

# DICKENS AND ITALY

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The aim of this paper is to give a brief account of some aspects of Dickens's relationship to Italian culture, politics, and society. It proposes a modest originality of scope, consisting in the inclusion of at least partial consideration of articles on Italian subjects written between 1850 and 1870 for two periodicals edited by Dickens, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. Though few of these are by Dickens himself, several of them are collaborations, and all of them, most particularly the *Household Words* articles, bear the marks of Dickens's editing. That this was thorough and interventionist, especially in the early years, and that most of the views expressed in these journals may be assumed by and large to have tallied with his own, can be gauged by the fact that the sole name mentioned in either periodical was that of Dickens himself. Each page bearing the inscription 'Conducted by Charles Dickens', all other contributors remaining anonymous, it seems reasonable to give more attention to these writings, as providing at least supporting evidence of Dickens's views on Italian social, cultural and political issues, than they have hitherto been accorded.

To begin with some generalities about Dickens's relation to foreign countries, it may be somewhat surprising to notice that a writer so often regarded as English to the core was willing to devote so much space in both periodicals to articles dealing with matters overseas. In fact it can be shown that motion and indeed travel – not loving attachment to known and familiar environments, as in some nineteenth century realists, but discovery of the unknown and marvellous in the everyday, and habitual movement toward its embrace – is a fundamental principle of Dickens's mind and art. He loved, says Percy Fitzgerald, 'that actual living movement in the form of walking, riding, travelling by coach or other vehicle, railway excursion, ascent of mountains abroad, travelling over the Continent in diligences or carriages.' What Dickens often called his restlessness, particularly at times when he was beginning to write a new book, with its edge of metaphysical yearning ('this is one

of what I call my Wandering days, before I fall to work. I seem to be always looking at such times for something I have not found in life, but may possibly come to, a few thousand of years hence, in some other part of some other system, God knows.') seems to have been at the root of a lifelong predilection for travel. His bookshelves, according to George Henry Lewes were full of 'three volume novels and books of travel,' many of them no doubt souvenirs of that childhood 'greedy relish for a few volumes of voyages and travels' emphasised in *David Copperfield*, for in 1850 we find him unable to respond to a *Household Words* colleague's need for more recent travel books: 'my travels are chiefly old, and I have none of these books.'<sup>1</sup>

This sense of other countries as a site and source of magic and wonder certainly had a distinctive Italian focus. *Pictures from Italy* recalls how as a child he had responded to 'pictures in school-books, setting forth 'The Wonders of the World', published by Harris of St. Paul's Churchyard, which of course included the leaning Tower of Pisa. The preface, attempting in part to explain why his first extended excursion into Europe should have been to Italy, refers to a long-standing fascination with 'places to which the imaginations of most people are attracted in a greater or lesser degree on which mine had dwelt for years.'<sup>2</sup> As the editors of volume 4 of the Pilgrim House edition of the letters conjecture, that imagination must have imbibed its fantasies of the peninsula from a variety of sources – from writers such as Shakespeare, Byron, Samuel Rogers and Bulwer Lytton, from painters like Stanfield, Turner and Eastlake, from composers like Auber<sup>3</sup>; but it seems to me that two other youthful influences predisposing Dickens in favour of Italy can be singled out. Sir Walter Scott is one; Dickens married, as he wrote later to Wilkie Collins, the daughter of 'the great friend and assistant of Scott, . . . who first made Lockhart known to him', and sought to emulate his great predecessor in a number of ways, not least by visiting Italy before the onset of old age and ill health – he had read his Lockhart with passionate attentiveness, and visited Scott's biographer on his second visit to Rome in 1853.<sup>4</sup> The other, representing the less official or respectable side of Italy's appeal, is that of the great pantomime clown Grimaldi, the source of a special enthusiasm for Italian popular culture and traditions of carnivalesque art, reflected in numerous articles in the two periodicals.

