

The Traveller as Liar: Dickens and the 'Invisible Towns' in Northern Italy

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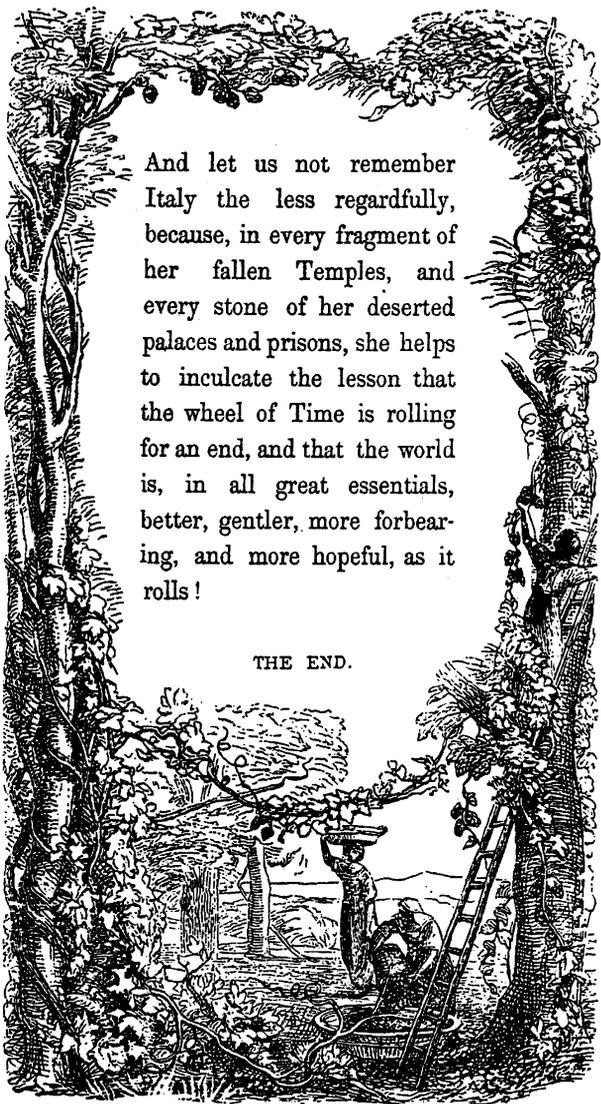
In a fairly recent book on Dickens's characters, at the end of a section devoted to *Pictures from Italy*, James Davies argues that Dickens's travelogue 'has to be read as travel fiction in which the Narrator-character is the main source of interest' and that 'the narrator emerges as a complex, unhappy and confused figure' largely responsible for a narrative effect which this critic calls 'latent negativity'. Far from being solely Dickensian, this dark view of the Italian experience was common to many British travellers at a time when the traditional interest in the Italy of the past was giving way to an interest in present-day Italy. According to C.P. Brand, 'the idealistic halo with which the Romantics had surrounded Italy' was being superseded by a more realistic outlook: 'Dickens and his contemporaries mockingly substitute dirt and mosquitoes for the moonlit ruins and the serenades of their sentimental parents'.² Even the ancient city of Rome was a source of disappointment and depression for such Victorians as William Thackeray or Arthur Clough. However, as I am arguing, in *Pictures from Italy* one can perceive a constant tension between memory and experience, dream and reality which is typical of Dickens and particularly characteristic of his later works.

