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Themes and Styles in *Pictures from Italy*

Before the 1990s, *Pictures from Italy* was one of the most neglected of Dickensian works. Most Dickensian criticism overlooked it, probably following Chesterton's dismissal, when the famous scholar claimed that the author never travelled through Italy but rather through Dickensland[1]. In fact, critics seemed to prefer to point their attention on the overtly fictional works of the prolific novelist. I think the case of Roberto Bertinetti's *Verso la sponda invisibile* is paradigmatic: the subtitle of this book is *Il viaggio nella narrativa inglese da Dickens a Virginia Woolf* [2] and yet the chapter on Dickens is entirely devoted to the *flâneurs* and prowlers of *Old Curiosity Shop*. Bertinetti seems to imply that, working on a novelist, fictional travel is more appealing than the real thing. Certainly Bertinetti's research is most rewarding, and yet I think that *Pictures from Italy* is as much a travel book as a work of creative writing, where idiosyncrasies of realism, autobiography and journal prose are harmonised by a thorough work on style. Recently, a book significantly titled *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds* – edited by the late Annie Sadrin – inverted the trend and showed that this travelogue can be both interesting and aesthetically rewarding.

The lack of academic appreciation for this work could be due to a certain uneasiness of the author with travel writing. It sounds paradoxical to talk of awkwardness with regard to an author who, in 1846, when *Pictures from Italy* was published in volume, had already signed *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Burnaby Rudge*, *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*, yet it is difficult to deny that stylistically the Italian

[1] Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *Charles Dickens, Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, London : J. M. Dent & Sons, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1911.
[2] Roberto Bertinetti, *Verso la sponda invisibile. Il viaggio nella narrativa inglese da Dickens a Virginia Woolf*, Pisa, ETS, 1995.

travelogue is rather uneven, sometimes raw. Interpretations too of this text are rather varied: some critics consider *Pictures from Italy* the representation of a travelling Pickwick[3], others see the travelogue as a tension between fiction and reality[4], whereas yet other critics describe the book as a series of sketches dominated by the aesthetics of the picturesque[5]. All the said critics can quote no little evidence to back up their interpretations.

Pictures from Italy is a composite book, probably on account of Dickens's search for a new narrative technique. It is noteworthy that *David Copperfield*, the first Dickensian novel written in the first person and dealing with a mixture of autobiographical and fictional material, comes two years after *Pictures from Italy.* According to Chesterton *David Copperfield* is the first novel of Dickens's second manner written after what the critic calls "a period of transition", spent in London and Italy[6]. Chesterton could base his claim that Dickens's manner and Dickens himself underwent a transition on biographical evidence. Dickens's decision to spend some time in Italy in 1863 follows the disappointing results of both *American Notes* – incidentally another travelogue – and *Martin Chuzzlewit.* Dickens felt the urge to enjoy a period of relaxation in some healthy and cheap place. David H. Paroissen suggests that decisive for the choice of the destination was the acquaintance with the Italian patriot and journalist Antonio Gallenga (1812-1895) – author of *Italy Past and Present* published in London in 1848 – at that time an exile[7]. Thus

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3 Susan Schoenbauer Thurin, "Pickwick and Podsnap Abroad", *Dickensian*, 83 (412), 1987, pp. 66-78. A more perceptive study of Dickens as character can be found in James A. Davies, "The Troubled Traveller in *Pictures from Italy*", in *The Textual Life of Dickens's Characters*, London, MacMillan 1989, pp. 65-74.

4 Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel*, Lexington, The University Press of Kentucky, 1983.

5 Michel Hollington, "Dickens and Italy", *Journal of Anglosaxon Studies*, I, 1991, 129-136.

6 G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, London, Methuen, 1913.

7 David H. Paroissen, "Dickens's Pictures from Italy. Stages of the Work's Development and Dickens's Method of Composition", *English Miscellany*, 22, 1971, pp. 243-262.