To detect this keynote of pleasing unfamiliarity in Dickens's representation of Italy in telling context, one may turn simply to the title of the account of his Italian travels of 1844 – 5, *Pictures from Italy*, implying of course the code word 'picturesque'. It occurs throughout the book, and on innumerable occasions in the *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* articles; it not only governs the Dickensian writings associated with Italy, but also crops up frequently to describe a fundamental aim of the two journals: the desire to provide stimulus, through attractively fanciful highlightings of the realities round about us, to the imaginative faculties of ordinary people steeped, Dickens felt, in a world that was developing in an increasingly materialist, anti-magical direction. His editorial rewritings invariably went in the direction of enlivening articles that he felt to be too dry; in a letter to the *Household Words* office manager Henry Wills, for instance concerning a jointly-written article on English Wills, he declares, 'I have endeavoured to make it picturesque', or in criticism of the 'Shadows' series by Charles Knight (clearly borrowing in some respects from the emphasis upon shadows in *Pictures from Italy*) he writes that 'the use of the past tense instead of the present, a little hurts the picturesque effect.' However, as Burgan and others have shown, there is at the same time in Dickens's employment of the term 'picturesque' a constant critique of its habitual associations, made explicit in the writings on Italy. He cannot abide writers or artists who go to Italy in search of the supposedly pure and spontaneous aesthetic beauty and 'picturesque' charm of people and places that in reality suffer from crippling poverty and oppressive and corrupt government. A letter to Forster from Naples in February 1845 seeks to discriminate between the types of picturesqueness: 'The condition of the common people here is abject and shocking. I am afraid that the conventional idea of the picturesque is associated with such misery and degradation that a new picturesque will have to be established as the world goes on,' and leads on, in *Pictures from Italy*, to a specification of what this 'new picturesque' might aim at: 'Painting and poetising for ever, if you will, the beauties of this most beautiful and lovely spot on earth, let us, as our duty, try to associate a new picturesque with some faint recognition of man's destiny.'<sup>5</sup>

This term 'new picturesque', tilted once more back in a realist direction, can serve as a label for the kind of writing that Dickens attempts to establish in *Pictures from Italy* and that contributors to *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* attempt to imitate. In characterising it, it may be said first that it does not by and large attempt to deal in any very direct way with Italian political and social problems. In *Pictures from Italy* itself, for example, the narrative voice declares at the outset his 'strong conviction' on the subject of misgovernment in Italy, 'but as I chose when residing there, a Foreigner, to abstain from the discussion of any such questions with any order of Italians, so I would rather not enter on the inquiry now.' That the abstention may not be to the book's disadvantage, as an effective reflection upon the condition of Italy, is suggested by the Italian Dickensian Ugo Piscopo, from whom I am constrained to quote in French, 'au contraire *Pictures from Italy* constitue un des documents le plus vivants et les plus passionés mais sans rhétorique ni mystification sur le tragique situation sociale italienne.' A similar tone – acknowledging that politics insists upon obtruding itself into a discourse that does not seek to invoke it – is adopted in the introduction of a *Household Words* article by H.G. Wreford, a *Times* and *Daily News* correspondent based in Naples who is one of the best and most prolific of Dickens's contributors on Italy: 'Seeking health here in Naples, and meddling not at all with European politics, I find it impossible to walk with an impassive mind among the scenes that are daily presented to my notice.'<sup>6</sup>

The image of the *flâneur* introduced here, strolling about the streets and observing the *passaggiata* of city life, points to another cardinal principle of the Dickensian 'new picturesque' representation of Italy – that it is fundamentally *physiognomical*. Walter Benjamin has explored the meaning of the 19th century preoccupation with physiognomy as a response to the pressures of anonymity in modern urban life, a fantasy of the legibility of the surface appearance of individuals in a crowd;<sup>7</sup> it has an obvious relevance, too, to the anonymity of the traveller in a foreign country, attempting to interpret the signs about him. Dickens's acceptance in many places, not least in an *All the Year Round* article of December 11, 1869 entitled 'Physiognomy of Luggage' which confidently asserts that 'there is a physiognomy in the human back,

