is also parasitic and who, according to Scoggin, physically resembles a stereotypical vampire. This seems right for the 'long black figure' of Vholes, and Esther does actually make the comparison between him and a vampire. (See, for example, *BH* 827-8.) It is also true that the financial speculations of *Our Mutual Friend* are indeed parasitic, from the major ones of the Harmon inheritance and Mr Boffin's dust heaps, right down to minor speculations like the Lammles' marriage, though it is much harder to see the actions of the vampire in these.

However, the state of 'living-deadness' does seem very right for the Rogue, and the way in which he preys upon Eugene and Bradley, and tries to exploit the supposed Harmon murder as an informer can be seen, in Scoggin's term, as 'vampiric' because, amongst other things, he tries to prey upon the dead. It supports his supernatural status and therefore the idea that he inhabits an underworld, as being a place inhabited by the vampire, but also on the classical model by the animated dead. He is also of course inextricably associated with the river, as a longshoreman, being employed as a lock-keeper, giving his occupation at one point as 'waterside character' (*OMF* 155) and being elsewhere referred to by Eugene as a "'water-rat!'" (*OMF* 176) He therefore unites the concepts of river and underworld, and the lock he tends is aptly described as 'spectral'. (*OMF* 732)

I turn now to Daniel Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop*, the grotesque dwarf who feeds Nell's grandfather's gambling habit, abuses his wife, and generally plots against and persecutes various characters throughout the novel. There are several very unnatural things about this character. Firstly, he seems to possess a supernatural power of knowing things which he has no means of knowing. The wanderings of Nell and her grandfather about the countryside are dictated entirely by the chance of their adventures, nobody in London has any idea where they are, and yet, their journey being pretty well advanced, the unaided Quilp manages to trace them to the town where Jarley's wax-works puts up. He even gets there first, appearing as if by magic in a niche of the old town gateway.<sup>42</sup> He also seems to possess an unnatural degree of physical strength. Hablot Browne's original illustrations support the narrator's descriptions of him as a miniature person, quite badly deformed, and yet he seems to be capable of acts of great violence against his wife, against Kit, and against the errand boy Tom Scott. They are all physically terrified of him.



Fig. 10: *Quilp Defies the Dog* by Hablot K. Browne, 1841.

Part of his strength consists in an ability to endure unendurable physical conditions. For example, when he meets Sampson and Sally Brass in the summer-house of 'the Wilderness', the cold is unendurable to both of them, and Sampson's teeth 'chatter[] in his head', but to Quilp it is a 'choice retreat'. (OCS 376) Similarly, the counting-house of Quilp's wharf is always full of smoke, thus additionally infernal, and nobody is able to breathe properly in there but Quilp himself. See, for example, the episodes when he is visited there by Sampson Brass and by his own wife.

He is consistently described by the narrator in devilish terms: for example as an ‘evil genius’, or ‘some familiar demon’, or as ‘represent[ing] and embody[ing] that Evil Power [the devil himself]’. (*OCS* 352, 359 & 358) In relation to Nell and her grandfather, he himself promises to be ‘their evil genius yet’, (*OCS* 505) and he tortures the Brass siblings, the narrator, gives, for ‘the gratification of his demon whims’. (*OCS* 377) Quilp’s daemonic image is reinforced by his association with the element of fire, which is presented in extreme, unnatural terms. He is distinctively characterised by his penchant for boiling rum, which he consumes for example on this occasion at a meeting with Sampson Brass. Brass complains that ‘it’s burning hot’, whereupon:

Mr Quilp raised the hot saucepan to his lips, and deliberately drank off all the spirit it contained, which might have been in quantity about half a pint, and had been but a moment before when he took it off the fire, bubbling and hissing fiercely. (*OCS* 458)

This is clearly impossible. When Brass asks for water, Quilp responds: ‘Water for lawyers! Melted lead and brimstone, you mean, nice hot blistering pitch and tar – that’s the thing for them ...’. (*OCS* 459) Dick Swiveller calls him a ‘salamander’, which the narrator echoes by calling him ‘a fire-proof man.’ (*OCS* 170-1)

The imagery of hell and the devil in all these passages is insistent, and Quilp’s devilish character is finally very powerfully evoked by his association with the element of fire in his death scene. In his hurry to escape his pursuers at the wharf, he puts out a candle, and accidentally upsets the stove: ‘which came tumbling forward, and fell with a crash upon the burning embers it had shot forth in its descent, leaving the room in pitchy darkness’. As the building catches fire he makes his way outside but cannot find his way, it being, as he says: ‘A good, black, devil’s night this’, (*OCS* 505) and falls into the river. As he drowns, he sees a ‘hundred fires that danced before his eyes’, which ‘tremble and flicker’, and in the description of his washed-up corpse which closes the chapter the narrator gives:

