

# *“Italy is not his ground”: Dickens on the Outside in “Pictures from Italy”*

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## *T*he Reader’s Passport: Conviviality and Controversy

In the opening chapter of *Pictures from Italy*, “The Reader’s Passport,” Dickens proclaims that “This book is made as accessible as possible, because it would be a great pleasure to me if I could hope, through its means, to compare impressions with some among the multitudes who will hereafter visit the scenes described with interest and delight” (7).<sup>1</sup> In speaking of this anticipated union of opinion with readers both present and future, Dickens goes on to “sketch [his] reader’s portrait” in the style of a contemporary passport, revealing as much about his own hopes for the book’s reception as he does about his actual readership:

|                    |                     |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Complexion         | Fair                |
| Eyes               | Very Cheerful       |
| Nose               | Not supercilious    |
| Mouth              | Smiling             |
| Visage             | Beaming             |
| General Expression | Extremely Agreeable |

In his self-proclaimed “accessible” work, Dickens proposes to take his readers on an imaginative journey, stipulating that to do so they must be “very cheerful,” “smiling,” and “extremely agreeable.” In this case accessibility may be a cloak for similarity, as Mary A. Armstrong identifies that the passport “is actually a looking glass, and the countenance [Dickens] sees there is largely his own” (151): Dickens seeks like-minded – even like-faced – individuals to join him on this journey.

The projected description in the passport is an extraordinarily prescriptive anticipation of a reader, a literary form of border-control that warns away any who are feeling contrary, or less than buoyant, and places responsibility not on the author to deliver a work of suitable quality, but on the reader to be in the right frame of mind to receive it: critics need not read on.

Sadly for Dickens the critics *did* read it, and reviewed it less than favorably. *The Times* reported, “There is nothing new in the book from beginning to end. It has no purpose, and attempts to work out no definite idea” (qtd Collins 139). It might well be argued that “no definite idea” is the founding principle for a work which Dickens himself likens to “a series of faint reflections – mere shadows in the water” (5), but to dismiss the work as sentimental fancy is to ignore the artistry in its writing and the complexity of Dickens’ position within it as a narrator. Worse still, the reviewer in *The Times* reaches the conclusion, intended as a piece of advice to Dickens “offered in a spirit of true friendliness,” that “Italy is not his ground” (qtd Collins 140-41). It is a remarkable leap from disapproval of the book’s merits to a perceived incompatibility between writer and subject, one influenced by the shadow of Boz. It supposes that since Dickens in London was a man in his element, writing of what he knew with great relish, that Dickens in Italy must be a fish out of water, writing as an outsider and failing to get under the surface to offer any great insight or revelation. I contest that this is an incorrect assumption on the reviewer’s part, albeit one that continues to resurface in most readers’ ready association of Dickens with London above all other locations. I aim to show how finding himself in a location that “is not his ground” provokes and challenges Dickens to produce a work in which he carefully navigates the conundrum of writing a meaningful commentary as an outsider while describing and identifying social issues within Italy. My intention is to show that the apparent lack of a “definite idea” is not only a deliberate ploy, but also one that Dickens works hard to establish only to regularly subvert it as he subtly introduces criticism and insight under the veil of an “extremely agreeable” tourist.

It is not difficult to ascertain Dickens' reason for doing so. It is quite apparent that his experience with *American Notes* formed a significant influence in his writing of *Pictures*, especially in his marked attempts to avoid the same controversial reception that his earlier travel narrative had received. Dickens maintains in "The Reader's Passport" that "I have likened these Pictures to shadows in the water, and would fain hope that I have, nowhere, stirred the water so roughly, as to mar the shadows" (6), but despite his protestations there are nonetheless certain topics that are unavoidably incendiary. Italy was a source for contemporary political debate; when the Home Secretary Sir James Graham made the controversial decision to open letters addressed to Giuseppe Mazzini, a political exile living in England, Dickens was one among many who expressed utter dismay at this invasion of personal privacy, writing on envelopes of his own correspondence that "It is particularly requested that if Sir James Graham should open this, he will not trouble himself to seal it again."<sup>2</sup> Dickens' interest was not just that of an affronted member of the public; his Italian tutor Antonio Gallenga was himself an exile from his country.<sup>3</sup> With such personal contact with an exiled Italian, one might assume Dickens to be sympathetic to the cause, or at least the effect it was having on the Italians he knew, and yet he insists in "The Reader's Passport" that that there will not be found, in these pages, any grave examination into the government or misgovernment of any portion of the country [...]. No visitor of that beautiful land can fail to have a strong conviction on the subject. 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. During my twelve month's occupation of a house at Genoa, I never found that authorities constitutionally jealous were distrustful of me; and I should be sorry to give them occasion to regret their free courtesy, either to myself or any of my countrymen. (5)