In a passage of *Little Dorrit* – a novel which for obvious reasons is often mentioned in connection with *Pictures from Italy* – Dickens makes fun of the lack of imagination of the typical Victorian tourist: 'Everybody was walking about St Peter's and the Vatican on somebody else's cork legs, and straining every visible object through somebody else's sieve. Nobody said what anything was, but everybody said what the Mrs Generals, Mr Eustace, or somebody else said it was'.³ Eustace's *Classical Tours* was one of the most popular guides for travellers to Italy. In Jack Lynch's opinion Eustace's experience appears to be 'filtered through a literary lens', he seems to have used 'his tour as an excuse to copy out the literature of antiquity from his commonplace book'.⁴ In *Pictures from Italy* Dickens's rejection of the traveller's literary paraphernalia is less drastic: it is true that in the preface ('The Reader's Passport') he explicitly dismisses guides and travelogues dealing with 'the history of that interesting country' and with its 'famous Pictures and Statues',⁵ but in the book he mentions appreciatively Simond's 'charming book on Italy' (301) and also Murray's guidebook (271), both of which still dealt extensively with Italian antiquities and works of art.⁶ Besides, Dickens's Italian itinerary follows the traditional routes and his view of the country appears to be largely influenced by conventional attitudes. Even when he travelled without his family, as on his journey through

Northern Italy, he did not attempt anything adventurous. He travelled by stage-coach, stopped at the usual towns⁷, fleetingly glanced at the countryside and mostly noticed poverty and squalor, as Simond had done twenty years before.⁸ He never stopped anywhere long enough to be able to become thoroughly acquainted with the nature of the place he was visiting and the character of its inhabitants. His experience remained on the whole surface-level and highly subjective, based largely on a well-established system of values. He did not even escape the usual Shakespearean associations while visiting Verona, though some self irony can be detected in his words: 'I read Romeo and Juliet in my own room at the inn that night – of course, no Englishman had ever read it there' (340). In this part of his journey Dickens seldom goes beyond the stage Eric J. Leed appropriately calls 'transit', which can shape and enrich the mind of the traveller, but never allows him to get thoroughly acquainted with the foreign country.⁹ In one passage he even boasts of his propensity 'to leave new scenes behind, and still go on, encountering newer scenes' (321).

In the preface Dickens warns his readers that they should expect to find in the book 'a series of faint reflections – mere shadows in the water – of places to which the imagination of most people are attracted'. Rather than with the mode of travel writing, Dickens seems in fact to be concerned with the modes of fiction. It is not by chance that references to the *Arabian Nights* and to fairy tales in general are to be found scattered in the narrative as if to underline the continuous shift from documentary reporting to a fictional rendering of experience. While the 'eastern stories' are mentioned in connection with Avignon (272) and Genoa (290), Piacenza is the place that seems most to evoke fabulous scenes: 'A mysterious and solemn Palace, guarded by two colossal statues, twin Genii of the place, stands gravely in the midst of the idle town; and the king with the marble legs, who flourished in the time of the thousand and one Nights, might live contentedly inside of it' (317). The adjective 'fairy' represents a superb choice conjuring up the idea of those fantastic patterns in the vineyards surrounding the town: 'The wild festoons, the elegant wreaths, and crowns, and garlands of all shapes; the *fairy* nets flung over great trees' (318).

Dickens is also aware of the distinction between perception and description – two major activities both for a traveller and a writer – and even of a kind of split between the real-life traveller and the narrator. At the beginning of the travelogue the author makes a clear distinction between his persona as a typical Englishman travelling through Europe with his family and himself as a writer engaged in reporting his journey to the reader. He then distances himself from the first figure, dismissing it in one short ironic paragraph, before starting on his journey and beginning his report: on leaving Paris the figure of the head of the family sitting in the carriage in the shadow of the 'portly presence' of the French Courier, is said to have 'dwindled down to no account at all' (262). As Dickens the traveller moves first through France to Genoa, then from Genoa to Venice and Milan - Angus Wilson has justly praised the



And let us not remember Italy the less regardfully, because, in every fragment of her fallen Temples, and every stone of her deserted palaces and prisons, she helps to inculcate the lesson that the wheel of Time is rolling for an end, and that the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing, and more hopeful, as it rolls!

THE END.

Final page of the first edition of *Pictures from Italy* (1846): illustration by Samuel Palmer.

