Why do so many of the best Disney World attractions feature boats? There could be many reasons. On a hot summer day, when you have been standing in line for a long time, the splash of a flume ride can be very refreshing. A boat is a welcome variation on simple rollercoaster cars. But there are a number of rides in which the physical aspects of the ride itself — its speed, for example — are not, as with “Space Mountain,” say, part of the thrill. These rides are instead essentially scenic: they move you past a series of tableaux. The pleasure comes less from physical movement than from the act of viewing. “Jungle Cruise,” “20,000 Leagues Under the Sea,” “Pirates of the Caribbean” — these attractions all put viewers in boats to transport them through the scenery and past the animated displays.

The designers of these rides figured out what the Victorians had already discovered a hundred years earlier: that when you want a scene to be not just realistic but illusory, you need to convey a sense of movement in connection with it. Either the scene should move, or the viewer should move in relation to it. The hyperreality of Disney attractions comes from their combination of carefully crafted, moving figures with a careful orchestration of the viewer’s own gradual immersion in the scene. In each of the rides mentioned above, the water is not incidental but an integral part of the setting. They aren’t just amusement-park rides that happen to occur in boats: they are representations of boat rides in which the viewer watches events that occur along the shore. In this sense, they are the logical extension of entertainment trends begun 180 years earlier, when Victorian audiences packed theaters to watch moving panoramas unfold before their eyes.
When George Eliot, in *Adam Bede* (1850), described Arthur Donnithorne's shallow inner life through reference to the "panorama of Arthur's thoughts," she was drawing on an image with considerable popular currency. Her readers would have understood the scenic and theatrical nature of Arthur's sense of the world through Eliot's evocation of the contemporary craze for panoramas, enormous moving pictures that depicted places or journeys. The popularity of panoramas among people of all classes surged in the years 1845–1850, and interest in the form was sustained by Albert Smith's immensely popular entertainments, all of which were closely modeled on his initial hit "The Ascent of Mont Blanc" (1852). Smith and his many imitators presented monologues describing arduous journeys, with enormous scenic scrolls supplementing their travel narratives. Smith in particular was praised for his uncanny ability to magically transport his audiences to the scenes he described.

In this essay, I will trace the rise of scenic entertainments and connect them to a parallel development in literature of the period: a focus on descriptions of specific, real places that give primacy to the place itself rather than to thematic issues connected to the narratives in which scenic set-pieces are embedded. Paradoxically, the hunger for "armchair travel," for vicarious or simulated travel experiences, seemed to intensify as actual travel became more accessible and expedient. The fact that many people participated in the rise of tourism by taking their "tours" in homes and theaters suggests that, even as the British empire expanded and British travelers covered the globe, some British citizens preferred to enjoy their newfound knowledge of other places in a highly mediated form.

The most popular subjects of panoramas were river journeys that provided a sense of access into foreign lands by allowing the viewer to "travel" down the Nile, the Rhine, or the Mississippi. The river journey became a powerful metaphor for the movement of British culture abroad. Rivers, after all, frequently mark political boundaries; the traveler has equal access to either side but moves inexorably toward a goal that is predetermined. The British fascination with this mode of travel reflects a deepening anxiety about the authority of British culture. It reflects what Mary Louise Pratt has called the "anti-conquest," the "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony" (7).

By examining the representation of particular rivers and journeys in
several nineteenth-century novels, I hope to show that rivers became an especially popular subject of representation in Victorian literature because they encapsulate conflicting notions about place and representation of place. They are both “place” and movement, both static scene and mode of travel. For this reason, rivers provide an ideal locus for an examination of what it means to attempt to capture in literature the sense of a place and convey through words on a page the sense of traveling to unknown worlds.

**PANORAMAS**

It is difficult to overstate the popularity of scenic panoramas in mid-nineteenth-century London and in many ways equally difficult to explain that phenomenon. In the 1840s and 1850s, there were often dozens of panorama-type scenic exhibitions in London at any one time. There were several exhibition spaces devoted exclusively to panoramas, most notably the Panorama in the Strand, which opened in 1802 and lasted until 1831, and the Panorama in Leicester Square operated by John and Robert Burford from 1823 to 1861. These spaces were designed to exhibit 360-degree scenes which the spectator viewed from a central point and also walked around to examine closely.