Dickens did not by any means consider his Italian sojourn as a grand tour, but rather as an occasion to seek diversion and stimulate his creativity. In fact, the Victorian writer held a poor opinion of his own countrymen abroad, retaining that they were unable to see anything, in Italy or elsewhere, without the help of a guidebook, or that they never tried to learn even the bases of the language. In *Little Dorrit*, in fact, the "typical" English tourist is satirized in the character of Mrs General, while the stubborn incapacity to learn a foreign language is criticized in the characters of Mr Meagles (*Little Dorrit* ch. 2) and Mr Lillyvick (*Oliver Twist* ch. 16)[8]. Unlike other English travellers, Dickens enjoyed speaking with Italian common people and observing their customs, so it is likely that the novelist went to Italy in search of human rather than cultural experiences. Yet Dickens remained a comic writer and not an anthropologist; his political and social attitude towards Italy surfaces more in *Little Dorrit*, where the writer describes Venice in pages that anticipate Mann's, than in *Pictures from Italy*, where he seems more preoccupied with stylistic and compositional concerns, and positively denies any political commitment.

The genesis of *Pictures from Italy* is a particularly long one, especially for a writer who was used to fast writing under the pressure of impending serial publication[9]. The core of the work was written in 1844 while Dickens, having left his family in Genoa, was travelling through the Italian cities. Dickens moved very fast, never stopping for more than a couple of days in any city, with the exception of Rome and Genoa, where he rented a villa. He would write down his impressions either in the evening, after the day's travelling or sightseeing, or in his coach, during journeys; his impressions would take the form of letters addressed to various friends, principally to his biographer, John Forster. When Dickens returned to Britain he began a series of weekly articles called

[8] On Dickens and Foreign Languages see Matthias Bauer, "Foreign Languages and Original Understandings in *Little Dorrit*", in Annie Sadrin (ed.), *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, London, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 155-168. A more general approach can be found in Tore Rem "*Little Dorrit*, *Pictures from Italy* and John Bull", ibidem, pp. 131-145.
[9] For a detailed account of the genesis of *Pictures from Italy* see Paroissen, *op. cit*.

Italian Letters for the *Daily News*, which were based on the letters he had actually written when he was abroad. These contributions were published from November 1845 to March 1846; after this date Dickens abruptly stopped his correspondence and decided to postpone the undertaking of a new novel, namely *Dombey and Son*, in order to write a volume-length travelogue about his Italian experience. We have no evidence to show why Dickens should have put off such an enticing subject as *Dombey and Son* to go back to already published material. Furthermore it is not easy to explain why Dickens should have opted for the effort of rewriting a travel book instead of continuing effortlessly the publication of his articles on the *Daily News*. Possibly Dickens wanted to make up for the scorn received by the previous *American Notes*[10], or, more probably, he cherished the idea of trying out new techniques within an established genre.

In the introduction to *Pictures from Italy* the author claims that "The greater part of the descriptions were written on the spot, and sent home, from time to time, in private letters" (260) and that this was to be "a guarantee to the Reader that they were at least penned in the fullness of the subject, and with the liveliest impressions of novelty and freshness"(260)[11]. Actually, mountains of palimpsests prove that "freshness" is not synonymous with first draft writing. This quality, so advocated by Dickens, is actually reached, if at all in *Pictures from Italy*, only as a third manipulation of the original material, after the epistolary form and after the pretended weekly correspondence – in other words, after a great amount of work.

With *Pictures from Italy* Dickens was by no means working in a new field. He probably felt the urge to compete with existing travel books and chose to take his own characteristic style into the realm of

[10] The reception of *American Notes* was rather cold both in Europe and on the of the other side of the Atlantic, where many felt offended by Dickens's satire. However, in the course of the XX century, the book has received more attention than its Italian brother.

[11] This and following quotations are taken from *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957.

travelogues, where Baedecker ruled. Significantly he distances himself from travel books not only with respect to their uselessness, but more importantly, to stress the novelty of his own work:

> Many books have been written upon Italy, affording many means of studying the history of that interesting country, and the innumerable associations entwined about it. I make but little reference to that stock of information; not at all regarding it as a necessary consequence of my having had recourse to the storehouse for my own benefit, that I should reproduce its easily accessible contents before the eyes of my readers (259).

We know from the letters that Dickens did appreciate some travel books, especially a French text by Louis Simond, which he used to plan his own tour[12]. His distancing is therefore more at a literary than at a semantic level. The reader of *Pictures from Italy* is also considered different from the one of the classic Baedecker: whereas ordinary travel books were written for people who would go to Italy in order to instruct them on the must-see, this travelogue is thought for those who are to remain in Britain and it aims at entertaining more than at instructing. However, by refusing previous models, Dickens had to create ex nihilo a new poetic of travel literature. The book shows traces of this stylistic endeavour, and bears witness to a changing phase in the writer's technique.

