

**REPRINTED FROM DICKENS: THE CRAFT OF FICTION AND THE  
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«THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP»:  
CARTOGRAPHIES OF MOTION

Bisognerebbe fare alla fine d'ogni libro  
una piantina. Non un indice, piuttosto  
una planimetria delle sue parti,  
descrivendo le fondamenta,  
i suoi diversi accessi, le stanze,  
i servizi e i disimpegni.  
Bisognerebbe precisarne anche  
la capienza e i costi, spiegando  
l'ammontare della manutenzione nel tempo.  
Svelare così l'ossatura del cantiere,  
le sue membra nascoste  
dal parametro della pagina.  
Soprattutto sapere: quale  
e quanto il materiale  
(legname, pietre, tubature, cemento)?<sup>1</sup>

In 1946 the great master of avant-garde cinema Oskar Fischinger, after several experiments, realised his masterpiece – *Motion Painting* – a short film which explores the relationship between cinema, motion and music. Constructed around Bach's third *Brandenburg Concerto*, this short is a tempest of colours which draw lines, tracks, multiple paths and errances. The peculiarity of this map is its idea of juxtaposition, realised through the use of a succession of six Plexiglas plates placed one on top of the other, on which Fischinger draws colourful lines and shapes so that under every stratum the previous layers remain visible. It is a juxtaposition of lines, simultaneous wanderings in different spaces and directions, a stratification of movement, a map.

In many ways the cartography of *The Old Curiosity Shop* is very similar to *Motion Painting*, being composed of transparent superimposed maps which reveal traces of characters moving on different plateaus, paths traced on the geological strata of the literary text which, because of the transparency of the different surfaces, often meet, creating intersections and interferences. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, motion, intended in its multiplicity and therefore including travel, wandering, *flânerie*, nomadism, pilgrimage, flight and tourism, can be found on three different levels: the different

<sup>1</sup> Magrelli, Valerio, *Poesie (1980-1992) e altre poesie*. Torino, Einaudi, 1998.

movements of the characters, the reader's own journey led by the narrator-guide and finally the text in its formal and stylistic plurality.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* is not, as the title would seem to suggest, the enclosed space of a shop: rather, it is the shop itself which has to close, to give way to the real dynamic nature of the text and the endless peregrinations of the characters around its empty centre. After the shop closes, we lose track of it for a while until after some time Kit walks past and stops to observe it.

It was a gloomy autumn evening, and he thought the old place had never looked so dismal as in its dreary twilight. The windows broken, the rusty sashes rattling in their frames, the deserted house a dull barrier dividing the glaring lights and bustle of the street into two long lines, and standing in the midst, cold, dark and empty (338).

This description evokes a kind of desolate stagnancy. This impossible centre or dwelling place is cold and dark, resembling an arid island, an anti-oasis in the luminous luxury of the street which by contrast is a zone of transit, of crossing, a vital space. Walter Benjamin, among his numerous portraits of flâneurs, includes Dickens describing his unremitting night walks in the immense labyrinth of the streets of London. He needed the bustle of the streets, which he used to call his magic lantern, to write, comments Benjamin (1986), the creation of his characters depended on it.

Kit is one such character: often on the road, he cuts a swathe through the crowd to trace geometric lines. However, he hardly ever abandons himself to pure wandering but rather limits himself to short binary journeys which invariably include the idea of return. In other words, he moves from one specific point to another, according to patterns which are limited in space as well as in time. Moreover, his movements always have a goal, one which sees him becoming in turn messenger, carrier pigeon and detective. The most common verbs used to describe his movements are “to dart” and “to dash”, verbs which contain the idea of speed and accomplishment, a kind of movement towards a precise destination, without detour, consumed in a flashing straight line:

and now darting at full speed up a bye-street (164 ).

Without relaxing his pace or stopping to take breath (he) dashed on through a great many alleys and narrow ways (130).

Kit made his way through the crowded streets, dividing the stream of people, dashing across the busy roadways, diving into lanes and alleys (388).

In other cases, the idea of speed is often expressed:

[he] went off at full speed to the appointed place” (216).

he hurried on again, making up by his increased speed for the few moments he had lost (389).

Kit was leaving the room hastily to make up for lost time (541).

Kit, we might say, is a creature of speed who cannot conceive of the slow, progressive, often aimless movement of the wanderer, whose goal is motion itself (see Rubino 1991).

After the shop closes he will work at Abel Cottage taking care of the horses, symbols of speed, with whom he establishes a particularly good rapport, becoming a textual centaur fighting against a story which is lacking in linearity, trying to speed up the rhythm of a novel which on the contrary has an erring structure, dominated by the whim of a narrator who, as we shall see later on, begins telling a story only to abandon it and recommence it several chapters later. The anxiety of Kit to “make up for lost time”, to use Dickens’s words, could be compared to the marionette’s protest against the puppet master who takes pleasure in laying it aside to give space to other stories and other characters. Kit is in a hurry because he has to make up for the time he has lost, those eternal temporal ellipses which freeze him in an instant of static void.