'splendid description of the coach trip through northern Italy'¹⁰ – the narrator sounds less and less 'reliable'. Presumably in an attempt to distinguish his book from what he terms in the preface a 'mountain of printed paper', he captures the strangest and queerest objects and people and often envelops them in a hazy halo that blurs their contours, producing sometimes a kind of fade-out. The further Dickens proceeds in his journey through Northern Italy the more intense this effect grows. At first he seems only to be noticing, as previous travellers had done, picturesque details of the Italian scenery, and his narrative is brimming with humorous comments on places, incidents and sometimes people. Then, on arriving at Piacenza his mood grows dismal and his vision gloomier: the 'brown decayed old town', which he visits in a kind of 'doze', brings with it some misgivings about Progress (317). He seems to cheer up in the 'cheerful and stirring streets' in Parma, but he soon feels the depressing influence of the 'decayed and mutilated paintings' in the cathedral and the only impression the town leaves him with is a vague one of desolation and decay. The same thing happens in Modena, where the sudden appearance of a circus only adds a grotesque touch to the disquieting picture of a 'stagnant town', and in Bologna, which, in spite of an attempt at enlivening the picture by introducing the humorous character of 'the little Cicerone', seems to sum up all the most fanciful and disturbing features of the Italian towns Dickens visited: 'Again brown piles of sacred buildings, with more birds flying in and out of chinks in the stones; and more snarling monsters for the bases of the pillars. Again rich churches, drowsy Masses, curling incense, tinkling bells, priests in bright vestments: pictures, tapers, laced altar crosses, images and artificial flowers' (324). Even the landscape on the road to Ferrara appears gloomy and menacing. The narrator tries to explain the psychological process through which a trite bucolic scene can be perceived as something both familiar and frightening:

In the blood red light, there was a mournful sheet of water, just stirred by the evening wind; upon its margin a few trees. In the foreground was a group of silent peasant girls leaning over the parapet of a little bridge... in the distance a deep bell; the shade of approaching night on everything. If I had been murdered there, in some former life, I could not have seemed to remember the place more thoroughly, or with a more emphatic chilling of the blood. (325)

This particular dream-like and alienating look at the Italian townscape culminates in the chapter on Venice, entitled significantly 'An Italian Dream': the traveller approaches the 'ghostly city' in a kind of trance and grows confused and baffled by 'this strange dream upon the water' (336). In Dickens's description of Venice the reader does not find half the enthusiasm and rapture found in a previous letter to Forster. Here, he tells his friend that 'nothing in the world that ever you have heard of Venice, is equal to the magnificent and stupendous reality.' He adds that 'The wildest visions of the Arabian nights are nothing to the piazza of

Saint Mark' and ends his long eulogy on the city with these words: 'it is something past all writing of or speaking of – almost all thinking of'.¹¹ His picture of Venice in the travelogue is therefore even more fanciful than the pictures of the other towns: what he gives us is really a *paysage intérieur* haunted by faint memories and 'imaginary recollection' where the darker aspects of the town seem to prevail over the brighter ones. Finally, on reaching Milan, a city which only three decades later Henry James called 'the last of the prose capitals'¹², he chooses to talk about its invisibility. Even the renowned marble cathedral is not to be seen: 'The fog was so dense here, that the spire of the far-famed Cathedral might as well have been at Bombay, for anything that could be seen of it at that time' (345). True, he also says that on a second visit he had the opportunity to admire the monument, but this picture is not in the travelogue and again the impression left in the reader's mind is of a strange evanescent place mysteriously reminiscent of London and Bombay.