The alternative format for panorama viewing was more closely linked to theatrical productions. Panoramas painted on linear canvas that could be unrolled slowly while viewed from a stationary seat were also extremely popular and were usually presented in conjunction with music, commentary, or some combination of the two. Albert Smith’s “Ascent of Mont Blanc” and his second major monologue program, “Journey on the Overland Mail,” were typical of this genre, in which a traveler-showman provided a description of his journey to the sights being viewed behind him. A review of one such display, reprinted in “An Illustrated Description of the Diorama of the Ganges” (1850), compared it to Smith’s performances, stating that “the mode of exhibition adopted is the same as that of the overland journey, the canvas being in continual motion, and seen through a circular opening. . . . In other like exhibitions, we have particular spots selected; but here we have the whole length of the view as it would really be seen if passing up the river” (John Johnson Collection of
Printed Ephemera [JJ Coll]). These displays seem generally to have aimed for a close to real-time pace of presentation that allowed the viewer to visually travel the landscape along with the lecturer.

The presence of a lecturer as a kind of tour guide was an indispensable component of the most successful panoramas. The authenticity of the representation seemed to be validated by the presence of an eyewitness who could bear testimony to the fact that the picture conveyed what it really like. John Banvard’s famous panorama of the Mississippi was able to capitalize on this sense of authenticity because it was presented by the painter, Banvard himself. Dickens said of this panorama, “It may be well to say what the panorama is not.” He goes on to enumerate its aesthetic deficiencies before commenting:

But it is a picture three miles long, which occupies two hours in its passage before the audience. It is a picture of one of the greatest streams in the known world, whose course it follows for upwards of three thousand miles. It is a picture irresistibly impressing the spectator with a conviction of its plain and simple truthfulness. . . . It is an easy means of travelling, night and day, without any inconvenience from climate, steamboat company, or fatigue . . . and seeing every town and settlement upon the river’s banks. These three miles of canvas have been painted by one man, and there he is, present, pointing out what he deems most worthy of notice. This is history. (Oettermann 329)

The assumption that panoramas were intended to be regarded as a substitute for real travel experience is borne out by both the publicity created by panorama exhibitors and the reviewers who commented on these exhibitions. A scenic view of a Swiss waterfall incorporating “the various changes of the day” is said by an advertising handbill to produce so “enchanting” an effect that spectators “cannot help fancying themselves imperceptibly transported into the very interior of the province of Switzerland; and that they are viewing in reality, the very identical spot, on which their admiration is so intensely fixed” (JJ Coll). In other words, seeing is the next best thing to being there. The famous Panorama of London by Night, exhibited in the Colosseum after interest in the Grand Panorama of London had waned, is given this testimonial in a souvenir guide to the re-opened Colosseum: “We confidently state, that it is next to impossible, that any person can lean over the balustrade for five or six minutes, and mark the fleecy clouds sailing steadily along, lighted as they come within
the influence of the halo-encircled moon . . . [and] recall themselves immediately to the conviction that the scene before them is nothing but an illusion” (22).

A reviewer in Blackwood’s Magazine struck a typically facetious note: “Panoramas are among the happiest contrivances for saving time and expense in this age of contrivances. What cost a couple of hundred pounds and half a year a century ago, now costs a shilling and a quarter of an hour” (Oettermann 113). But the absurdity of this premise is less evident in the promotional literature for these exhibits. An advertisement for “Mr. Washington Friend’s Grand Tour of Five Thousand Miles in Canada and the United States of America” dryly notes that travel to Canada and the United States “is expensive, requires time, involves the chances of shipwreck . . . whereas by visiting MR. FRIEND, you are placed at once on the other side of the Atlantic by payment of One Shilling.” The capacity of this kind of constructed experience to eliminate danger and overcome the boundaries of space and time is echoed in a twentieth-century description of a theme-park ride. Disney publicists describe the “Jungle Cruise” as “a favorite attraction among arm-chair travellers” because “it compacts into ten minutes the highlights, mystique, fun and excitement of an adventure that could only be duplicated through weeks on safari. Best of all, it has none of the mosquitoes, monsoons, and other misadventures of the ‘not always so great’ outdoors” (Wilson 161). The fact that real safaris are referred to as mere duplicates of the simulated jungle cruise suggests that the facsimile has become the standard against which the real experience can be judged (and, presumably, found wanting). Although jokes about how cheap and easy such a journey could be acknowledge the difference between a real trip and armchair travel, they also indicate that at some level viewers liked to conceive of these shows as experiences rather than exhibitions.