It behoves us to leave Kit for a while, thoughtful and expectant, and to follow the fortunes of little Nelly; resuming the thread of the narrative at the point where it was left some chapters back (396).

On the other hand, the narrator-character Master Humphrey, present in the book only in the first three chapters, can be seen as a Benjaminian Flâneur. It is Humphrey himself who opens the novel with an apology for restlessness.

Night is generally my time for walking (43).

A night wanderer (in fact, the definition he gives of his movement is “roaming”<sup>2</sup>) he never tires of walking through London’s meanders: he is like Kafka’s traveller – “I stride along and my speed is the speed of this side of the street, of this street, of this part of town” – abandoning himself to the

<sup>2</sup> The etymology of the verb “to roam” derives from Latin “Roma” and originally indicated the pilgrimage to Rome. Voided of its religious significance, here it loses also its destination, transforming into its opposite: aimless movement, without a destination, flânerie.

flux of the metropolis to observe the passers-by, the ghostlike faces that make the “never-ending restlessness” of the city at night, threads of steps slowly sewn along streets and alleys. In his wanderings the narrator-*flâneur* enters into concert with the characters he meets, giving voice to their silence, as with little Nelly when, having lost her way, the child stops Master Humphrey to ask for directions and during their walk towards their destination – *The Old Curiosity Shop* – the narration starts to unravel. Although *flânerie* can be considered a form of wandering for its absence of a precise goal and of a binary element, for its slowness and the possibility of multiplying one’s trajectories in a rhizomatic (Deleuze, Guattari 1988) way, unlike wandering it traces limited paths that unwind within the spaces of the metropolis. It is symptomatic that in the first chapter, when Humphrey walks Nelly to the shop, he avoids taking a direct path:

I avoided the most frequented ways and took the most intricate (46).

And, again, when he goes back to the shop he says:

I walked past the house, and took several turns in the street (58).

From the perspective of what Michel Butor calls “iterology”<sup>3</sup>, Little Nelly and *the old man* – the figures in the novel who were the most criticized by writers such as Oscar Wilde<sup>4</sup> and Aldous Huxley for their naivité, simplicity and excess of pathos are in fact “open”, plural characters who embody different modes of motion and therefore elude fixed identity. Nomadic in their motion, they occupy a de-territorialised subjectivity that doubles the idea of motion. In fact we could say that they embody the motion of motion. As Rosi Braidotti (Braidotti 1994) says: “Nomadic identity is an inventory of traces”. The different traces left by Nelly and her grandfather on the territory around The Old Curiosity Shop are those of pure wandering as well as pilgrimage, existential quest and flight, circumnavigating a non-existent centre.

Let us walk through country places, and sleep in fields and under trees [...].  
Let us never set foot in dark rooms or melancholy houses any more, but wander

<sup>3</sup> Butor 1972: “Le voyage et l’écriture”, in *Romantisme*, n.4, 1972 – “Je propose donc une nouvelle science [...] étroitement liée à la littérature, celle des déplacements humains, que je m’amuse à nommer itérologie”

<sup>4</sup> “One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Nelly without laughing”.

up and down wherever we like to go, and when you are tired, you shall stop to rest in the pleasantest place that we can find (124).

Speaking to her grandfather, Nelly proposes a nomadic alternative to their old sedentary life where the only occasions for movement were his night outings and the errands that Nelly was obliged to run. We can see their project as a form of flight: for the old man, flight from gambling, for Nelly from solitude, for both from *The Old Curiosity Shop*. But neither has a set destination, “wandering they knew not whither” (152) as the narrator says, describing their movements.

Their departure from the city is gradual: leaving the busy streets of the centre they go through suburbs slowly making their way towards the country. Once the characters have abandoned the “centre”, as we shall see later on, also the “structure” of the text explodes, becoming dispersed in different territories and autonomous stories. It is here in the countryside, that their motion begins to take on the features of pilgrimage. At which point the narration too becomes highly rhetorical, and loaded with religious intertextuality and biblical references.

The sun was setting when they reached the wicket-gate at which the path began, and, *as the rain falls upon the just and unjust alike*, it shed its warm tint even upon the resting places of the dead (180)<sup>5</sup>.

The wanderings of Nelly and the old man will be interrupted several times, in which they will meet other characters in motion (the totalising paradigm of this text is indeed walking – Eco 1979) such as itinerant actors, artist-travellers and street performers. Indeed, the description of one of the places they cross can be considered an example of the “planimetry” Magrelli refers to in his poem: it is, to use another Deleuzian expression, a “smooth space” where meaning is endlessly deferred.

Meanwhile, they were drawing near the town where the races were to begin next day; for, from passing numerous groups of gipsies and trampers on the road, wending their way towards it, and struggling out from every bye-way and cross-country lane, they gradually fell into a stream of people, some walking by the side of covered carts, others with horses, others with donkeys, others toiling on with heavy loads upon their backs, but all tending to the same point (209).

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 5:45.