the wave of the rim of a hat, the height of a shirt-collar' as much as in a face in which can be read 'the curious marks which the interior soul leaves behind it, wherever it comes in contact with earthy matter, or earthy manners and modes.'<sup>8</sup> Eschewing the overtly political, the Dickensian manner of representing Italy looks (like Blake's lyric persona in 'London') into the outward appearance of Italians for 'marks of weakness marks of woe' – or for the villainy of their oppressors. In the appearance of the priesthood of Genova, for instance, 'if Nature's handwriting be at all legible, greater varieties of sloth, deceit, and intellectual torpor, could hardly be observed among any class of men in the world' – a manner copied by Grenville Murray in his Roving Englishman series for 'Household Words', seeing in Naples a priest with 'a broad-brimmed hat and stealthy step – a bad face, I am sorry to say, if we dared believe in faces as, let me confess it, we all do.'<sup>9</sup>

These relatively crude examples show how transparently Dickens's 'strong conviction' on Italian political questions shines through the physiognomical surfaces that the writings observe. Though the famous war-correspondent W.H. Russell (himself one of the contributors on Italy to Dickens's periodicals) wrote that, at the time of his brief editorship of the *Daily News* in 1844 he "was ignorant and indifferent to what are called 'Foreign Affairs'; indeed, he told me himself that he never thought about them till the Revolution of 1848",<sup>10</sup> it is clear that firsthand experience of Italy and Italian politics, and friendship with distinguished refugees, altered and developed his attitudes. 'I have known Mazzini and Gallenga,' he wrote to Henry Chorley in February 1860; 'Manin was tutor to my daughters in Paris.'<sup>11</sup> Not only Italy, but also France, Hungary and Poland engaged his sympathies during and after 'the year of revolutions' (in a letter of 1849 he signs himself 'Citoyen Charles Dickens').<sup>12</sup> But his intervention on behalf of Italy seems to go further than that for any other country – extending, in August and September 1849, after the fall of Rome, beyond condemnation of the Governor of Malta, More O'Ferrall, for his refusal to let the refugees land, to his authorship of 'An Appeal to the English People on Behalf of the Italian Refugees', issued from Tavistock House, which was to become Dickens's own home two years later. Echoing themes that are to figure in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, it speaks of the

refugees as 'good citizens . . . who built upon the ruins of a monstrous system which had fallen of its own rottenness and corruption, one of moderation and truth.'<sup>13</sup> A gauge of the extent to which Dickens was publicly identified with the Italian cause at this time can be had in an interesting 1849 detective novel by 'Morna' (the pseudonym of Thomas O'Keefe) entitled *The Battle of London Life: or, Boz and his Secretary*, in which the central figure, engaged unwittingly by Dickens, turns out to be a Government agent investigating the extent and nature of the novelist's involvement with Mazzini.<sup>14</sup>

What emerges both in Dickens's own writings about Italy and in those that he sponsored in his journals is a determined separation of his positive estimation of the Italian people and his negative condemnation of most if not all of the peninsular governments. 'So many jewels set in dirt' is the commentary of *Pictures from Italy* on the Italians themselves, praising 'the smiling face of the attendant, man or woman: the courteous manner; the amiable desire to please and be pleased.' The letter to Chorley of 1860 gently chides him for his negative representation of Italy in his novel *Roccabella* and urges a 'symptomatic' understanding of the wrinkles on the surfaces of Italian behaviour: 'I believe they have the faults you ascribe to them (nationally, not individually), but I could not find it in my heart, remembering their miseries, to exhibit those faults without referring them back to their causes.'<sup>15</sup>

Sala's influential question, referring to the continental episodes of Dickens's great novels – 'Can you divest yourself of the impression that Dickens had, on the whole, a good-humoured contempt for foreigners?'<sup>16</sup> – thus seems to offer an inadequate approach to the question of Dickens's attitude towards Italy, or for that matter to France or to a number of other European countries. According to the varying attitudes of individual contributors there are certainly many instances of various kinds and degrees of prejudice, condescension and even downright jingoism to be found in the articles on Italy in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, not least on the question of religion. But the overall picture is a good deal more complex<sup>17</sup>: the comparisons between England and Italy that are inevitably frequently implied by no means operate wholly in England's favour.