In a letter which his biographers often quote in order to stress Dickens's homesickness during his stay in Italy, he wrote to Forster: 'I seem as if I had plucked myself out of my proper soil when I left Devonshire Terrace'¹³; he also wrote that suddenly he realised he could relieve his discomfort and put his nostalgia to creative use by indulging in a long reverie on London. The short story *The Chimes* arose from his associating the sound of the church bells in Genoa with that of an old London belfry.¹⁴ The fact is that Dickens never really left London behind, and the image of London – particularly the darker side of the city already described in *Oliver Twist* and *The Old Curiosity Shop* – kept creeping into his perception, superimposing itself on the images of the various Italian towns. It is not so much a question of capturing analogies and links between the foreign country and the homeland – a common and reassuring feature in travelogues – or the fact that 'the ruinous, poverty-stricken and decaying Italian towns which he visited stirred up the worst pessimistic thoughts in him', as Kate Flint suggests.¹⁵ A further possible explanation is that the London scenery loomed so large in the mind of the traveller as to envelop each new sight and feeling. At the same time it is true that at this stage in Dickens's writing career the cityscape had already become a fictional entity which he could either recreate or reinvent at his pleasure, as Schwarzbach's study convincingly demonstrates.¹⁶

This leads me to suggest that the contemporary Italian novelist Italo Calvino can offer a clue to understanding Dickens's peculiar attitude as a traveller and as a narrator. Like Dickens, Calvino loved fairy tales and in his fiction often mingled realism and fantasy. Not surprisingly, therefore, Dickens was one of his favourite authors, as we know from various references he made to the latter's novels and from a review of *Our Mutual Friend*.¹⁷ What is interesting here, however, is not a search for a possible influence of one writer upon the other, but the analogy between the figure and the mood of the traveller in *Pictures from Italy* and in Calvino's *Le città invisibili* (*The Invisible Cities*). In this book – a kind of

re-make of the famous *Il Milione* by Marco Polo – descriptions of fabulous towns and imaginary conversations between Marco Polo and the Kubla Khan alternate. The inspiration probably came from a passage in Polo's travelogue where the author tells the reader that on returning from a journey as ambassador to far-away countries the Venetian chose to entertain the Khan with stories about the wonderful lands he had visited. The Khan, who had been disappointed by the spare and factual reports of previous ambassadors, liked Polo's tale very much and sent him as an ambassador to various places in his empire in the course of the following twenty years. Most of Polo's descriptions treat of strange and beautiful towns, among which Quisai stands out, a town almost entirely built upon the water, full of canals and bridges, like Polo's hometown, Venice.

In Calvino's book, Polo, exhausted after a long night spent talking about the towns he has visited, says to the Khan who keeps questioning him: 'Sire, now I have told you about all the cities I know.' To which the Khan replies: 'There is still one of which you never speak.'¹⁸ The city is Venice and Polo explains to the 'man that in actual fact every time he describes a new town, he is saying something about his hometown. As the Khan insists that he should start again from the beginning and describe Venice before describing the other places, Polo utters a few oracular words: 'Memory's images, once they are fixed in words, are erased.'¹⁹ He adds that perhaps he is afraid of 'losing' Venice completely if he talks about it.²⁰

This interplay between memory, representation and fiction stands at the basis of Dickens's travelogue. In this sense *Pictures from Italy* marks, in my opinion, an influential stage in the writer's career. It was not by mere chance that *David Copperfield*, his first novel employing a first-person narration and, at least in part, autobiographical, came soon after. Here again we find Dickens giving a fictional rendering of personal experiences and trying to recapture past emotions. A few years later the autobiographical mood surfaced again in *Little Dorrit*, especially in the long section devoted to the protagonist's journey to Italy. Here again we find Dickens's troubled response to the experience of travelling and of the stay in a foreign country. Little Dorrit goes so far as to reject all contact and exchange with the new reality: she is totally absorbed by the haunting image of London and the Marshalsea. But it is, of course, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, both in the serial and the collected-essay form, where the journey motif, real or fictional, is most fully developed by building upon the premises already laid in *Pictures from Italy*²¹. The protagonist, who, as we know, declares that he has 'rather a large connection in the fancy goods way', reminds us of the 'unreliable traveller' in the Italian travelogue. The well-known autobiographical sketch 'Nurse's Stories', where the author recalls childhood experiences and also explores the relationship between truth and lies in storytelling, significantly begins with the sentence: 'There are not many places that I find more agreeable to revisit when I am in an idle mood, than some places to which I have never been'²². They are all places to be found in