In public at least, Dickens deliberately avoided an overtly political tone in *Pictures* while still nursing the wound from his American experience. However, the absence of political commentary in *Pictures*

need not denote an absence of political engagement from Dickens personally. Kate Flint argues that *Pictures* is “superficially [...] a curiously unpolitical book,” but that Dickens “was much more aware of the current political situation in Italy than the surface of the text would seem to suggest” (xxiii). In particular Flint draws attention to Dickens’ later article “The Italian Prisoner,” published in *All the Year Round* in 1860 that retrospectively recalls an episode from the Italian tour that (as the title suggests) is overtly political.<sup>4</sup> That Dickens should have refrained from writing of this at the time speaks to his commitment to avoid any “grave examination” in the pages of *Pictures*, and yet inevitably the very act of writing on another country is intrinsically political, as the writer of one nation implicitly projects his country’s ideals onto that of another nation. In particular, Dickens’ frequent comparison of Italy in relation to its past, as much as it serves to romanticize the country, can be interpreted as an inferred criticism of a nation unable to confront the challenges of the present. Throughout the tour Dickens spies constant signs of neglect and deprivation. In Mantua he sees “in almost every street, some suppressed church: now used for a warehouse, now for nothing at all: all as crazy and dismantled as they could be, short of tumbling bodily down” (93). Here and elsewhere tour guides woefully lead him around abandoned piazzas as the discussion focuses on what has come before but never on what will happen next. The country, under Dickens’ narration, becomes one with all its glory and achievements behind it.

But the greater controversy, and the one that attracted most attention at the time, was Dickens’ comments upon the Catholic Church. Once more this was an area Dickens anticipated by including a disclaimer in the passport, of his “hope” that he was “not likely to be misunderstood by Professors of the Roman Catholic Faith, on account of anything contained in these pages,” as in any comments upon the ceremonies he did “no more than many conscientious Catholics both abroad and at home” (6). However, his own mistrust of the established church could not fail to emerge in his prolonged discussions of Catholic ceremonies, not least in his descriptions of Rome. He dismisses St. Peter’s Cathedral as being

neither "religiously impressive or affecting" (119), and condemns the ceremony of the Pope as having "nothing solemn or effective in it; and certainly very much that was droll and tawdry" (121). For a work claiming to have a "fanciful and idle air" (6), these comments are as barbed as any of Dickens' attacks on America. His inability to maintain an objective and tolerant position on Catholicism is likely to be the cause for his original illustrator Clarkson Stanfield stepping away from the project, as David Paroissien notes: "Stanfield was a well-known figure by the 1840s and he may have found himself unwilling to lend his name to a work which many Catholics would find grossly offensive" (87). Moreover, Dickens' anti-Catholic rhetoric attracted the full wrath of the reviewer of an unsigned piece in the *Dublin Review*:

That a production like this, exhibiting, from beginning to end, such extreme narrowness, littleness, one-sidedness of mind; so much cockney trifling and sneering on topics regarded by a hundred and fifty millions of Christians as of a solemn and sacred character – that such a production should have come to us, under the sanction of a name so honoured by us, and, as we fondly thought, so deserving of honour, has confounded and shocked us more than we can express. (185)

Note in particular the reference to "cockney trifling" on solemn matters, which hints at Dickens' better-known persona as a citizen of London, and with it again the insinuation that in writing on Italy, and its religious ceremonies, he is overstepping his boundaries. The *Dublin Review*'s key condition to the offense taken is that it is Dickens who is writing it; the content is not so damning as the contrast from expectations of the author writing it. Readers were not prepared for Dickens in Italy.