The first stylistic model that Dickens must have had in mind was the comic one, that had presided over the composition of *Pickwick Papers* and had been used for *American Notes*; a stylised character, in this case Dickens himself, walks across a strange and bewildering landscape and refers his impressions. Sometimes Dickens takes up such a role even in his letters to Forster. Comparing the letters and the final version, it is

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[12] Louis Simond, *Voyage en Italie et en Sicile*, Paris, 1828. In the same year an English translation was published, *A Tour in Italy and Sicily*, London, 1828. About Dickens's appreciation of travel literature see Clotilde de Stasio, "The Traveller as Liar: Dickens and the 'Invisible Towns' in Northern Italy", *The Dickensian*, 450, vol. 96, spring 2000, rpr. in *Carlo Dickens – A Site devoted to Dickens Studies in Italy* (http://users.unimi.it/dickens).

clear that Dickens's chief intent is not in describing the setting, but in working with metaphors and creating a certain half dark-half hilarious tone. Here below there follows an excerpt from a letter to Count D'Orsay, where Dickens describes his first impression on arriving in Genoa: such a bleak incipit would not have suited a book on Italy and, moreover, Dickens had certainly changed his mind about the town during his stay in Genoa, and he used the description for Piacenza when he came to writing *Pictures from Italy*:

> What a sad place Italy is! A country gone to sleep, and without a prospect of waking again! […] I thought that of all the mouldy, dreary, sleepy, dirty, lagging, halting, God-forgotten towns in the wide world, it surely must be the very uttermost superlative. […] I never knew what it was to be lazy before.—I should think a dormouse was in very much the same condition before he goes under the wool in his cage—or a tortoise before he buries himself. I feel that I am getting rusty. —I should creak when I tried to think, if it were not for some feeble efforts I am making to acquire the language[13].

In *Pictures from Italy* we find:

> A brown, decayed, old town, Piacenza is. A deserted, solitary, grass-grown place, with ruined ramparts. […] The sleepiest and shabbiest of soldiery go wandering about, with the double curse of laziness and poverty. What a strange, half-sorrowful and half-delicious doze it is, to ramble through these places gone to sleep and basking in the sun! Each, in its turn, appears to be, of all the mouldy, dreary, God-forgotten towns in the wide world, the chief. I became aware that […] I have never known till now, what it is to be lazy. A dormouse must surely be in very much the same condition before he retires under the wool in his cage; or a tortoise before he buries himself. I feel that I am getting rusty. That any attempt to think, would be accompanied with a creaking noise. (317)

[13] To Count D'Orsay, 7 August 1844, page168. All Letters are taken from Madeline House and Graham Storey (editors), *Letters of Charles Dickens*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1974.

Both passages are rich in figurative speech, especially repetition, variation, hyperbole, alliteration, a richness that actually contrasts with the alleged poverty and drowsiness of the scene described. The dormouse is a fine understatement which undermines what might appear a severe judgement on Italian mores. The variety of registers and images creates a comic effect that drives the reader's attention away from the described squalors. This description is not one of the chief intents of the author. As we have seen the second passage was originally written on Dickens's arrival in Genoa and therefore not in Piacenza, as the author pretends. It follows that the text creates a sort of tension between realism and fiction, between reportage and sketch; although as a man Dickens is usually concerned with the lot of humankind, *post factum*, as a writer, he seems to concentrate his efforts on stylistic devices. Possibly, in translating real experiences into a written form, Dickens applies a strategy that translation theory would call compensation[14]. This consists in inserting a particular element (be it a pun or a stylistic device or anything else) into a part of the target text where it has no correspondent in the original, to compensate for a similar element lost in a previous part of the translation. In this case Dickens compensates the loss of his first impressions of Genoa with a description of Piacenza.

There is a second kind of translation that Dickens pursues in these pages, namely the transformation of the picturesque into writing. The idea of the picturesque was born in England in the second half of the eighteenth century and had ever since been a matter of debate thanks in particular to the Rev. Gilpin (1724-1804), who published his *Observations, relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty* in 1772. The idea of the picturesque influenced all major painters, particularly Wilson and Gainsborough and, most noticeably, the early Turner.