In Michel De Certeau's words it is not so much a *lieu* as an *espace* since it is essentially dynamic and contains a multiplicity of vectors: "*L'espace est un lieu pratiqué. Ainsi la rue géométriquement définie par un urbanisme est transformée en espace par des marcheurs. De même, la lecture est l'espace produit par la pratique du lieu que constitue un système de signes – un écrit*" (De Certeau 1990).

Nelly and her Grandfather's meeting with the schoolmaster is particularly significant for the development of the story. The first time they stop at his house/school it is only for a short period of time, but the death of his pupil foreshadows the destiny of the wandering pair.

Indeed, after some time they will end up back to the same place and it is exactly in the closing of the circle that, strangled by this kinetic *ouroboros*, they decide to return to a sedentary condition.

"We are safe here, at last – eh? We will never go away from here"  
The child shook her head, and smiled (504).

After betraying the promise of movement, it is in the school – which stands as a sort of double of the Old Curiosity Shop – that the two characters will finally meet their death. For their decision to stop can be considered a betrayal of the text itself and therefore is also where the literary journey reaches its end.

The magic reel, which, rolling on before, has led the chronicler thus far, now slackens in its pace, and stops [...] It remains to dismiss the leaders of the little crowd, who have borne us company upon the road, and so to close the journey (663).

Though Master Humphrey is our guide for the beginning of this journey, after the third chapter he disappears to be replaced by a voice which though bodiless nonetheless imposes its authority. We could imagine it as being the voice of a despotic tour-leader who is forever making us change direction, though for the contemporary reader who reads the text as a book and not as a part of a weekly magazine, it is he who decides the pace. This guide is not always completely honest with us: often he promises speed:

To tell how Kit then hustled into the box all sorts of things which could by no remote contingency be wanted; and how he left out everything likely to be of the smallest use; how [...] would take more time and room than we can spare. So, passing over all such matters, it is sufficient to say [...] (394).

But only to lead us into another of his typical conspiracies of details, verbose and rhetorical descriptions and characters that keep on appearing whose stories we can hardly follow. Thus we can say that the wanderings of

the characters finds its textual counterpart in the narrator's endless digressions, interruptions and detours, reminiscent of the narrator of *Billy Budd*: "In this matter of writing, resolve as one may to keep to the main road, some bypaths have an enticement not readily to be withstood. I am going to err into such a bypath. If the reader will keep me company I shall be glad. At the least, we can promise ourselves that pleasure which is wickedly said to be in sinning, for a literary sin the divergence will be."

As Susan Horton (1981) says, *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a space in which the reader is continually carried away from what has been called the "central plot" (i.e. the wanderings of Nelly and her grandfather) in an incessant magnetic attraction of the periphery against any possible narrative linearity. However, it may be argued that we cannot speak about a "central plot" in this case, or even of main characters, since it is a text which questions the binary opposition centre/periphery, a text which moves slowly in the peripheral magma.

Kit's mother and the single gentleman – upon his track it is expedient to follow with hurried steps, lest this history should be chargeable with inconsistency, and the offence of leaving its characters in situations of uncertainty and doubt – Kit's mother [...] (440)

In this citation the narrator comments on the form of the narration and it is as if he were afraid of losing the thread of the story. Perhaps this is why his presence becomes increasingly felt as the chapters unravel.

*The Old Curiosity Shop* has often been criticised for its weak construction, incoherence, and lack of consistency but it is exactly the combination of these elements which contributes to give it its wandering, open and plural structure, its multiplicity of different planes.

In the absence of the book of the weekly publication, we can say that *The Old Curiosity Shop* was conceived as a wandering narrative. As we all know, Dickens used this literary form in order to increase the effect of suspense of his text: his Victorian readers had to wait weeks, sometimes months before seeing a character re-emerge in the story or knowing how a certain episode ended. Funnily enough, in contrast to the slowness of the pace forced on the reader, the exaggerated speed of writing to which Dickens was condemned makes him, as Paul Virilio says, a "virtual novelist". His literary production was always ruled by the laws of acceleration, considering that often the rhythm of the publication of episodes left him very little time to write. On this Paul Virilio remarks: "Dickens tells that one day he heard a reader asking for a monthly episode of *David Copperfield*. When the shop-assistant gave her the issue she gave it a glance and said: "Oh no, I've already read this. I'm looking for the next one" And Dickens remarks: "Hearing these words, and aware of the fact that the first word of the episode to which she referred had not yet been written, for the first time in my life I felt... terrified" (Virilio 1993 – my translation).

The language of the novel too, as we said, maintains a wandering identity, in its polyphonic use of contrasting styles and incessant changes of register. Reportage-like passages, like the account of Quilp's drowning, are interwoven with excessively rhetorical lines, moralistic prose alternates with witty and satirical passages, fairy-tale turns into melodrama.

At the beginning of this paper we said that *The Old Curiosity Shop* is a de-centred text, an empty shop: such emptiness, however doesn't necessarily entail absence. Rather it creates a continuous movement, a juxtaposition of traces which refer to a deferred itinerary that is mapped from time to time and then given back to the wind.

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