The sky was red with flame, and the water that bore it [the body] there had been tinged with the sullen light as it flowed along. The place the deserted carcass had left so recently, a living man, was now a blazing ruin. There was something of the glare upon its face. (*OCS* 506)

Here the combination of ‘burning embers’, ‘pitchy darkness’ and Quilp’s own description of a ‘devil’s night’ strongly point up the infernal character of this scene, while the dramatic contrast between the elements of fire and water reflects some of the imagery described in Ch.4 above, and further reinforces the classical tenor of Dickens’s discourse of the river generally.

The character of Quilp may have been suggested to Dickens partly by a devilish and seemingly supernatural figure, dubbed ‘Spring-Heeled Jack’ who actually appeared in the riverside areas of London throughout the decade of the 1830s, immediately preceding the writing of this novel.

Contemporary police reports tell of a strange figure, a tall, thin man enveloped in a long black cloak with a white oilskin suit beneath it, a large helmet and metallic claws, whose eyes resembled red fires and who belched forth blue and white flames at people he accosted, usually young women, and bounded around with unnatural agility, hence the soubriquet. He was known as ‘the terror of London’ but was never apprehended and soon inspired a mythology which identified him as the offspring of the devil, being described by some witnesses as possessing horns and cloven feet. It has been suggested that he may have been some kind of lunatic circus performer, a fire-eater who wore a mask to protect his face. There were sightings of him at Limehouse, and he was said to have thrown a prostitute into the Thames at Jacob’s Island – both of these places being, of course, important Dickensian riverside settings.<sup>43</sup> Whether or not Spring-Heeled Jack has any place in the genesis of *Quilp*, he supplies an interesting point of comparison, as a well-known contemporary figure who would have helped to associate riverside settings with a demesne of devils in the popular imagination and therefore, I suggest, with a kind of underworld.

This chapter has developed further the ideas in Ch.5 about the river being a locus of death, to suggest its representation by Dickens as an underworld of the dead along mythic lines. However, it reveals some contrasts in the cultural associations which these two types of association evoke. While the cultural references of Ch.5 are predominantly Christian and Biblical, the references here tend to be classical, and extensively so. They reveal Dickens to be more strongly influenced by classical ideas than is often recognised,<sup>44</sup> and shows how Christian ideas are blended with classical ones in a complex way in the cultural and iconographical frames of reference within which he operates.

From Dickens’s creation of an underworld for London along classical lines may also, perhaps, be deduced an additional nuance in his attitudes towards social reform. There is of course no doubt that he was himself a tireless activist for reform, as evidenced by the novels themselves as well as his journalism, his philanthropic actions, his support for Mary Furley and other unfortunates, his speeches including many to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association, and of course his commitment over at least a 10 year period to the Urania Cottage project itself.<sup>45</sup> There is also no reason to doubt that he believed in the real possibilities of substantive reform. However, one of the effects of his use of the river in configuring London’s underworld of crime, violence, disease, poverty and prostitution is to make it seem more cut off from the upper world: a more final destination from which the potential for return, and for Christian forgiveness, seems more excluded.

In the episode explored in *David Copperfield*, for example, the world of the river to which Martha belongs is made to seem completely separate from that of the city to which David and Mr Peggotty belong, and the only hope is to prevent Emily from also sinking into it: for Martha herself there is no hope of rescue and none is attempted. In the real world of Dickens and Miss Burdett Coutts, an individual such as Martha would presumably be a realistic candidate for Urania Cottage, but in the imaginative world of the fiction its refuge is completely beyond her reach. The same may be said of the other denizens of Dickens's riparian underworld: of Nancy, of Rogue Riderhood, of Quilp or Rigaud, all of whom are morally irretrievable in different ways. In his creation of an underworld of the river, then, Dickens may actually be expressing some degree of underlying pessimism about how much the reformers could really achieve.