works of fiction – Robinson’s island is of course the first to be mentioned, together with Brobdingnag and Bagdad – or that had been described to him by his nurse in her terrible bed-time stories. The implied concept is that these places are more ‘real’, both for the narrator and the reader, than places that have been actually visited. Another essay, entitled ‘The Calais Night-Mail’ contains a report of a strange reverie enjoyed during a Channel crossing, in which mental associations and memories are stimulated both by the refrain of a popular song and the sound of the sea. It is rather an inner voyage than an actual sea crossing to France. The travel metaphor, employed on various levels, dominates also ‘Travelling Abroad’, a totally imaginary rendering of real, psychological experiences. Rather than a realistic *récit de voyage*, the traveller gives the reader the illusory image of a journey, where mysterious encounters (at the beginning of the journey he meets his double as a child), supernatural obsessions (he is persecuted by the image of a corpse seen at the Morgue in Paris), magical visions of the Alps, all blend together creating hallucinatory effects.

The Uncommercial Traveller’s wanderings bring him likewise to unknown and mysterious places in London: ‘Shy Neighbourhoods’, ‘Arcadian London’ and to his home place ‘Dulborough Town’, where again the reader finds him crossing and recrossing the border between truth and fiction, reality and dream. On the one side the essays in *The Uncommercial Traveller*, like the ‘Pictures from Italy’, pinpoint the traveller’s psychological situation hinted at by Calvino in his book, when Marco Polo realises that the more a traveller wanders through unknown, far-away cities, the more he gets to know the port he sailed from and ‘the familiar places of his youth’²³. On the other side, even more outspokenly than the Italian vignettes, they bear evidence of the close connection between travel, travel literature and fiction pointed out by P. G. Adams in his seminal study on the subject. Adams, who investigates the contribution of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travelogues to the rise of the novel, finds in travel literature the same truth-lie dichotomy that lies at the core of fictional works: ‘The tension between the personal and the impersonal, the romantic and the realistic, the fanciful and the useful, is as important in the evolution of travel literature as it is in the evolution of the novel’²⁴. Dickens was certainly aware of this as he was aware that ‘any writer of travels other than pure guide-books... must often approach the boundary between the existent and the uncertain, between facts for facts and facts for pleasure’²⁵. In an age dominated by Beadecker’s common sense and by the aesthetics of realism Dickens chose to imitate the travellers and narrators of old who did not think it their duty to look carefully and report faithfully, but rather to entertain their audience, as Polo did with the Kubla Khan, through a more attractive mixture of truth and fiction.

¹James A. Davies, *The Textual Lift of Dickens’s Characters* (London, Macmillan, 1989): 74.

²C.P. Brand, *Italy and the English Romantics* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1958): 229. However, as David Paroissien has pointed out in his introduction to *Pictures from Italy* (London, Robinson Publishing 1989: 13), travel writers such as Samuel Sharp, Smollett, Lady Anna Miller, etc. were not 'so deeply immersed in humanistic pursuits as to ignore the Italians of the present day... Dickens... was not the first to complain about what Shelley in 1818 called "the, other Italy".'

³Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968): 512. Two of the most recent essays comparing *Pictures from Italy and Little Dorrit* are included in Anny Sadrin ed., *Dickens, Europe and the New Worlds* (London, Macmillan, 1999).

⁴Jack Lynch, 'Observation, with Extensive View? English-Italian Narratives 1700-1820', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 4 (1995): 16-17.

⁵Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994): 259. All subsequent references to *Pictures from Italy* are to this edition and appear parenthetically in the text.