The guidebook for “Mr. Friend’s” exhibition suggests that this mode of travel has practical applicability, too, for the “intending emigrant” to Canada or the United States, who will receive “a complete account of the principal cities, rivers, and lakes of this wonderful continent” as well as learn “the cheapest and best mode of getting there.” Similar educational motives might have been expected to encourage spectators to see the “Moving Panorama of a Voyage to Australia, with descriptive lecture by Mr. Prout,” advertised in a handbill of 1853 (JJ Coll). A Leicester Square panorama was even more explicit about this agenda in its advertisement: “COLONIZATION! THE EMMIATION PANORAMA, NEW ZEALAND. If you are de-
sirous of escaping the miseries of this country, and improving your condition in life, see this panorama! With Mr. Brees' information, you will be better acquainted with the subject than those who have been to the Colonies.” Adding a further twist to the class-based appeal of this handbill, the ad continues, “To the nobility & gentry who unfortunately cannot leave England the Panorama affords a perfect exposition of Colonial Life” (Museum of London Collection [ML] DPA1). By presenting the prospect of emigration as a privilege denied those unfortunate enough to be tied to England by hereditary land ownership, the exhibitors intensify the viewer’s identification of this panorama with escape from English society and in particular its class stratification.

The implied parallel between real emigration and the imaginary journey taken by way of the panorama suggests that the marketers of these exhibitions understood the complex, even contradictory, reasons for their appeal. They offered a mode of exploration that did not require the inconvenience, even danger, of real travel. The correlation between this kind of imaginative possession of a foreign place and the literal colonization of other parts of the world is implicit in the description of a panorama of the Rhine from 1853. This panorama presented a tour from Dover to Naples, or Naples to Dover, alternating with each performance as the scene was unscrolled and then reversed. The “Descriptive Book of the Tour of Europe” that accompanied the exhibition of this “immense Moving Diorama” makes an explicit connection between the work of the artist and the work of European culture: “The telegraph, the rail-way, and the Steam-Boat have been making great changes and doing their utmost to bring about a Brotherhood of Nations; — may not also the Pencil of the Artist claim its share of this great work; here we have the Exploration of a Continent showing in pictorial form the energies of past ages and in the present civilized and intellectual world” (51).

The most successful panorama exhibitions tried to create an authentic environment around the display of the panorama itself. Albert Smith was a master at manufacturing ambience that reinforced his audience’s sense of entering a foreign land. For “The Ascent of Mont Blanc” (1852–1856), Smith converted the Egyptian Hall into a Swiss scene that included a full-scale chalet exterior; a pool of water surrounded by rocks and plants and containing live fish; miscellaneous baskets, knapsacks, and other items strewn picturesquely about the hall; and vines and creepers hanging from the rafters. In his second season, Smith added ten Saint Bernards, which
Rivers, Journeys, and the Construction of Place: would trot about the auditorium delivering packets of chocolate to children. A subsequent show, “Mont Blanc to China,” required audiences to enter through an oriental foyer lined with souvenirs for sale, such as willow-pattern plates with Smith’s picture, and replaced the chalet with a Chinese pagoda (Altick 475–477). When repair work on the dome of Saint Paul’s in 1821 provided the access for an artist to make sketches he converted into a panorama of London, the 360-degree panorama was displayed in a rotunda built for the purpose that included real scaffolding constructed in front of the painting, presumably to enhance the illusion that the viewer was standing on the dome of the cathedral (141–145).

Most panoramas offered for purchase a guide to the exhibition, often written in the form of a guidebook, as if the reader were being led through a tour of the actual location. This format neatly elides the difference between being a real traveler and being the potential traveler imagined by a guidebook. In the “Illustrated Description of the Diorama of the Ganges,” for example, the author offers to conduct “the stay-at-home traveller” to the places “where every enterprising traveller should go” (Altick 4). The scenes visited by the person who describes them become identical to the scenes unfolded to the viewer. “On leaving Calcutta to proceed up the country, the traveller may . . . travel by dark to Benares, a distance of 480 miles. . . . The traveller is now supposed to land from his boats . . . at sunset, to enjoy a stroll on its banks. . . . In the present instance he joins a party of pilgrims proceeding towards Benares . . .” (27). The party of pilgrims is depicted resting under a banyan tree, a scene singled out by a reviewer from King’s College Magazine as particularly realistic: “we almost fancied we were enjoying the quiet repose of the place” (quoted in “An Illustrated Description of the Diorama of the Ganges”).