## Notes to Ch.6

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- <sup>1</sup> See Ackroyd (1990) pp.563-4.  
<sup>2</sup> Tambling (2009) p.262.  
<sup>3</sup> Cited in Ackroyd (2008) p.155.  
<sup>4</sup> See Thacker (1914) p.169.  
<sup>5</sup> See Thacker (1914) p.184.  
<sup>6</sup> See *RP* 160-161.  
<sup>7</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.343.  
<sup>8</sup> See, for example, *UT* 139, and of course all the descriptions of Limehouse Hole in *Our Mutual Friend*.  
<sup>9</sup> Gissing (1898) p.34.  
<sup>10</sup> Letter to Mrs S.C. Hall of 29 December 1838. See *Letters*, vol.1, p.481.  
<sup>11</sup> Mayhew (1851) p.37.  
<sup>12</sup> See the whole of Ch.47 in Ackroyd (2001) for an account of this air pollution.  
<sup>13</sup> For a full account of the east wind in Victorian London and in *Bleak House*, see Schwarzbach (1979) p.126.  
<sup>14</sup> Ackroyd (2001) p.428.  
<sup>15</sup> See *RP* 152-162.  
<sup>16</sup> As described in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. See Freud (1900) pp.414-419.  
<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Ackroyd (2001) p.377, or Tambling (2009) p.261.  
<sup>18</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) p.306.  
<sup>19</sup> Ackroyd (2001) p.342  
<sup>20</sup> Tambling (2009) p.252.  
<sup>21</sup> As cited in Allen (2008) pp.59-60.  
<sup>22</sup> Allen (2008) pp. 15 & 59.  
<sup>23</sup> Allen (2008) p.63.  
<sup>24</sup> Forster (1892) p.20.  
<sup>25</sup> Slater (2010) lecture.  
<sup>26</sup> See Ackroyd (1991) p.116, or Kaplan (1988) p.45.  
<sup>27</sup> See 'Our School' in *RP*, p.191. Admittedly, this claim has been said to be 'doubtful': see 'V.R.' (1945) p.232.  
<sup>28</sup> See Crawford (1997) p.186, on the 1844 inventory of the library at Devonshire Terrace.  
<sup>29</sup> As evidenced by the 1844 inventory and the Gad's Hill library catalogue. See Fletcher (1998) p.8.  
<sup>30</sup> See Crawford (1997), pp.185-197.  
<sup>31</sup> See Fletcher (1998) pp.1-22.  
<sup>32</sup> eg *BH* 11 but throughout.  
<sup>33</sup> In a speech of 1858 cited, for example, in Ackroyd (2001) p.344 and Sanders (2010) p.50.  
<sup>34</sup> Scheick (2007) p.411.  
<sup>35</sup> Jerome (1889) p.164.  
<sup>36</sup> When reviewing *Our Mutual Friend* in *The Nation*, 21 December 1865. See James (1865) online version.  
<sup>37</sup> Letter of 6 June 1841 to W.H. Harrison. See Ruskin (1841) p.103.  
<sup>38</sup> See, for example, his remarks about Mr Pecksniff and Mrs Nickleby, cited in Romano (1978) p.24.

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<sup>39</sup> Romano (1978) p.24.

<sup>40</sup> As cited in Romano (1978) p.23.

<sup>41</sup> Scoggin (2002) p.101.

<sup>42</sup> See the end of Ch. 27, *OCS* 203 onwards.

<sup>43</sup> See Ackroyd (2001) pp.500-502.

<sup>44</sup> See Slater (2010) lecture but also, for example, 'V.R.' (1945) p.232.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Slater (2009) pp.268-9.

## Conclusion

Throughout Dickens's prolific strain of writing about the river, it emerges as a powerful, menacing, even deadly force. This is consistent with the menace he perceives in nature generally, but is greatly magnified in his conception of the river, which obtrudes itself so much more largely on his imagination through his experience of the Thames in London. For him it is most significantly a relentless, unstoppable force beyond the reach of human control, and these are the qualities which emerge most strongly in his many uses of the force of the river to signify forces at work within human society. His conception of the relentlessness of the river is thus translated into a sense of relentless sociological forces which may not, after all, be as susceptible to human intervention as might have been hoped. This in turn suggests a strain of Dickens's thinking which is pessimistic about change and therefore surprisingly conservative in social and even political terms, given his reputation as such an energetic campaigner for social reform. As such it is, by way of conclusion, worth considering the degree to which this strain of social conservatism may be present as a unifying factor in his attitudes towards the range of subject matter covered by this thesis.

Dickens's credentials as a reformer are well established. As Sally Ledger writes: 'That Dickens was a radical political writer on the side of the poor and the dispossessed was blazingly clear to his contemporaries and to many critics in the first half of the twentieth century,' and she goes on to say that his: 'popular radicalism was powerfully combined with a consciousness that he could try to bring about positive social and political change, and to this extent he was a thoroughly instrumental writer'.<sup>1</sup> Hugh Cunningham is just one among many who have enumerated the social ills against which Dickens campaigned, and these campaigns very often translate into critical positions in the novels.<sup>2</sup> That such positions could sometimes contribute to effective reform is also not in question. Dickens's campaign for sanitary reform, for example, would have helped to build the political will which was required in the 1860s to mobilise the colossal Bazalgette project.