In *Pictures* then we have a writer who is either trying to self-gag any pointed opinions on the country before him with limited success, or else slip such comments in under the veil of conviviality. While the controversy over his Catholic comments is the most obvious example of

Dickens failing in his attempt to remain congenial and accessible to all in his travel narrative, this in itself diverts our attention from the more widespread movement throughout the text of embedded commentary masquerading as pleasant musings. This sleight of hand is achieved through Dickens' conscious attempt to keep himself, as a character, in the background of this narrative and allow the sights and people of Italy to step forward as their own critics. Moreover, Dickens attempts to dilute his own judgments by deliberately adopting a veil of vagueness, utilizing his keen eye for observation still but blurring the description to make the likeness of what he sees closer to reflections in the water. The reality of Italy becomes enveloped in the fantasy of Dickens' mind. It is this latter technique that makes *Pictures* so striking today as a literary work, allowing us to appreciate Dickens' manipulation of facts and figures into a framework of fancy, dreams, and illusion.

### **Dickens in Italy: Personal and Public Identity, and the Incredible Shrinking Author**

When reading about Dickens' time in Italy we are effectively presented in print with two trips: the one contained in his private letters, and the one made public in *Pictures*. The very nature of *Pictures*' content invites us to look for autobiography, but this is an interpretation that Dickens knowingly obstructs in his narrative style. The first installment of the work to appear in print, in *the Daily News* on 21 January 1846, was the text later presented as the chapter "Going through France," and as an opening it offers a very different impression of the work to come than "The Reader's Passport." Where the Passport offers the illusion of structural coherence, and foregrounds the author as the reader's guide through what is to follow, "Going through France" flings readers directly into the action and focuses their attention not on who is telling the story, but what they are seeing. Dickens tells of the carriage's occupants being an "English family" (8), with no further detail, denying opportunity to concentrate on those inside the carriage and forcing our attention to the view outside the carriage instead. It is part of a movement throughout *Pictures* to keep our

eye on Italy itself, rather than Dickens. Our understanding of Dickens' travelogue – specifically its structure and focus – can be better understood by looking at what the letters tell us, and noting what Dickens chooses *not* to discuss in *Pictures*.

As a personal trip, a tour through Italy offered a number of benefits to Dickens. His fame continued to rise, making the promised seclusion of a continental hideaway that more appealing, while conversely he was growing anxious about his personal finances. A year out of London, potentially resulting in a new publication about those travels, was therefore doubly enticing. *Martin Chuzzlewit* had not sold well, and Paroissien notes that going abroad allowed Dickens "to live cheaply and reorganize his finances after the losses from the sales of the novel." He suggests that "of greater importance was the increasing restlessness and tension that Dickens experienced" in the process of writing *Chuzzlewit*, which would make a writing sanctuary in Genoa the more appealing (11). John Forster ambiguously recalls this time as a "turning point in Dickens' career," without fully justifying why this should be so, though it does coincide with the transition from *Chuzzlewit* to *Dombey and Son* and the shift in Dickens' novels from slightly chaotic reactionary serial writing to a more detailed narrative structure planned in advance (Forster 51). Yet the only passing mention we get of Dickens' writing in *Pictures* is a brief note in "The Reader's Passport" of his "old pursuits," which he is about to "resume [...] joyfully, in Switzerland" (6).