Ali Behdad has suggested that the literary form of the “travelogue” was replaced in mid-nineteenth-century orientalist writing by a different form of travel writing, the “tourist guide.” What distinguishes the two genres, he argues, is the “situation of the speaking subject” (39). Travelogues emphasize the role of the author-explorer, whose personal experiences provide “discursive justification and legitimization” (40). Tourist guides, on the other hand, often fail to identify their author at all, appearing instead under the aegis of an editor or publisher. When they do name an author, they provide little personal information about him or her. The “disappearance of the author” changes the text’s relation to the reader. The travelogue “produces its first-person subject (‘T’) as the site of an act of inter-
pretation—‘making sense’ of the orient—and as someone who is authorized to make meaning. The centrality and discursive authority of the first-person subject in turn imply exclusion, separating the orientalist [traveler] from the reader, whose desire for exoticism can be satisfied only as a displacement of or identification with the enunciative subject’s desire” (41).

The tourist guide, however, “constructs the reading subject as a potential traveller and presupposes the realization of its addressee’s desire” to travel. The “discourse of tourism” manifests an “obsessive desire to include, to incorporate every kind of traveller in its implied domain” (41).

The panorama descriptions quoted above seem to construct this sort of touristic relation between text and reader. Their goal is not to convey an author’s unique experience to a reader who has not had, and most likely never will have, the opportunity to experience the places described. Instead, they work on the assumption that the experience they describe is common to both author and reader. They treat the journey and the spectator’s viewing of the journey as if they were identical processes. The reader becomes the traveler, the tourist who visits the scene. The reader thus partakes of the expertise of the “real” traveler. This may explain why so many of the advertisements for panoramas either allude to reasons why the viewer might be planning to visit the place described or maintain the polite fiction that many viewers have probably seen these sights themselves and will be in a position to confirm their accuracy.

This particular rhetorical strategy resembles a narrative strategy common to nineteenth-century novels, which may themselves have been influenced by the format of both real guidebooks and exhibition catalogs. Many novels of the period portray panoramic vistas not, as one might expect, by describing a major character’s response to them but by describing the typical response that might be felt by any traveler or viewer who happened to stumble on the scene. While a stronger thematic point could perhaps be made by showing the scene’s effect on a particular character, authors chose instead to present a generalized response that allows viewers to imaginatively substitute themselves for the anonymous viewer.

George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*, for example, introduces an important scene by describing at length the way it appeared to “a traveller” who rides up on horseback and looks down on the town green below. He looks across at the “picture,” with its undulating hills, below which “the eye rested on a more advanced line of hanging woods,” beyond which “our traveller” saw
a “foreground which was just as lovely” (17). While this sort of picturesque
description is not new, what is noteworthy is the description’s reliance on
the impressions of the anonymous traveler. The scene could as easily have
been described from Adam’s point of view or that of any other character.
But Eliot wants to evoke an objective, almost touristic response that mim-
ics what the readers might see if they actually traveled to this spot.

Mary Louise Pratt has noted that “promontory descriptions” like the
passage cited above are common in many kinds of nineteenth-century
writing and in exploration literature function as ways of rendering “mo-
mentously significant, what is, especially from a narrative point of view,
practically a non-event”: the “discovery” of a scene that is new to the
viewer but not, of course, unknown to others (202). The “act of discovery”
consists of “a purely passive experience — that of seeing” (204). Eliot’s in-
clusion of an anonymous traveler seems designed to evoke a sense of dis-
covey in relation to a scene that would have been familiar to characters
already present in the novel; the point is not simply to describe what the
place is like but what the place seems like to someone discovering it for
the first time. Pratt calls this sort of panoramic perspective the “monarch-
of-all-I-survey” genre (201), a phrase that encapsulates the political dy-
namic inscribed by the relationship between viewer and scene.