However, criticism of the status quo does not necessarily translate into optimism about change, and there is another recognised dimension to Dickens's political stance which may be characterised as distinctly conservative. Sally Ledger's assessment is qualified by the observation that: 'Most subsequent critics ... have followed Humphry House's 1941 evaluation of Dickens as an essentially middle-class writer committed to middle-class values.'<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, even though writing about him specifically as a reformer, Cunningham suggests that there were others with a better claim to the title, and that:

Dickens stood on shifting and uncomfortable ground amongst such reformers, his responses to situations often seeming to attract the label of ‘conservative’ as much as ‘radical’. This does not mean that he did not attack abuses in his society, nor that his reputation as a reformer was undeserved; rather, his responses to particular issues were shaped by his abiding concern for decency and humanity, and not by any coherent doctrine of the proper role of the state.<sup>4</sup>

‘Decency’ and ‘humanity’ are clearly among the ‘middle-class values of which Ledger writes, but there are some quite socially divisive values among them, too.

This is what, in a full-length work on the subject, Myron Magnet has referred to as ‘the *other* Dickens’:<sup>5</sup> a man who was passionate about the imposition of order and control on society, and who reacted quite hysterically when things got out of control. As Magnet writes, he: ‘had an almost fanatical devotion to the Metropolitan Police’, members of which he used to entertain at the *Household Words* office during the 1860s,<sup>6</sup> and indeed six of the 29 *Reprinted Pieces* from that periodical are devoted to his exploits on patrol with them. He had his own copy of the Police Act, and Magnet relates how he sometimes intervened when he saw offences being committed and offenders being apprehended on the street, bullying police officers into making arrests and pressing charges which they might otherwise not have done, and on one occasion being referred to by the magistrate at the resulting trial as: ‘a much more objectionable person than the prisoner’. He also relates how Dickens railed against ‘ruffians’, whom he called ‘the common enemy to be punished and exterminated’, complaining that the government failed in its duty of clearing the streets of them; how he approved of severe penal measures, for deterrent rather than rehabilitative purposes; how he once tried to prosecute a begging-letter writer; how he even canvassed for appointment to the paid magistracy of London.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile Dickens’s opinions of foreigners are conservative to the point of racism. His genocidal reaction to the Indian mutiny has already been quoted in chapter two above, and Magnet notes how he: ‘range[d] himself with Carlyle in support of Governor Eyre’s notoriously brutal suppression of the 1864 Negro uprising in Jamaica’.<sup>8</sup> In ‘The Noble Savage’, an 1853 piece for *Household Words*, he unleashes an extraordinary tirade of invective against primitive peoples, saying they are: ‘highly desirable to be civilised off the face of the earth’, and going on to call the savage: ‘cruel, false, thievish, murderous ... a wild animal ...’. (RP 95) Even in a fairly measured work such as *American Notes*, the white Americans come in for harsh treatment at the hands of British middle-class prejudice.

Magnet analyses what he calls this ‘conservative tendency’ in Dickens not in terms of spontaneous outbursts as some other critics have done,<sup>9</sup> but as a systematic part of a world view: ‘these

sentiments, often expressed with disquietingly excessive zeal, ... derive from a way of seeing the world which – though its influence is marked in Dickens's late books – nevertheless resolved itself into clear focus early in his novelistic career'.<sup>10</sup> A substantial part of Magnet's study then goes on to deal with *Barnaby Rudge*, and the ways in which it expresses conservative middle-class fears about the breakdown of civilisation.<sup>11</sup> This discussion has much in common with my reading in chapter four of the rioters in the same novel and in *A Tale of Two Cities*. In these novels the powerful use of river and fluid imagery to evoke the power of the mob expresses a real horror of social unrest, very much in keeping with what Jules Law has demonstrated about Victorian perceptions of the menace of fluidity itself.

Loss of control is also at the heart of what Law has described as the fluid threat to the autonomy of the individual, which is vividly expressed by the overwhelming number of references to drowning in Dickens's work. As chapter five has shown, this insistent motif of drowning expresses a horror of being submerged, disfigured, unidentified or entirely lost, and carried away by forces beyond the control of the individual. Dickens adds a further, infernal dimension to the fluidity of the mob in the historical novels by combining the primal elements of fire and water in the imagery of the riot scenes, and by endowing characters such as Hugh with such monstrous qualities and propensities. As Magnet points out, for Dickens the antidote to such disorder is: 'paternal authority, [which] establishes a hold upon the individual, severely restricting the dark impulses of anarchic aggression ingrained in every human heart':<sup>12</sup> a reactionary, authoritarian and fundamentally conservative response.