Equally absent from *Pictures* are Dickens' numerous visits to Augusta de la Rue, who was suffering greatly from anxiety. In several letters to her husband Emile, Dickens demonstrates a keen interest in her condition, which he hoped to cure through mesmerism. Dickens writes of having "the truest interest in her" (*Letters* 4:243); another time he speaks of "looking, with the greatest impatience and interest" for Emile's next letter with further details of his wife's condition (*Letters* 4:251). Increasingly critics have gone where Forster dared not by highlighting the timing of the Italian trip with the cracks appearing in Dickens' marriage. The length of detail he goes into when describing the mesmeric sessions

to Emile in itself is testament to the importance Dickens attached to it, and whether correct or not it is understandable why Catherine Dickens should have felt jealous of the attention her husband was paying to Augusta de la Rue. Paroissien points to this episode, alongside Dickens' infatuation shortly before Italy with Christiana Weller as early signs of Dickens' "deteriorating relationship with his wife" (191). Needless to say then, there is no mention of de la Rue or mesmerism in the pages of *Pictures*; nor is there discussion of the financial benefits, seclusion from admiring fans, or anything about Dickens' writing career. Whatever the personal reasons for visiting Italy, the public-facing account that results from it takes great care to push the novelist into the background and allow a more pseudonymous narrator to take center-ground instead. And yet, as James Davies notes, "Most writers on Dickens regard *Pictures from Italy* as a mine of autobiographical information" (65). In truth *Pictures* bears the same resemblance to autobiography as *The Uncommercial Traveller* or *Sketches by Boz*. In all three, Dickens creates a persona as narrator, reporting on the experiences seen by Dickens but shaping them into a new fictional form. In all three, the observer directs our attention outwards to the scenes before him, keeping Dickens hidden behind the curtain.

In *Pictures* this scaling back of the explicit presence of Dickens himself can once again be argued to be a purposeful response to the backlash he faced for *American Notes*. In that work he is very much a protagonist; he namechecks himself as early as the second paragraph, noting the ship's "state-room had been specially engaged for 'Charles Dickens, Esquire and Lady,'" and in the same chapter goes on to describe his own sea-sickness, or his wife's discomfort in the cabin during a storm: the escapades of the couple, and their interpersonal relationship, receive continual referencing during a work that is supposed to be focused on America (*American Notes* 19). Marie-Amélie Coste notes that "compared to *American Notes* where his role as author was underlined, *Pictures from Italy* presents him more as a spectator"; the narrator is more passive, reporting on observations rather than directly engaging with them, and providing no information on the author's party (214). Instead, tour guides

lead the narrative, be it the Goblin of Avignon, the pitiable cemetery guide in Bologna, the optimistic Cicerone in Mantua, or of course the brave Courier himself. While Louis Roche is reduced to this latter pseudonym in *Pictures*, his unnamed persona is perceived as a dominant force over the author, who notes that most would assume the Courier to be the head of the party rather than him:

And it would have been small comfort to me to have explained to the population of Paris generally, that I was that Head and Chief; and not the radiant embodiment of good humour who sat beside me in the person of a French Courier – best of servants and most beaming of men! Truth to say, he looked a great deal more patriarchal than I, who, in the shadow of his portly presence, dwindled down to no account at all. (8)

This is an uncharacteristically humble moment on Dickens' part, in which the author shrinks back to let the Courier take charge, quite unlike the more domineering public persona that would come to epitomize Dickens during the reading tours. Indeed, if anything the description of "the radiant embodiment of good humour [...] most beaming of men" reads exactly like how Dickens himself would like to be perceived, and indeed how many of his readers then and now continue to see him. Roche becomes a surrogate Dickens in *Pictures*, allowing the real Dickens to shy away from the attention and secrete his opinions under the radar of objective, unobtrusive observer. It highlights the early stages of Dickens' growing wariness with his escalating fame. His time in America, though besieged with eager fans, carried a certain novelty, as he experienced being the great writer on tour. By the time he visits Italy, there is a conscious effort not to be in the foreground, to be able to enjoy seclusion. Dickens is allowing the Italians to speak for themselves, with implied commentary rather than explicit engagement on his part. Gabriella Caponi-Doherty suggests Dickens "tried to make room in his book for ordinary Italians who were rarely mentioned in other travel books and whom he found morally enriching in their example and worthy of notice" (161). Equally,

his attempts to convey narrative through the voices of the locals allow him to borrow their native authority to criticize their own country.

