

# The Storm Scene in *David Copperfield*

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CHAPTER 55 of *David Copperfield* ("Tempest") is by general account one of the best-remembered passages in the whole of Dickens. Dickens drew on his deepest imaginative strengths in creating the scene and the result, as Forster said, "is a description that may compare with the most impressive in the language."<sup>1</sup> For Ruskin, who thought Turner's painting of the steamer in distress merely "a good study of wild weather," there was nothing in either painting or literature to compare with Dickens' storm.<sup>2</sup> Later readers, too, have responded with similar enthusiasm to the brilliant description of the furious wind and sea and to the high drama of Ham's vain attempt to save Steerforth from drowning. Yet several questions remain to be asked about this passage. Dickens' novels contain a good many storm scenes of one kind or another, why is this scene so much more memorable than any of the others? Is it simply a question of more powerfully sustained writing, or of something more? On the face of it, like any other writer producing a storm at a climactic moment, Dickens ran the risk of lapsing into mere contrivance: why is it that the reader has no real sense of things being forced or exploited in this chapter? Why does this storm have a poetic relevance and value in relation to larger happenings in the novel where other fictional storms do not? In the present article I should like to look more closely at these questions.

Dickens, of course, was well-practised in utilising the dramatic effects of storms in his writings by the time he came to *David Copperfield*. The early novels fully exploit the theatrical effects of storms for the purpose of heighten-

ing suspense and creating a threatening atmosphere. The result, not surprisingly, is very often stagey and melodramatic. In *Oliver Twist*, for example, as the Bumbles go to their nocturnal meeting with Monks in the dismal waterside warehouse, "The clouds, which had been threatening all day, spread out in a dense and sluggish mass of vapour, already yielded large drops of rain, and seemed to presage a violent thunderstorm" (Ch. 38), and the meeting itself is suitably accompanied by growing peals of thunder. There is a very similar exploitation of effects at key moments in both *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In the first, Nell and her grandfather are trapped in the wayside gambling den while a violent storm rages outside — with more than a hint that the Devil is abroad (Ch. 29), while in the second Jonas Chuzzlewit and Montague Tigg drive along on their ill-fated coach-ride to a background of thunder and lightning: "The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed; the rain poured down like Heaven's wrath" (Ch. 42). The theatricality of this is such that we almost expect a rhyme for "flashed" at the end of the quotation. One suspects a good deal of self-indulgence in these scenes, and Dickens clearly enjoyed borrowing his melodramatic effects from the popular theatre of the day. At the same time, though, he clearly had his sights set on more serious symbolic uses for storms in his novels and also looked to Shakespeare for inspiration. The novel, he may well have felt, offered possibilities for storm scenes much more powerful than those to be found in the theatre. Certainly when he went to see Macready's revival of Shakespeare's (as opposed to Tate's) *Lear* in 1838, his great admiration for the production was slightly tempered by his sense that something more might have been done with the storm scene: "Other parts of these scenes wanted more of tumultuous extravagance, more of a preternatural cast of wildness."<sup>3</sup> Dickens' feelings about theatrical productions may have been the same as Ruskin's about painting: when it came to storms, nothing could match a literary treatment.

Dickens' own early "tumultuous extravagance" can be seen most glaringly in the melodramatics of *Barnaby Rudge*. Here the storm-laden atmosphere of Shakespeare's tragedies takes on new excesses and the world of man is firmly linked to a world of violent natural forces: "There are times when the elements being in unusual commotion, those who are bent on daring enterprises, or agitated by great thoughts, whether of good or evil, feel a mysterious sympathy with the tumult of nature and are roused into corresponding violence" (Ch. 2). This may well be a Romantic rather than an Elizabethan doctrine but it clearly owes something to a reading of *Macbeth* and *Lear*.<sup>4</sup> Whatever its origin, however, the doctrine becomes a licence for extravagance in *Barnaby Rudge* and as the novel goes on Dickens strains for all kinds of sensational effects as the storms of the earlier chapters merge into the violence of the mob in the later ones. In Chapter 33, for example, the doors and windows of the house are being shaken by a "bitter storm of sleet"; by Chapter 49 they are being smashed to pieces by the mob: "The mob raged and roared, like a mad monster as it was, unceasingly, and each new outrage served to swell its fury." By this time the elemental power of the storm has taken a human form and the elements and man are seen working together in a single act of destruction: "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" (Ch. 55). Dickens never again reached these heights (or depths) of horror and sensation, but his taste for such things surfaces again of course nearly twenty years later in *A Tale of Two Cities* where there is a similar preoccupation with riot and slaughter in terms of raging elements (see especially Bk. 2, Chs. 21-24).