Hardy’s Mayor of Casterbridge begins with a description of what “a ca-
sual observer” (35) might have noticed about two figures walking along a
country road. Rather than specifying the relationship between them,
Hardy has us follow the deductions of the imaginary spectator. Again, this
mechanism seems intended to distance us from the protagonists and view
them as part of a scene to be visually deconstructed. Hardy begins his de-
scription of the Vale of Blackmoor in Tess of the D’Urbervilles by noting that
it is “an engirdled and secluded region, for the most part untrodden as yet
by tourist or landscape-painter,” yet he goes on to present the view as it
might appear to either genre of spectator:

The traveller from the coast, who, after plodding northward for a score
of miles over calcareous downs and corn-lands, suddenly reaches the
verge of one of these escarpments, is surprised and delighted to behold,
extended like a map beneath him, a country differing absolutely from
that which he has passed through. . . . The atmosphere beneath is lan-
gorous, and is so tinged with azure that what artists call the middle dis-
tance partakes also of that hue, while the horizon beyond is the deep­
est ultramarine. (39)

One function of the figure of the traveler may be to add a time dimension

to an otherwise static picture. By situating this scene in the context of the
journey that preceded it, Hardy emphasizes the movement of the viewing
figure, who pauses to look at a scene that is only one stop on his journey.

Even when Hardy is presenting the boy Jude's view of Christminster,
he removes the personal perspective from the scene, emphasizing the vi­
sual qualities of a sunset landscape that transforms itself like a magic
lantern show:

Some way within the limits of the stretch of landscape, points of
light like the topaz gleamed. The air increased in transparency with
the lapse of minutes, till the topaz points showed themselves to be the
vanes, windows, wet roof slates, and other shining spots upon the
spires, domes, freestone-work, and varied outlines that were faintly re­
vealed. It was Christminster, unquestionably; either directly seen, or
miraged in the peculiar atmosphere.

The spectator gazed on and on . . . the vague city became veiled
in mist. Turning to the west, he saw that the sun had disappeared. The
foreground of the scene had grown funereally dark, and near objects
put on the hues and shapes of chimeras. (41)

Hardy is often noted for the visual, even cinematic quality of his de­
scriptions of landscape. Natural scenes are presented from a panoramic
perspective that would be impossible for a single individual to achieve un­
der normal circumstances, as when Hardy notes that to birds soaring
overhead, “Casterbridge must have appeared on this fine evening as a mo­
saic-work of subdued reds, browns, greys, and crystals, held together by
a rectangular frame of deep green” (59). Clearly, Hardy is not attempting
to place us inside the perspective of a character. Instead, he wants us to
take a more global perspective.

RIVERS

Rivers were among the most popular subjects of representation for mov­
ing panoramas, for obvious reasons. While circular panoramas often re­
presented famous cities — Paris, Rome, Pompeii, Edinburgh, Calcutta, Mi­
lan, Florence, Bombay, Cairo, and Constantinople were all popular subjects — as seen from a particular vantage point, moving panoramas generally adopted the fiction of some sort of journey, by coach, railway, or river, to organize the perspective presented. River scenes were especially appealing, perhaps because the existence of towns along major waterways provided more alternation between pastoral and human interest than might be found on a typical road route. More important, the presence of the river itself provided a sense of connection between the various scenes. A publicity pamphlet for Burford's 1843 panorama of the Rhine praises it for “embracing a more comprehensive coup d’oeil,” as the “enchanting views” along the banks “develop themselves and arrest the imagination in one perpetual and ever changing chain of beauty and grandeur” (ML A2).

The Rhine, like the Mississippi, the Nile, and other large rivers, was frequently represented and was associated with a romantic, picturesque, Grand-Touristic sense of Europe that, as we will see, contrasts sharply with the associations generated by representations, literary and artistic, of the Thames. Mr. Charles Marshall's Grand Tour of Europe included, among other “imageryal visits” in this moving diorama, an “excursion down the picturesque Rhine — and home” (JJ Coll D3). The second part of that journey is an important one, as the return to home is what defines the exotic otherness of the place one has visited. Marshall's tour consisted of three canvases depicting “the three routes an English tourist would most likely follow,” as Altick notes: “the Thames to Constantinople by way of Berlin and Budapest, Rome to Mont Blanc, and the Rhine from Bingen to Cologne” (461). Clearly, river journeys were among the most popular ways to organize a tour of European cities and landscape.