But it is not only Italy under fire in *Pictures*. Compounding the sense of Dickens' ingratiating himself with an Italian perspective is the mocking of tourists throughout the book. Mr. and Mrs. Davis's woefully naïve responses to awe-inspiring moments of art and culture are a barbed attack on the idea of understanding another country in the space of a single visit: Mrs. Davis especially is said to be always present, rarely silent, yet Dickens remarks that he does not believe "she ever saw anything, or looked at anything" (129). Dickens twists the marvel of Victorian transport into a critique of the implication of the travel experience as something once earned, but now made too easy and accessible: "Mr. and Mrs. Davis, and their party, had, probably, been brought from London in about nine or ten days. Eighteen hundred years ago, the Roman legions under Claudius protested against being led into Mr. and Mrs. Davis's country, urging that it lay beyond the limits of the world" (130). This stark contrast of the ease of modern transport and the decreasing worth of travel correlates with what James Buzard notes as the rise of an "anti-tourism" in the latter half of the nineteenth-century, when

after the Napoleonic Wars, the exaggerated perception that the Continental tour was becoming more broadly accessible than ever before gave rise to new formulations about what constituted "authentic" cultural experience [...] and new representations aimed at distinguishing authentic from spurious or merely repetitive experience.

(6)

But if Dickens is raising concerns about this, he does so with good humor and self-awareness; after all, the criticism of Mrs. Davis's failure to really see anything applies just as equally to Dickens' own hurried travels in other parts of the text. Chris Louttit suggests this does not escape Dickens' attention, and that not only was he "conscious of his fevered and ultimately unsatisfying activity being rather like Mrs. Davis's [but] also that he was able to submit it to gentle parody" (32). Frequently Dickens

invites ridicule of himself; he teases his own instinct to read *Romeo and Juliet* in Verona by supposing ironically that "of course, no Englishman had ever read it there, before" (89). It is a travel narrative that mocks the traveler. Clotilde De Stasio argues that the comparisons between Italy and England made in the book are intended to show the superiority of the latter – "contrasting Italy (or any foreign country) with England was one of the most common devices used in travel reports [...] to underline the superiority of the motherland over the visited countries" (64) – but in practice this constant berating of tourists, mingled with the preference given for local voice, portrays a country that stands in defiance of tourism and external understanding. We can gape and wonder, but never comprehend.

A keystone in this barrier to comprehension is the romanticizing of the past in defiance of the present. Caponi-Doherty is one of many to note that "a major factor in the romantic appeal of Italy was its past," but Dickens had no time for nostalgia (151). Just a few years earlier in 1841, in response to the new Tory government, he had written a parody of "A Fine Old Gentleman" in which he wrote ironically of "the good old times" when "the press was seldom known to snarl or bark, / But sweetly sang of men in pow'r, like any tuneful lark"; and "Grave judges, too, to all their evil deeds were in the dark." For Dickens, the past was full of mistakes, and progress lay in the future; yet Italy was a place that thrived upon its history. Steven Marcus suggests that for Dickens "the Continent often seemed a monument to a past which, no matter how familiar he became with it, never ceased to horrify him" (304). In writing on Italy then we see a tension arise as Dickens – trying to better understand the country – challenges the romantic, fanciful notions of Italy based upon its monumental cultural heritage, with contrasting images of contemporary poverty and deprivation. Susan Schoenbauer Thurin notes Dickens' constant commentary on "physically degenerate people" such as the peasant women described in the chapter "Genoa and its Neighbourhood." Thurin writes: "What another writer might regard as picturesque, barefoot woman doing laundry in public tanks, Dickens maligns: beating the