There is no need to dwell on Dickens' liking for melodramatic storms, of course, but the early novels do provide a good background for a closer look at the *David Copper-*

*field* chapter. In this connexion it may be helpful to bring together two extracts; one from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the other from a key moment in the *David Copperfield* chapter. The first describes more fully the Jonas Chuzzlewit-Montague Tigg coach-ride already briefly referred to above:

It was very dark; but in the murky sky there were masses of cloud which shone with a lurid light like monstrous heaps of copper that had been heated in a furnace, and were growing cold. . . . The thunder rolled, the lightning flashed; the rain poured down like Heaven's wrath. Surrounded at one moment by intolerable light, and at the next by pitchy darkness, they still pressed forward on their journey . . . . Louder and louder the deep thunder rolled, as through the myriad halls of some vast temple in the sky; fiercer and brighter became the lightning; more and more heavily the rain poured down. The horses (they were travelling now with a single pair) plunged and started from the rills of quivering fire that seemed to wind along the ground before them; but there these two men sat, and forward they went as if they were led on by an invisible attraction. (Ch. 42)

Against this may be set the following passage from *David Copperfield* which describes David's journey down to Yarmouth:

It was a murky confusion — here and there blotted with a colour like the colour of the smoke from damp fuel — of flying clouds, tossed up into the most remarkable heaps, suggesting greater heights in the clouds than there were depths below them to the bottom of the deepest hollows in the earth, through which the wild moon seemed to plunge headlong, as if, in a dread disturbance of the laws of nature, she had lost her way and were frightened. There had been a wind all day; and it was rising then, with an extraordinary great sound. In another hour it had much increased, and the sky was more overcast, and blew hard.

But, as the night advanced, the clouds closing in and densely overspreading the whole sky, then very dark, it came on to blow, harder and harder. It still increased, until our horses could scarcely face the wind. Many times, in the dark part of the night (it was then late in September, when the nights were not short), the leaders turned about, or came to a dead stop; and we were often in serious apprehension that the coach would be blown over. Sweeping gusts of rain came up before this storm, like showers of steel; and, at those times, when there was any shelter of trees or lee walls to be got, we were fain to stop, in a sheer impossibility of continuing the struggle. (Ch. 55)

The main difference between these two passages is the difference between a mere *tour de force* and a passage of real descriptive power. The first is chock full of strained images and false poetic effects — “like monstrous heaps of copper . . .,” “rills of quivering fire”, etc. — and often runs into straight clichés with its “lurid” light, “pitchy” darkness, “vast temple of the sky” and “Heaven’s wrath.” Dickens is intent on thrilling the reader and nothing more. The second passage, however, is very different. There is no stage thunder and lightning and no attempt to create gratuitously startling effects (compare the description of the clouds in each passage). The second passage gains its power not so much from striking or vivid images as from a gradual buildup of tension with the increase of the wind; and this build-up of course extends for several paragraphs more. The scene has what Dickens found wanting in Macready’s storm scenes in *Lear*, a “preternatural wildness” and a sense of foreboding. Dickens one feels is aiming to achieve effects closer to those in Wordsworth’s poetry (cf. “the sky seemed not a sky/ of earth — and with what motion moved the clouds!” *Prelude*, Bk. I, 11. 338-39) than to the spurious melodrama of his earlier storm scenes. The painfully difficult journey to Yarmouth through this storm is one of a fearful approach to some unknown climax, and this climax manifests itself as a sea raised to a terrible power by the wind: “As we struggled on, nearer and nearer to the sea, from which this mighty wind was blowing dead on shore, its force became more and more terrific. Long before we saw the sea, its spray was on our lips, and showered salt rain upon us.” The sea itself, once seen, is like a vision of another world, an image of nature re-shaping itself into a new and terrifying form:

The tremendous sea itself, when I could find sufficient pause to look at it, in the agitation of the blinding wind, the flying stones and sand, and the awful noise confounded me. As the high watery walls came rolling in, and at their highest, tumbled into surf, they looked as if the least would engulf the town. As the receding wave swept back with a hoarse roar, it seemed to scoop out deep caves in

the beach, as if its purpose were to undermine the earth. When some white-headed billows thundered on, and dashed themselves to pieces before they reached the land, every fragment of the late whole seemed possessed by the full might of its wrath, rushing to be gathered to the composition of another monster. Undulating hills were changed to valleys, undulating valleys (with a solitary storm-bird sometimes skimming through them) were lifted up to hills; masses of water shivered and shook the beach with a booming sound; every shape tumultuously rolled on, as soon as made, to change its shape and place, and beat another shape and place away; the ideal shore on the horizon, with its towers and buildings, rose and fell; the clouds fell fast and thick; I seemed to see a rending and upheaving of all nature.

This scene might well be compared with the great storm (also off Yarmouth) in the opening chapter of *Robinson Crusoe*, when "the sea went mountains high"; and Dickens was possibly remembering Defoe in this chapter. But the difference between the two scenes is clear: the storm in *Robinson Crusoe* is an instrument of divine retribution; a punishment for Crusoe's arrogance and recklessness. The storm scene in *David Copperfield* may partly suggest this in Steerforth's death, but the scene as a whole is less clearly allegorical in the *Robinson Crusoe* way and conveys a larger and more disturbing sense of calamity, as if the whole world is breaking up. The storm in *Robinson Crusoe* is terrible enough, but its power is felt in immediate and limited ways (mainly the inability of the sailors to control their ship) and there is no sense of such things being out of the ordinary (the storm is the first of several that Crusoe encounters). In *David Copperfield* the storm, for a moment at least, has something apocalyptic about it; an "upheaving of all nature" with distinct echoes of *King Lear* and the Bible, and Dickens nowhere else achieves such a sense of human helplessness in the face of universal disorder and crisis.

But the whole scene of course is not just a magnificent set-piece in the Turner-esque manner. It is seen through David's eyes and its full power comes from images, feelings and associations that are gradually accumulated in the

course of the novel. The part that Steerforth, Emily and Ham have played in David's life is all-important here, and so too is his whole sense of the past that belongs to Yarmouth. Yarmouth for David is a place of mixed and poignant memories; a haven from the sinister world represented by the Murdstones, and a place of real affection and love; yet also, later on, a place of bitterness and guilt. Yarmouth itself (like the dreary marshes in *Great Expectations*) is a desolate spot standing on the edge of an unknown world in the sea, and already on David's first visit the sea has ominous associations for him as he hears of Mr. Peggotty's drowned relations and listens to the wind on the flats and to Mrs. Gummidge's laments. David's own father is buried in the quiet churchyard shaded by trees, Emily's father is somewhere out in the depths of the sea. David's own uneasy feelings about death, therefore, are greatly heightened on his first Yarmouth visit.

As in *Dombey and Son*, we are always aware of the sea in *David Copperfield* and its presence is often a faintly uneasy one. In both novels the sea represents a transcendent realm beyond the human world,<sup>5</sup> but in *David Copperfield*, one feels, there is less exploitation of the sea as a mere symbol. In *Dombey and Son* the sea is more of a dream in the minds of Paul and Florence Dombey than a real presence (Walter Gay's shipwreck takes place offstage); in *David Copperfield* it is more actual and more troubling, and when David makes his later visits to Yarmouth storms are often in the offing. In Chapter 21, for example, when he takes Steerforth there for the first time, the atmosphere is dark and threatening, with the wind sighing even more mournfully, David tells us, "than it had sighed and moaned upon the night when I first darkened Mr Peggotty's door." In Chapter 31, when he is down there again and hears the awful news that Emily has run off with Steerforth, Ham's despair is firmly linked with a particular scene: "The face he turned up to the troubled sky, the quivering of his clasped hands, the agony of his figure, remain associ-

ated with the lonely waste, in my remembrance, to this hour." Sea and sky reflect, though not in any too obvious way, the troubled emotions of the Yarmouth world and suggest a larger dimension of unease and discord.