The 1869 dictum that is often quoted as the quintessence of Dickens's political attitudes – 'my faith in the people governed is on the whole limitless, my faith in the people governing strictly limited'<sup>18</sup> – is in fact not so far from his central position on Italy; indeed, his experience of Italy may have helped him to formulate it. Beginning with the passage in *Pictures from Italy*, which sees the effort required at Carrara to make sculpture out of marble as an allegory of Italy, of the difficulty besetting 'virtue that springs in miserable ground', the emphasis recurs throughout *Household Words*, in Wreford's writing on Naples, for instance, where 'quick talents and very good nature' are intermixed with 'many of those low qualities which spring from the want of a regard to truth and honor distress', but 'this deficiency may in a great measure be attributed to the *régime* under which they live.' We can see too why, in an 1862 *All the Year Round* article entitled 'The Country of Masaniello,' Cavour's dying words on Naples are prominently quoted: 'there is much corruption in their country; but it is not their fault, poor people, they have been so badly governed!'<sup>19</sup> Dickens's compassionate view of 19th century Italy seems in some ways to anticipate Brecht's focus, in *The Good Woman of Setzuan* or *The Life of Galileo*, upon the difficulty of doing good in an evil society.

Thus there is in fact a good deal more dialectical to-and-fro and balance in the handling of comparisons between England and Italy than the Sala tradition of commentary on Dickens and Europe has cared to admit. On the question of crime, it is true that Wreford's article on 'Spy Police' in Italy is specifically linked to other *Household Words* articles by Wills and by Dickens himself that praise the skill and integrity of the London police and describe from the enthusiastic perspective of liberal faith in scientific progress recent advances in crime detection;<sup>20</sup> by comparison Italian governments, obsessed with the fight against subversion, and finding it in such apparently innocuous physiognomical manifestations as the sporting of beards and moustaches (Dickens began to wear both after about 1852; was he expressing solidarity with Italian 'radicals'?<sup>21</sup>), are seen as backward and indifferent in the fight against real criminals. It is true, too, that on matters of religion, Dickens is strongly biassed in favour of Protestantism against Roman Catholicism (in March 1851 he writes of his

enjoyment of Malvern 'where the wind blows as freshly as if there were no Popes and no Cardinals whatsoever – nothing the matter anywhere'), and that he appears himself almost a little paranoid about what he perceives as the threat to established religion in England emanating from Puseyism and the Pre-Raphaelite movement (on Millais' painting he writes in May 1850: 'If such things were allowed to sweep on, without some vigorous protest, three fourths of this Nation would be under the feet of Priests, in ten years.')22 In a *Household Words* article of December 1858, 'Doctor Dulcamara M.P.', written chiefly by Wilkie Collins but with Dickens's own collaboration, there is sharp satiric reference to Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* to attack Mr. Sidney Herbert as a quack for his enthusiastic recommendation of the Puseyite novel *The Heir of Redclyffe*, by Charlotte Yonge, with its use of an idealised Italian setting to chart the moral and religious regeneration of an Englishman suffering from a bad temper.<sup>23</sup>

But when it comes to cultural questions, with their own very important social and political implications, very different emphases are seen at work. Schlicke has observed how in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* the dearth and decline of popular culture in Britain is consistently contrasted with its vitality in other countries, not least Italy itself.<sup>24</sup> Here it is a case of a different kind of suppression – of popular national traditions of festival and carnival, such as Bartholomew Fair – by the prudishly moralistic power that middle-class evangelicalism was able to exert in Victorian Britain (the kind of attitudes mocked in 'Dr. Dulcamara, M.P.', which ridicules, in Charlotte Yonge's novel, the refusal of Sir Guy Morville to read the descriptions of Italy in *Childe Harold* 'because Lord Byron was a profligate man.')25 It is interesting that one such person – Mary Elizabeth Taylor – wrote to him in the autumn of 1849, asking him to lend his voice to a campaign to clean up the immortality of street Punch-and-Judy shows, and turn Punch into a propagandist for decency. In declining to do so, Dickens points to Naples, 'where Punch is still a censor of the follies of the day . . . In the most popular Theatre in Naples that is still his character every day and night, and Naples is perhaps the wickedest City upon earth,' and speaks on behalf of what he sees as 'one of those extravagant reliefs from the realists of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and