⁶In his Preface to *A Tour in Italy and Sicily* (London, Longman 1828: 1-1 1) Louis Simond shows an interest in Italian politics, but the book is mostly concerned with Italian art. Murray's *Handbook of Northern Italy*, published in 1842, was soon to be upstaged by Baedeker's more popular 'Handbook for Travellers'.

⁷Milan, Parma, Piacenza, Bologna, Venice, had always been favourite places of call in a tour of Northern Italy. See Attilio Brilli, *Quando viaggiare era un'arte. Il romanzo del Grand Tour* (Bologna, il Mulino, 1995): 65.

⁸Simond's view of Italian poverty was partly derived from the famine caused by the Napoleonic wars. Images of dirt and squalor also belonged to the so-called aesthetics of the picturesque characterising travel writing at the turn of the eighteenth century. See Malcolm Andrews, 'The Metropolitan Picturesque', in Stephen Copley, Peter Garside (eds.), *The Politics of the Picturesque* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1994): 282-298. According to Michael Hollington, however, 'Pictures from Italy is one of the central places where Dickens's critique of conventional ideas of the "picturesque"... is mounted'. (*Dickens and the Grotesque*, London, Croom Helm, 1984): 140.

⁹Eric J. Leed, *The Mind of the Traveller. From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism* (New York, Basic Books 1991).

¹⁰Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (London, Martin Seeker & Warburg, 1970): 190.

¹¹Venice, Tuesday Night, 12th November 1844. *The Letters of Charles Dickens, gen. eds.* Madeline House and Graham Storey, vol. IV, edited by Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977): 216-218.

¹²Henry James, *Italian Hours* (New York, Grove Press, 1959): 88.

¹³(Genoa), 6th October 1844. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, cit.: 197-199. Apart from Forster's biography, the letter is quoted diffusely in Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie, *Dickens: A Life* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1979): 157.

¹⁴(Genoa), 8th October 1844. *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, cit.: 199-200.

¹⁵Kate Flint, *Dickens* (Brighton, Harvester Press, 1986): 86.

¹⁶F. S. Schwarzbach, *Dickens and the City* (London, Athlone Press, 1979): see in particular the introduction and the first four chapters. See also Rossana Bonadei, *Paesaggio con figure: intorno all'Inghilterra di Charles Dickens* (Milano, Jaka Book, 1996).

¹⁷'Spazzatura d'oro' ('Golden Trash'), *la Repubblica*, 11 November 1982. The review has been reprinted with the title 'Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend' in *Perché leggere i classici* (Milano, Mondadori 1995): 160-166.

¹⁸Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, translated from the Italian by William Weaver (San Diego, Harcourt Brace and Co., 1974): 86.

¹⁹Calvino, 87.

²⁰Italian critics have noticed a similarity between Polo's attitude towards Venice and Calvino's mixed feelings towards his home town of Sanremo on the Italian Riviera. According to Claudio Milanini, the descriptions of the exotic towns in *Invisible Cities* were probably influenced by pictures of Sanremo in nineteenth-century foreign travelogues (*L'Utopia discontinua: Saggio su Italo Calvino*, Milano, Garzanti, 1990): 140.

²¹See John M. L. Drew, 'Voyages Extraordinaires: Dickens's "Travelling Essays" and

The Uncommercial Traveller' (*Dickens Quarterly*, June 1996, vol. XIII, n.2): 84.

²²Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968): 148.

²³Calvino, 28.

²⁴Percy G. Adams, *Travel Literature and the Evolution of the Novel* (The University Press Kentucky, 1983): 109. See also Jean-Michel Racault, 'Les Jeux de la vérité et du mensonge', *Metamorphoses du Récit de Voyage*, ed. François Moureau (Paris-Genève, Champon-Slatkine, 1986).

²⁵Adams, 97.

End of the *Dickensian's* text.

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A view of Milan in 1846, drawing by W.Leitch, etching by T. Higham