The Rhine initially represents a picturesque natural beauty that unfolds itself before the educated traveler. But in later depictions, a journey up the Rhine becomes a touristic cliché. Thackeray satirizes the English family abroad in his novella *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*, while Trollope asks rhetorically, “where is the man who can tell his wife and daughters that it is quite unnecessary that they should go up the Rhine?” (102). George Eliot's 1860 novel *The Mill on the Floss* alludes nostalgically to the Rhine's emblematic status as the most romantic of rivers, comparing it to the less picturesque Rhone:

> Journeying down the Rhone on a summer's day, you have perhaps felt the sunshine made dreary by those ruined villages which stud the
banks . . . telling how the swift river once rose, like an angry, destroying god, sweeping down the generations whose breath is in their nostrils, and making their dwellings a desolation. Strange contrast, you may have thought, between the effect produced on us by these dismal remnants of commonplace houses . . . and the effect produced by those ruins on the castled Rhine, which have crumbled and mellowed into such harmony with the green and rocky steeps . . . that was a day of romance! . . . That was a time of colour, when the sunlight fell on glancing steel and floating banners. Therefore it is that these Rhine castles thrill me with a sense of poetry: they belong to the grand historic life of humanity, and raise up for me the vision of an epoch. But these dead-tinted, hollow-eyed, angular skeletons of villages on the Rhone oppress me with the feeling that human life . . . is a narrow, grovelling existence, which even calamity does not elevate. (237–238)

Eliot's description characteristically mingles her own response with her readers', noting the human tendency to prefer the ideal to the real. But she goes on to compare this response to the way she imagines her readers might feel about “watching this old-fashioned family life on the banks of the Floss” (238), a phrase that conflates the stream of her narrative with the river at the center of the novel. She admits that the lives she portrays are narrow and ordinary but insists on the importance of understanding them nevertheless. Eliot's metaphoric association of a reader's journey through her book with a traveler's voyage down a famous river suggests that she recognizes that the familiar touristic perspective of the outsider encourages one to passively critique the text passing before one's eyes rather than emotionally engage it. Her goal is to overcome this distant attitude and force her readers to “feel . . . [the] sense of oppressive narrowness” (30) that shapes the lives of her characters.

Eliot may have been influenced by a passage in Ruskin's *Modern Painters* describing the valley of the Rhone with a similar emphasis on the contrast between idealism and realism. Ruskin talks about the disillusionment travelers may feel when they get closer to the picturesque scene they admire.

The traveller on his happy journey, as his foot springs from the deep turf and strikes the pebbles gaily . . . sees with a glance of delight the clusters of nut-brown cottages. . . . Here, it may well seem to him, if there be sometimes hardship, there must be at least innocence and
peace, and fellowship of the human soul with nature. It is not so. . . . Enter the street of one of those villages, and you will find it foul with that gloomy foulness that is suffered only by torpor, or by anguish of soul. (312)

For these cottagers, Ruskin claims, there is “neither hope nor passion of spirit” (314). He goes on to note the irony of theatrical representations that convert such squalor into rustic charm. He might be describing Albert Smith's Alpine cottage when he writes:

Is it not strange to reflect, that hardly an evening passes in London or Paris but one of those cottages is painted for the better amusement of the fair and idle, and shaded with pasteboard pines by the scene-shifter; and that good and kind people, — poetically minded — delight themselves by imagining the happy life led by peasants who dwell by Alpine fountains. . . . If all the gold that has gone forth to paint the simulacra of the cottages, and to put new songs in the mouths of the simulacra of the peasants, had gone to brighten the existent cottages . . . it might, in the end, have turned out better so, not only for the peasants, but even for the audience. (315)

Ruskin's explicit linkage of the tourist's perspective with the theatergoer's perspective reinforces the contention that the distanced, idealized view of natural and human scenes embodied in the aesthetic of the panorama was deeply embedded in a variety of cultural discourses.