instructive.’<sup>26</sup> The work of Wreford in *Household Words* offers many clear examples of pointed celebrations of how ordinary Italian people achieve a liberation of spirit at popular festivals such as that of the Giglio in Nola, when on a Sunday, their one rest day, they can revitalise themselves in forgetful carnival, unlike their counterparts, the working class in England: ‘Sunday is not, to their minds, what the week had been to their bodies – a weight and a cloud, oppressing and saddening.’<sup>27</sup> So that, as commonly in Dickens, as with London and Paris in *A Tale of Two Cities* or high and low society in *Dombey and Son*, categories initially set up in opposition to each other, in the end collapse into one other and offer multiple mutual ironic cross-lightings.

And this handy-dandy imbrication of the one and the other is no doubt one driving force of the continuing reference to Italy in Dickens’s work. Italy was an actual presence in the streets of London, in the shape of image-boys or organ-grinders, with whom – despite his detestation of street music, and campaigning with Michael Bass in 1864 to tighten the law<sup>28</sup> – Dickens loved to speak Italian; Hans Christian Andersen describes him doing so, and Dickens himself in a letter of 1846 declares: ‘I talk to all the Italian Boys who go about the streets with organs and white mice, and give them mints of money *per l’amore della bell’Italia*.’<sup>29</sup> Italy aroused suppressed depths of emotion in him, referring him back of course to experiences in England – thus in Genoa Michaelmas church bells caused him to dream again for the first time in years of the traumatic experience of his young sister-in-law Mary Hogarth’s death in his arms; in the dream, she even appeared to persuade him that Catholicism was the right religion for him.<sup>30</sup> So that when James Joyce, in a fine essay on Dickens written in Padua in 1912 as part of an attempt to gain official status as a teacher of English in Italy, uses the Dick Whittington motif to express his conviction that Dickens needed constantly to return in his imagination to London (as Joyce himself did of course to Dublin), he only grasps half the point in asserting that ‘whenever he went far afield . . . his magic seems to have failed him, his hand seems to have lost her ancient cunning.’<sup>31</sup> The real truth is that for Dickens the near and the far were held in essential counterpoint, and the magic of the near to hand needed constant replenishment from the magic of the far away.