This paternalistic tendency towards control of the population may also be answerable for Dickens's impulse towards keeping different sections of the population in their places, whether they be north or south of the river, in City, Town or country. As chapter three has shown, he asserts the power of the old City of London and divides the whole metropolis, along with the countryside upstream, into distinct zones, using the river as a two-fold axis which resists any tendency for the zones to merge or bleed into one another. By making river crossings significant, difficult or transforming, Dickens also places a barrier in the way of people's movements, and this further helps to create a sense of external control being imposed upon them, just as the state had regulated and taxed crossings of London Bridge for centuries before his time. This sense of control is strengthened by the use of the Thames itself as a zone in its own right, to signify an underworld to London, barely penetrable to outsiders, for the denizens of which there is little hope of escape. As chapter six has shown, Dickens sets up a relatively impermeable barrier between the two worlds of London's mainstream society and its underworld, implying that the elements which inhabit the latter are largely

irredeemable. His recognisable use of the classical trope of the visit to the underworld to learn secrets helps to reinforce the separation, because the inhabitants of a classical underworld cannot return to life, and it is further reinforced by the inhuman properties of characters such as Rogue Riderhood and Daniel Quilp.

These impulses towards ordering society around its landscape can all be interpreted in terms of the political gaze of the picturesque, which is very present to Dickens's river scenes. Notwithstanding the progressive agenda of *Pictures from Italy*, these scenes evoke images of the historical picturesque in which the observer, and certain higher-status characters, occupy secure positions of power in relation to the landscape they survey and certain other, lower-status characters who inhabit it. Thus, for example, the relationships of Florence Dombey with the poor man and his daughter at Fulham, of David Copperfield with the Peggotty family in their land-boat at Yarmouth, and of Pip with the Barley household at Mill Pond Bank, are all patrician to the point of feudality, and Dickens maintains very secure class boundaries between such higher-status characters and the people they are dealing with.

The picturesque scenes of dockyards and of shipping are also markedly nostalgic, with their emphasis on rigging and their privileging of sail over steam, and these also suggest a traditional, confidently conservative vision of the empire which places Britain in a secure position of power in relation to the rest of the world. As Bella Wilfer surveys the shipping at Greenwich, as explored in chapter two, the fantasy she conjures up is not only wholly optimistic, but also a very innocent invention, ignorant of real conditions in other countries and redolent of an empire yet to be explored, while the embarkation scenes of Walter Gay, the Micawber family and others are filled with adventure. Even on the one sustained occasion when Dickens expresses a problematic empire, through the returner Magwitch, he still has him depart for Australia in a ship which looks to Pip like 'Noah's ark'.

If the picturesque gaze suggests a conservative view of a stratified society in which the possibilities of social mobility are limited, that does not have to mean that Dickens felt such conditions to be desirable – indeed his campaigns for reform clearly show he did not. However, it does indicate a belief that such conditions were in some way natural and hard to resist. Things may not have been in their perfect places, but at least they were in their places. This is the middle-class, socially conservative impulse which has been noticed by others and which, as this thesis has shown, is partly played out through Dickens's conception of social forces signified by the natural forces of the river.

## Notes to the Conclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Ledger (2007) p.2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Cunningham (2008) pp.160, 164, 166, 168 & 170 on utilitarianism, political economy, workhouses and the New Poor Law of 1834, child labour, education and the political process. On Dickens's tireless campaign for sanitary reform, see his speeches to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association, for example on 10 May 1851: Fielding, ed. (1960) p.129.

<sup>3</sup> Ledger (2007) p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Cunningham (2008) p.159.

<sup>5</sup> Magnet (1985) p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Magnet (1985) p.1.

<sup>7</sup> See Magnet (1985) pp.1-3.

<sup>8</sup> Magnet (1985) pp.3-4.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Anthony Chennells, who attributes 'The Noble Savage' to Dickens's isolated reaction to seeing some Zulu performers in London. Jacobson, ed. (2000) p.166.

<sup>10</sup> Magnet (1985) p.4.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, Magnet (1985) p.102 etc.

<sup>12</sup> Magnet (1985) p.146.

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Vol. 18: Companion volume

(All dates refer to completion of serialization.)

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