Eliot's and Ruskin's revolt against the picturesque idealization of the river as a conduit to culture is evident in the changing view of the Thames in the nineteenth century. Once, the great London river had combined beauty and commerce to form a powerful symbol of the British empire; by the mid-nineteenth century, the Thames came to stand for the pollution, deprivation, and misery of urban life. In literature as well as art, the river is symbolic of a dark undercurrent that threatens the tranquil surface of Victorian society. Dickens, for example, links the Thames with crime in Great Expectations and with suicide in Our Mutual Friend. In David Copperfield, an extended description of the filth and debris in the Thames ends with the prostitute Martha standing by “the polluted stream,” looking “as if she were a part of the refuse it had cast out, and left to corruption and decay” (680). Dickens conveys the horror of urban poverty by emphasizing the inescapability of its products: what the culture attempts to dispose of will always float to the surface again.
Its critical role in the development of British trade and industry made the Thames a powerful symbol of British wealth and political power. The river had long occupied a privileged place in British poetry, where it developed a set of metaphoric and mythic associations that made it a rich subject for a variety of poets, including Spenser, Pope, Gray, Thomson, and Peacock. In the early nineteenth century, it also became a staple of British landscape painting, generating some of the best-known works of Turner, Constable, and lesser painters. Andrew Hemingway has shown that “the economic and social functions of waterways, and the sheer volume of discourses about them . . . made rivers a crucial pictorial theme” (291). In addition to depicting the river’s natural beauty, some works also represented the leisure and economic activities that took place along its banks.

If one turns from landscape painting to genre painting, the Thames plays an important cultural role in representations of life in London. Paintings like G. F. Watts’s Found Drowned and Luke Fildes’s Found Dead on the Embankment reflect a more sinister side of the Thames, in which it becomes the repository of the human detritus of urban life. Martin Meisel has noted that in the paintings, literature, and theater of the period, there is a recurrent iconographic image involving “the concatenation of the stone arch, the river, the night, and the fallen woman contemplating or committing suicide” (138). In these representations, the Thames becomes a sewer in which people dispose of themselves or others.

This image of the Thames was undoubtedly influenced by controversies about pollution of the river that began in the 1820s and peaked in the 1850s and 1860s. The increased availability of indoor plumbing in and around London in the early to middle part of the century contributed to a dramatic increase in the amount of waste flowing into the river, and the cholera epidemics of the 1840s and 1850s intensified public sanitation concerns. The duke of Newcastle warned in 1857 that “the river . . . was like a vast sewer, and unless something was done before long to purify it, it would engender some frightful plague” (Luckin 17). A member of the Parliament claimed that “the noblest of rivers . . . had been turned into a cesspool” (Luckin 18). Because the worst of the pollution derived from towns upriver, beyond the jurisdiction of metropolitan authorities, the controversy became a test of how large-scale environmental problems could be handled. Bill Luckin’s analysis of reports and press commentary on the issue throughout the century reveals a “movement from a sense of impending calamity to a conviction that river pollution was manage-
able” (29). But the image of the Thames was forever changed. No longer a shining symbol of British commerce and culture, it became a mirror of public health, reflecting generalized concerns about pollution and disease that were raised by industrial development throughout the nineteenth century.

In Dickens's novels, the Thames also becomes a mirror of psychic health, functioning at times as a scene of pleasant recreation and at others as a living embodiment of an uneasy conscience. In *Great Expectations*, Pip, protecting the convict who has been his benefactor, uses the river in an attempt to help the criminal escape. Pip notes that while his friend Herbert took comfort from the knowledge that the river “was flowing, with everything it bore, toward Clara,” his beloved, he himself “thought with dread that it was flowing towards Magwitch, and that any black mark on its surface might be his pursuers, going swiftly, silently, and surely, to take him” (381). The inescapable movement of the river makes it emblematic of the workings of an inevitable fate.

In *Our Mutual Friend*, the river provides a horrifying livelihood for Lizzie Hexam's father, who retrieves drowned corpses for what he can scavenge from their bodies. The novel begins by describing the boat used for the purpose, which was “allied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state” (1). The boat takes on the characteristics of a corpse itself, as if it might sink at any time. The sense of defilement that Lizzie feels as a result of her participation in this grim work amazes her father, who, noting her reluctance to sit near a corpse in the boat, reproaches her, “As if it wasn’t your living! As if it wasn’t meat and drink to you!” (1). His attitude encapsulates the dual nature of the activity: on the one hand, it depends on the danger and despair of urban life, which ensure that there will always be victims to be retrieved; on the other hand, it is a living, an economic activity that to him is no different from the other livelihoods pursued on the river. He represents the furthest extreme of capitalist enterprise, an entrepreneur who feeds on the waste discarded by the system.