## Notes

1. See Philip Collins ed., *Dickens: Interviews and Recollections* (London, Macmillan, 1981; 2 vols.) I, 25, (Lewes) II, 229 (Fitzgerald); Graham Storey, Kathleen Tillotson, Nina Burgis eds, *The Letters of Charles Dickens, 1850 – 1852* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988), 144 (to Wills, 10/8/50), 721 (to Mary Boyle, 22/7/52). This is vol. 6 of the Pilgrim House edition of the Letters, hereinafter referred to as *Letters*.
2. Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* in *American Notes and Pictures from Italy* (London, Oxford University Press: Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1957), pp. 357, 260; hereinafter referred to as *PI*.
3. *Letters* IV, xiii.
4. To Wilkie Collins 6/6/56, quoted in *Interview and Recollections* I, 2. See also *Letters* I, 54, and Liselotte Thalmann, *Charles Dickens in seinen Beziehungen zum Ausland* (Zürich, Juris Verlag, 1956), p. 35; *Letters* II, 365 (to Thomas Mitton, 23/8/41).
5. See *Letters* VI, 165 (to Wills, 8/9/50), 446 (to Knight, 27/5/51); William Burgan, 'Little Dorrit in Italy', *Nineteenth Century Fiction* XXIX (March 1975), 393 – 411; Michael Hollington, *Dickens and the Grotesque* (London, Croom Helm, 1984), chapter 7: 'The New Picturesque: *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorrit*', pp. 138 – 152; *Letters* IV, 266 (to Forster, 11/2/45); *PI*, 413.
6. *PI*, 259; Ugo Piscopo, 'Dickens en Italie', *Europe* XLVII, no. 488 (December 1969), 119 ('in my view *Pictures from Italy* constitutes one of the most living and passionate of documents on the tragic social situation in Italy, but at the same time it is without any rhetoric or mystification'); Wreford, 'Neapolitan State Prisoners', *Household Words* II, 235 – 7 (29/11/51; hereinafter referred to as *HW*).
7. See *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, transl. Harry Zohn (London, New Left Books, 1973), p. 39.
8. *All the Year Round* XXIII, 39 (11/12/69; hereinafter referred to as *AYR*); the author of the article is unknown to me.
9. *PI*, 296; 'Beautiful Naples,' *HW* VII, 303 (28/5/53).
10. *Interviews and Recollections* I, 76.
10. Quoted from *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, eds. Mamie Dickens and Georgina Hogarth (London, Macmillan, 1893), p. 494 (to H.F. Chorley, 3/2/60); see also Harry W. Rudman, *Italian Nationalism and English Letters* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 126.
12. *Letters* V, 257 (to John Forster, 29/2/48).
13. See *Dickensian* X (1914), 320 and *Letters* V, 598.
14. See W. Dexter, 'When Found', *Dickensian* XL (1940), 56.
15. *PI*, 326.
16. *Interviews and Recollections* II, 201.
17. On the complexity of Dickens's relations to Englishness and foreignness see eg. Chesterton: 'Now Dickens is at once as universal as the sea and as English as Nelson', in *Charles Dickens* (London, Methuen, 1906), p. 295, and Floris Delattre, *Dickens et la France* (Paris, Gamber, 1927), p. 74: 'sous l'Anglais qu'il a l'air d'être, on trouve sans peine un romancier européen.'
18. Speech to the Birmingham and Midland Institute 27/9/69, quoted in House, *The Dickens World* (London, Oxford University Press), p. 172 – the chief source for its wide dissemination.
19. *PI*, 356; H.G. Wreford, 'Neapolitan Purity', *HW* VIII, 572 (11/2/54); *AYR* VII, 564 (23/8/62; author unknown to me).

20. See *Letters* VI, 130 for the nexus of relations between Wreford's article, which appeared in *HW* on 21/9/50, and 'Will's article 'The Modern Science of Thief-Taking' of 13/7/50, and Dickens's article 'A Detective Police Party' of 27/7/50.
21. See *Interviews and Recollection* I, 81, II, 186.
22. See *Letters* VI, 106 (to Maclise, 30/5/50), 340 (to Forster, 29/3/51).
23. See Harry Stone, ed., *The Uncollected Writings of Charles Dickens: Household Words 1850 - 1859* (London, Allen Lane, 1969; 2 volumes), II, 619 - 626.
24. Paul Schlicke, *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1985), p. 197 etc.
25. *Uncollected Writings* II, 624.
26. *Letters* V, 640 (to Mary Elizabeth Taylor, 4/11/49).
27. *HW* 16/8/56.
28. See the article on Michael Bass in *The Dictionary of National Biography* for the details of Bass's bill 'by which householders might require street musicians to quit the neighbourhood of their homes', which was enthusiastically welcomed by 'Carlyle, Tennyson, Charles Dickens' and others.
29. See *Letters* V, 154n for Andersen, and IV, 535 (to Mrs. de la Rue, 17/4/46).
30. See *Letters* IV, 196 (to John Forster, ?30/9/44), VI, 276 (to Thomas Stone, 2/2/51).
31. See Louis Berrone, ed., transl., *James Joyce in Padua* (New York, Random House, 1977), p. 34.

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