If the sea is a disturbing presence for David, it stirs Steerforth's imagination in another way. Bored by the social worlds of Oxford and London, he finds in the sea an image of his own restlessness and a chance to free some of his pent-up energy. Already by Chapter 22 he has taken to sailing under Mr Peggotty's tuition and is soon an expert pilot. While David prudently applies himself to his profession, falls in love and gets married, Steerforth (with no caul to protect him) becomes the demonic sailor, burning up his "fervent energy" in the "buffeting of rough seas, and braving of hard weather" (Ch. 28). Against David's quiet and purposeful life, Steerforth's is seen as a defiant quest for self-destruction. The last time we hear of him before the shipwreck he is "coasting Spain; and this done is away to gratify his seafaring tastes till he is weary" (Ch. 46). His death in the storm, waving his red cap, is all of a piece with this constitutional recklessness; so too is his cavalier return to Yarmouth — a place for him to avoid, one would have thought. Steerforth is the Romantic version of the Fielding-Smollett hero, the real successor to "Captain Somebody of the Royal British Navy" who lightened the dreary moments of David's boyhood, and David can never quite overcome his early admiration for Steerforth's dare-devil brilliance and energy whatever he has done to Emily and Ham. David's last glimpse of Steerforth alive is like a picture from one of his early story-books, and his last remembrance of him is as he was as a schoolboy: "I saw him lying with his head upon his arm, as I had often seen him lie at school." Throughout, Steerforth has offered David an image of freedom and daring which corresponds with his own private desire for adventure and excitement. David comes to reject this desire as he matures, but Steerforth's personal magnetism



never fails to pull him back towards his childhood and always reasserts their first relationship of hero and hero-worshipper. The final drama in the storm with David standing helplessly on the shore watching Steerforth fighting for life on the floundering ship epitomises the whole nature of this relationship.

David's feelings about Steerforth, then (and of course about Emily and Ham too), are an important part of his troubled state of mind as he makes his way to Yarmouth for the last time in Chapter 55. David's world is falling apart around him: Dora is dead, Mr Peggotty, Emily and the Micawbers are about to leave for Australia, and the Yarmouth home has been destroyed by Steerforth (something David feels partly responsible for). All David's journeys to Yarmouth awaken disturbing memories; this one is more painful than most, since he is carrying Emily's last message to Ham in what amounts to an expiatory act. David's sense of the storm, then, is coloured by his underlying sense of disaster and loss. The storm is certainly there in fact but it also reflects David's way of seeing the world at this moment of crisis in his life. His vision of the sea engulfing the land is a personal vision of calamity rather than an objective account of things. In other words its apocalyptic nature (like those apocalyptic moments in Wordsworth) is largely a matter of personal creation and apprehension. So too is the whole drama leading up to the drowning of Ham and Steerforth: it happens as stated, but the statement is coloured by David's own personal involvement in the scene, and his own sense of inadequacy and responsibility. Beneath this, though, lies a deeper lack of certainty and security, a feeling — formed in childhood and never properly come to terms with in adult life — that life itself is inherently unstable, threatening and violent. The stupendous sea threatening to engulf Yarmouth is for David an image of the convulsive nature of life itself; for part of the time he can indulge the illusion that life is steady and controllable, but every so often

it breaks its bounds and reduces him to a fearful child again. David's vision of the sea breaking on Yarmouth beach during the storm is essentially the vision of this child.

The rest of the novel is something of an anti-climax after the storm chapter, and one feels that Robert Graves was probably right in making the storm the real conclusion of the novel.<sup>6</sup> There is a somewhat contrived appearance to the "calm after the storm" episode when David is wandering through Europe and "great Nature" speaks to him (Ch. 58). This is plainly a resort to a weaker kind of Wordsworthian tactic. There is also something merely wishful about the later journeys of the novel, when whole families are safely conducted across calm seas to a new life in Australia. The tone of the later chapters is escapist and dreamlike, sorrows are greatly eased and problems neatly solved by the simple device of moving on, and the symbolism is flat and conventional, as if Dickens cannot resist making the most of his nature metaphors. David's own marriage to Agnes is bad enough as a piece of weak idealism, but the Australian vision (whatever Dickens' serious interest in emigration) is a sheer indulgence. In the artificial calm of the close the new lives we are asked to contemplate with satisfaction have much less interest for us than the earlier ones. The past with all its painful problems has been safely, but unconvincingly, buried.