clothes with wooden paddles, they appear to be ‘revenging themselves on dress in general for being connected with the Fall of Mankind’” (71). Charles Brand notes that Dickens is very much of his time in this challenging of sentimentalism, noting that in the 1840s “travellers idealised less and criticised more” (173), and that “Dickens and his contemporaries mockingly substitute dirt and mosquitos for the moonlit ruins and the serenades of their sentimental parents, and scenes from Italian literature which had seemed pathetic in the 1820s were laughed at twenty years later” (224). But if this mocking tone is indeed of its time, there is equally a part of this fascination with the ugly side of life that is characteristically Dickensian. That he should focus on degradation as much as beauty tells us as much about his own preoccupations as it does about his satirizing popular ideals. For all his insistence in “The Reader’s Passport” that the tale told will be a pleasant one of fancy, Dickens details a great deal of the grotesque. The Goblin’s delight in revealing the various chambers of the prison identify the worst face of tourism, which serves to make a profit from the memory of misfortune with no regard for moral imperative. While Brand notes a trend among some writers of the time, in encounters such as that with the Goblin Dickens is consciously attempting to position himself *against* other travel guides, most notably John Murray’s Handbooks. Published from the 1830s onwards, this catalogue of books stood as an example of authoritative country guidebooks against which Dickens reacts. Earlier in the same chapter Dickens has already highlighted the distinction between his own work and Murray’s during his description of the cathedral in Lyons:

There was no difference, in point of cleanliness, between its stone pavement and that of the streets; and there was a wax saint, in a little box like a berth aboard ship, with a glass front to it, whom Madame Tussaud would have nothing to say to, on any terms, and which even Westminster Abbey might be ashamed of. If you would know all about the architecture of this church, or any other, its dates, dimensions, endowments, and

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history, is it not written in Mr. Murray's Guide-Book,  
and may you not read it there, with thanks to him, as I  
did! (17)

Dickens simultaneously compliments and condemns Murray: the suggestion that his handbook gives such obsessive detail of measurements and dimensions both speaks of its thoroughness and lack of poetry. Like a precursor to Gradgrind, Murray can provide facts, but Dickens is trying to show the story behind those facts. In the Goblin episode Dickens shows how little facts can go to describing the emotional weight of a place and moment. When they reach the Chamber of Tortures, the Goblin wants to provide all the details, while Dickens cries for peace.

Oh Goblin, Goblin, let us think of this awhile, in  
silence. Peace, Goblin! Sit with your short arms crossed  
on your short legs, upon that heap of stones, for only five  
minutes, and then flame out again.

Minutes! Seconds are not marked upon the Palace  
clock, when, with her eyes flashing fire, Goblin is up, in  
the middle of the chamber, describing, with her sunburnt  
arms, a wheel of heavy blows. Thus it ran round! cries  
Goblin. Mash, mash, mash! An endless routine of heavy  
hammers. Mash, mash, mash! upon the sufferer's limbs.  
See the stone trough! says Goblin. For the water torture!  
Gurgle, swill, bloat, burst, for the Redeemer's honour!  
Suck the bloody rag, deep down into your unbelieving  
body, Heretic, at every breath you draw! (22)

And yet, ironically, Dickens cries silently for silence. His responses are internalized, allowing the Goblin to go on unchecked. This simultaneously allows her to condemn herself before the reader in her own words and actions without intervention from Dickens, while nonetheless allowing her to continue. Dickens is grotesquely hypnotized by the facts, by the horrible story being told. He wants it to stop, but does not want it to finish. Even as he is denouncing the worst traits of tourism, he is eagerly soaking it in. The call for silence is not limited to a moral commentary,

but rather a judgment on how the individual prefers to experience history and tourism. Dickens wants to savor the moment, but the shrill talk of the Goblin is a distraction from whatever catharsis he is hoping to experience. Dickens himself is acting like a vampire of emotions, absorbing the pain of the past for his own education, and though he presents his preference for silent contemplation as superior to the gleeful wallowing of the Goblin, in reality they are both using the past to the same end. As a tourist criticizing tourism, Dickens must always be in a position where he is open to the very criticism he is making against others.