Of the whole, ample, debate two topics are particularly relevant to us: the fact that in a picturesque painting a beautiful landscape must be

[14] See for instance the parts dedicated to the translation of metaphors in Peter Newmark, *Approaches to Translation*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1981.

slightly modified, and the fact that poverty itself was considered a picturesque subject[15]. When translated into a writing technique the first characteristic pushes the text in an anti-mimetic direction, and this suits the comic and the pathetic effects of Dickensian prose, connecting it with painting rather than with photography. The underlying aesthetic theory of the picturesque authorizes a deviation from a straightforward account of the visited places, and this again suits Dickens, since realism comes second in his aesthetic scale. Indeed Dickens was particularly interested in the aesthetic of the picturesque. The word itself occurs over twenty times in *Pictures from Italy*, in a variety of contexts. Among these the most interesting for us lead to the second characteristic mentioned above, that is, poverty. Both in his letters and in the text Dickens offers his contribution to the ongoing debate. The author of *Oliver Twist* is disturbed by the cynicism of those who find poor people picturesque, since, for him, pity and sympathy are more important than aesthetic pleasure. Dickens goes so far as to advocate a revision of the picturesque canon:

> 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 Saint 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 poetising 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 (413).

[15] On the picturesque and Dickens see Francesca Orestano, *Paesaggio e finzione: William Gilpin, il Pittoresco, la visibilità nella letteratura inglese*, Milano, Unicopli, 2000. See also, Francesca Orestano, "The Magic Lantern and the Crystal Palace: Dickens and the Landscape of Fiction", in Bonadei, de Stasio et alii, *Dickens: the Craft of Fiction and the Challenges of Reading*, Milano, Unicopli, 2000.

Little Dorrit, one of the most socially biased of Dickens's novels, seems to epitomize the author's view on this point. The word "picturesque" appears in a most sarcastic context as the villain, Monsieur Rigaud, claims to be himself picturesque. This boast becomes particularly sinister a few hundred pages later, when we find Rigaud in Venice, wrapped in a mantel, posing as model of bandit for the man he was paid to spy upon. Considering that the painter is a cynical untalented upper-class idler that has "sauntered into the Art at a leisurely Pall Mall pace", it is clear how Dickens objected to the accepted notion of picturesque.

Coming back to the idea of the picturesque as translation into the practice of writing, in my opinion the best examples of pure picturesque style can be found in the pages dedicated to the Simplon Pass, but other examples can be found throughout the narration. The indecision between comic and picturesque has often been perceived as a fault, but it is interesting to note that, when *Pictures from Italy* was first published, it was particularly welcome both by public and critics, unlike *American Notes*. Furthermore, nowadays a public used to post-modern fiction will no longer perceive a variety of styles within the same work as a fault. Clotilde de Stasio[16], for instance, suggests that we learn to read the Italian travelogue from Italo Calvino's *Le città invisibili*, an overtly fictional and surrealistic travel book[17].

There are passages in *Pictures from Italy* where the two stylistic trends, comic and picturesque, come together and merge into something extremely original and, with hindsight, amazingly modern. A famous example is in the pages devoted to Venice, which is not described as a real experience, but rather as a "Dream upon the Water". Here follows a brief excerpt:

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[16] Clotilde de Stasio, "The Traveller as Liar", in *The Dickensian*, no. 450 Vol. 96 Part 1, Spring 2000, pp.5-13.

[17] On the critical appreciation of Dickens during modernism and the post-modern period, see Roger D. Sell, "Modernist Readings Mediated, Dickens and the New Worlds of Later Generations", in Annie Sadrin (ed.), *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, London, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 294-300.

> So we advanced into this ghostly city, continuing to hold our course through narrow streets and lanes, all filled and flowing with water. Some of the corners where our way branched off, were so acute and narrow, that it seemed impossible for the long slender boat to turn them; but the rowers, with a low melodious cry of warning, sent it skimming on without a pause. Sometimes, the rowers of another black boat like our own, echoed the cry, and slackening their speed (as I thought we did ours) would come flitting past us like a dark shadow. Other boats, of the same sombre hue, were lying moored, I thought, to painted pillars, near to dark mysterious doors that opened straight upon the water.
> […] The glory of the day that broke upon me in this Dream; its freshness, motion, buoyancy; its sparkles of the sun in water; its clear blue sky and rustling air; no waking words can tell. But, from my window, I looked down on boats and barks; on masts, sails, cordage, flags; on groups of busy sailors, working at the cargoes of these vessels; on wide quays, strewn with bales, casks, merchandise of many kinds; on great ships, lying near at hand in stately indolence; on islands, crowned with gorgeous domes and turrets: and where golden crosses glittered in the light, atop of wondrous churches, springing from the sea! Going down upon the margin of the green sea, rolling on before the door, and filling all the streets, I came upon a place of such surpassing beauty, and such grandeur, that all the rest was poor and faded, in comparison with its absorbing loveliness (330-331).