The storm scene, then, is the natural climax of the novel and owes its power to a prevailing mood of unrest closely associated with the Yarmouth world in David's memory. Its success depends on the gradual build-up of personal crisis through the novel rather than on any sudden descriptive brilliance in Chapter 55. The symbolism is made clear at an early stage and develops naturally through the many references to sea and sky from that point on to the climax. The storm scene itself also seems to have been a climax in another sense: Dickens never again attempted anything similar on the same scale. Storm scenes do

crop up again in his later novels but usually briefly and dramatically (e.g. *Hard Times*, Bk. 2, Ch. 11); though there is a lively description of high winds in *Edwin Drood*, Ch. 14. The nearest Dickens came to recreating the mood of *David Copperfield* was in *Great Expectations*, his other novel of autobiographical development, which utilises similar imagery in terms of dreary marshes, moaning winds, and a gathering storm. The storm as such does not materialize in the *David Copperfield* manner, but on the night of Magwitch's return from Australia, the weather is wild and stormy and "gloomy accounts [had] come in from the coast of shipwreck and death" (Ch. 39). This atmosphere reawakens memories of Pip's childhood on the desolate marshes and prepares us for the re-entry of Magwitch, a figure from that past. It also of course takes us back to the troubled world of *David Copperfield* (and Dickens too);<sup>7</sup> a novel with a hero similarly threatened by the stirrings of memory and by a past he can never escape. Dickens withholds the climactic storm in *Great Expectations*, but for the moment one senses him working up towards it.

In the later novels, of course, Dickens develops other, and equally successful, kinds of symbolism for his fictional worlds (the fog and the rain in *Bleak House*, the dustheaps in *Our Mutual Friend*, and so on). In a sense he outgrows the obviousness of the storm symbolism to develop more sophisticated images in his best writing. In *David Copperfield* at least, however, he made the best possible use of the traditional atmospheric effects, reducing the suggestion of melodrama to a minimum, avoiding the excesses of his earlier storm pieces, and achieving through these effects a larger sense of unease in the novel. In the storm scenes of the earlier novels one is always thinking of the gothic novel or the popular theatre; in *David Copperfield* Shakespeare and Wordsworth come more readily to mind. *David Copperfield*, of course, is very much a novel of social and domestic concerns, but it is the first of Dickens' novels in which these concerns are successfully set against the wider back-

ground of the natural world; a world felt to be immeasurably larger than the human one, yet in tune with it at every point. The symbolism of sea, sky and storm is successfully integrated to achieve what amounts to a mystical dimension in the novel, and this mystical dimension is, on the whole, more acceptable than the ones found elsewhere in Dickens (see for example the "What the Waves were always saying" chapter in *Dombey and Son*). The storm scene itself is the finest part of this achievement, but it has to be seen in relation to the whole nature of David's experience and not as a mere *tour de force*.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, (London: Dent, 1966), II, 108.
- <sup>2</sup>John Ruskin, *Frondees Agrestes* (London: George Allen, 1906), p. 73.
- <sup>3</sup>"The Restoration of Shakespeare's 'Lear' to the Stage" in *Miscellaneous Papers*, (London: Chapman & Hall, 1911), I, 81.
- <sup>4</sup>For Dickens' debt to Shakespeare in this novel, see Sister M. Rosario, "Dickens and Shakespeare: Probable Sources of *Barnaby Rudge*," *English*, Summer 1970, pp. 43-48.
- <sup>5</sup>See J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965) pp. 148 ff.
- <sup>6</sup>Robert Graves, *The Real David Copperfield*, (London: Arthur Barker, 1933), Ch. 55. Characteristically, though, Graves shortens the chapter and gives the tremendous sea description to a visiting reporter from the *Morning Chronicle*.
- <sup>7</sup>While writing *Great Expectations* Dickens found himself thinking a good deal about *David Copperfield*. See Forster, II, 285.