For better or worse, however, the Thames was England — more particularly, was London — and continued to be a source of pride to the English. An 1849 guidebook, *The Tour of the Thames; or, the Sights and Songs of the King of Rivers*, describes it as “broad, bright, and beautiful” and begins its account by suggesting that touring the Thames was preferable to touring abroad:
Never was there such a summer on this side of the Tropics. . . . London a vast cauldron — the few people left in its habitable parts resembling stewed fish . . .

At length, in a pause of the conversation, someone asked where somebody else was going, for the dog-days . . . every Englishman of the party had been everywhere already — Cairo, Constantinople, Calcutta, Cape Horn. . . . There was not a corner of the world, where they had not drunk tea, smoked cigars, anathematized the country, the climate, the constitution.

At last an . . . old personage, with a nondescript visage . . . asked, Had any one at table seen the Thames?

I determined to see the Thames. (3, 5)

Since we can assume the anonymous author had certainly seen at least parts of the river before, his emphasis suggests that he is drawing a contrast between the pseudo-travel experiences of his companions, who have gone abroad but taken their home with them, and his own effort to understand something about his home by seeing it with new eyes, essentially becoming a tourist in his own backyard. The ordinary old gentleman who raises the question seems to represent the British heritage they have all ignored. The fact that these Londoners are “stewing” in a cauldron of fish suggests that they are more a part of this world than they realize, and the remedy for these dog days may be to swim upstream.

In an essay describing an evening spent with the Thames police, Dickens makes a similar comparison between England and more exciting destinations. “You’ll have seen a good many rivers, too, I dare say?” a companion asks, and he responds: “Truly . . . when I come to think of it, not a few. From the Niagara, downward to the mountain rivers of Italy, which are like the national spirit — very tame, or chafing suddenly and bursting bounds. . . . The Moselle, and the Rhine, and the Rhone; and the Seine, and the Saone; and the St. Lawrence, Mississippi, and Ohio; and the Tiber, the Po, and the Arno” (Dickens’ Dictionary 527).

Dickens’s clichéd catalog is as ridiculous as the assumption that traveling down each river could give him special insight into the “national spirit” of each country. Yet that is precisely how these river journeys were regarded: as a form of travel that provided a window on a land the traveler would pass through but not touch. Like the panoramas that imitated
them, rivers provided an illusion of access to a moving landscape that always stayed on the other side of the window.

Not only does real travel now far surpass Victorian possibilities, the technology of “virtual travel” has expanded as well. Videotaped excursions (such as America by Rail and 3-D Safari) promise a vicarious experience of places both familiar and exotic. Web sites for popular tourist destinations feature interactive representations that allow one to “walk” down a canyon ledge in Zion National Park or access real-time camera views of the ski slopes at Sugarloaf, Maine. At a time when such technology is growing exponentially, it is important to consider how the availability of what Baudrillard calls the “ironic simulacrum” affects our understanding of the world. It seems possible that the creation of such vivid illusions could ultimately diminish, rather than enhance, the value of the places they represent.

The Victorians enjoyed experimenting with the idea of art so realistic it could move beyond the realm of picture and become a kind of world. The classic narrative strategies of nineteenth-century fiction show the same “world-making” impulse, to use Nelson Goodman’s term. Just as novelists were including direct addresses to their readers in an attempt to pull them into the text, artists and performers were trying to create an all-encompassing illusion for the audience to enter. But once there, the spectators were encouraged to remain passive. Travelers on a boat, like “travelers” at a panorama, would feel the world passing around them, and the movement itself would reinforce the sense that this was a direct encounter with reality. But in fact these were highly mediated encounters, in which the spectator was free at any time to exit the holodeck and return to duty. In creating these kinds of virtual travel experiences, the Victorians initiated the idea of the “vacation,” an activity that is conceived of as precisely that: a vacating or emptying out of one’s familiar life and the assumption of an entirely different one. The emphasis is less on what you discover than on what you have left behind. You are expected to admire not the scene before you but the success with which it carries you away.

In this respect, the Colosseum that provided a “Grand Tour of Europe” was not very different from the Magic Kingdom that takes you to Main Street, U.S.A. Leicester Square, home of the Burfords’ Panorama and several competitors, was once the center of the panorama craze. Today, it fea-
tures enormous IMAX theaters. One could say that entertainment has changed very little in the last 150 years; only the technology has advanced. The Victorians would have been astounded at the idea of sending a man to the moon; they might have been even more excited, however, at the prospect of going to Disney World.