In this passage there are interesting traces both of the picturesque and of the parodic stylisation of the point of view, further complicated by the use of the *Arabian Nights* as a subtext. In fact the other "pictures" of the book are held together by an underlying existing territory, which provides cohesion. The dreamy atmosphere of Venice subtracts weight from the city[18] and reduces it to a heap of images that are given order and structure by the Arabian subtext. The description is a true parody. We have mysterious boats floating, melodious cries, sparkles of the sun in water and other such visual effects, but we can also enjoy the same use

[18] By the way, the same operation that Calvino claims to have carried out in the composition of *Le città invisibili*. See *Lezioni americane*, 1: "Leggerezza", Milano, Garzanti, 1988, p.5.

of variation, alliteration, hyperbole and metaphor that created comic effects in the description of Piacenza. On the whole these are the most original pages in the book. The visit to Venice had already been described in a letter to Forster[19], where Dickens's reaction had been equally enthusiastic, although stylistically the text followed a common epistolary rhetoric. In the letter, Dickens described his tour of Venice as an experience beyond writing and beyond his own expectations, lingering on his visit to I Piombi. Writing to Forster, Dickens expressly cites the *Arabian Nights*, but does not try to imitate their style, as he does in the Venetian pages of *Pictures from Italy.*[20]

I think the idea of describing Venice through a parody owes much to the narrative technique referred to by Bakhtin with the name of pluridiscorsivity[21]. According to Bakhtin this procedure consists in hybridising the narrator's voice with that of a character, employing some of the stylistic features (usually phrases or words) the character himself would use in the given circumstance. This may happen because, as Derrida puts it, everybody is constituted by a text, and owes his/her existence to words[22], an argument that holds especially true for fictional entities. The connection between the cityscape of Venice and the *Arabian Nights* is so strong that Dickens's discourse is actually attracted into the gravitation field of the eastern tales. It is as though Venice were to speak in Galland's language and Dickens's words were to submit to it.

The use of "pluridiscorsivity" with regard to Venice is by no means fortuitous, nor can it be attributed to Dickens's unconscious. The same writer was well able to attribute to Venice an atmosphere of decadence a few years later, when the Dorrits were to establish themselves there. As Little Dorrit stared at the stagnant water of the canals, the gorgeous city

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[19] Charles Dickens, *Letters*, edited by M. House and G. Storey, vol. 4, pp. 216-218.
[20] Another mention of the *Arabian Nights* in *Pictures from Italy* occurs in connection with Avignon, but I can see no stylistic deviation in that passage.
[21] Michail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. four Essays. by M.M. Bakhtin*. Edited by Michael Holquist, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.
[22] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976

disappeared and a view of the bleak Marshalsea emerged from the water. What in Mr Dorrit's intention was to have been a symbol of liberty and new, wealthy life, becomes, for his daughter, a symbol of death and captivity. This shift in attitude should not surprise us. In fact, in Victorian times, Venice held an ambiguous status: it was both a model and a warning for modern Britain. The British commercial empire spread all over the world cherished the proud thought that England could achieve the supremacy that had once belonged to Venice, but at the same time the decadence of the Serenissima obviously struck as a bad omen[23]. This ambivalence towards the watery city is reflected by Dickens, who focuses on these two aspects respectively in *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorrit*. We may suppose that Dickens's personal attitude toward Venice was more complex than that expressed by the narrators in *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorritt.*

However, to conclude, returning to the travelogue in the years following the first Italian experience, Dickens found a way to handle picturesque, comic and "recognition of man's destiny and capabilities" at one and the same time: *Pictures from Italy* thus remains as a witness to the human and artistic evolution of a genius who devoted more craft than theoretical reflection to his art.

[23] On this subject, see Ronald R. Thomas, "Spectacle and Speculation: The Victorian Economy of Vision in *Little Dorrit*", in Annie Sadrin (ed.), *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds*, London, Macmillan, 1999, pp. 34-46.