### **Italy in Dickens: Transferring the Exotic to the Fantastic**

*Pictures* not only raises the question of how Dickens fares in Italy, but how Italy stands up to being the subject of Dickens' writing, and how this compares to the treatment of Italy by other writers. As noted above, *The Times* review condemned it for offering "nothing new," while Brand spied a trend in 1840s' writers toward cynicism, which in itself was reacting against the writers of the 1820s and before. Dickens then was simultaneously writing with the crowd and against it. He certainly had a large back catalog of travel writing to draw upon: Louis Simond's *A Tour in Italy and Sicily* (1828), William Thackeray's *Paris Sketch-Book* (1840), Frances Trollope's *A Visit to Italy* (1842) or Mary Shelley's *Rambles in Germany and Italy* (1840-43). Dickens is not afraid to acknowledge the presence of other works, though he does so in such an off-hand manner as to belie their importance; in addition to the contrast he draws in his own work to Murray's Handbooks, a vague allusion to a book sold by "Mr. Harris, Bookseller, at the corner of St. Paul's Churchyard, London" (107) during the description of the Tower of Pisa has been identified as Isaac Taylor's *Scenes in Europe* (1819). In "The Reader's Passport," Dickens admits that "Many books have been written upon Italy, affording many means of studying the history of that interesting country," but argues that he makes "but little reference to that stock of information" (5). This is of course an essential sales ploy in the introduction to any work, to recognize that which precedes it while arguing for its own originality. Flint notes that

he is not the first to do so, identifying Trollope's introduction to *A Visit To Italy*, which, like Dickens, attempts to position the work against its predecessors (xii). Nonetheless, as Leonée Ormond notes, Dickens "consciously presents himself as a maverick and a newcomer among writers on Italy" (283). There was no glory in stating that he was going to do what had already been done; whether true or not, it was important for Dickens to argue that his work was doing something new.

While these contemporary titles indicate the market in which Dickens was situating his own work, there is a longer-reaching influence in the literary works he himself would have read when younger. This includes works of fiction as much as the heritage of travel writing and the precedent of authors and gentlemen of society taking the Grand Tour. Caponi-Doherty suggests that "Dickens' expectations of Italy would also have been influenced by his knowledge of Shakespeare, the fourth canto of Byron's *Childe Harold* (1818), Samuel Rogers's *Italy* (1822-28) and *Rienzi* (1835)" (152) – not to mention his childhood heroes Smollett and Sterne and their respective takes in *Travels through France and Italy* (1766) and *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). In *Pictures* Dickens tells us the town of Leghorn is "made illustrious by Smollett's grave" (109). In Rome too he visits the graves of Shelley and Keats, the latter of which "shines brightly in the landscape of a calm Italian night" (151); while in Florence he visits "the Stone of Dante" where the poet "was used to bring his stool, and sit in contemplation" (185). It is not just writers he seeks in Italy, but their creations too. Dickens' Italian narrative is as much a literary pilgrimage as a geographical one. In Venice he sees "old Shylock" and "a form [he] seemed to know for Desdemona's" (84); while his time in Verona is almost exclusively devoted to retreading the scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*. Always he looks for the stories of the past inside the stones of the buildings before him.

This very nostalgic imagining of Italy, precisely what Dickens appears to be contesting at other points in the text, highlights the uneasy tension of repressed conflict in *Pictures*. It is hard to determine whether the book contains criticism deliberately wrapped in fancy, or whether

Dickens simply cannot help including the latter; alternatively it could be a work of whimsy in which it is the points of criticism that Dickens is unable to stop himself from including. Michael Hollington notes, for example, the frequent references to prisons in *Pictures*, not only those that Dickens visits but even the analogy Dickens draws with his accommodation, be it the Pink Jail or his later accommodation “the Palazzo Peschiere, or Palace of the Fishponds” (54). Hollington suggests of the latter name that, “anyone as widely travelled throughout the length and breadth of Britain as Dickens was is likely to have heard of the notorious Fishponds prison in Bristol, one of the infamous prisoner of war camps during the Napoleonic wars” (82). For all the packaging of Italy as a mythical landscape, Dickens is either unafraid to identify harsh moments of reality and darkness on the horizon, or unable to avoid doing so. Yet as quick as he is to discuss areas of deprivation and degradation, he persists nonetheless in looking out for cultural keystones on the landscape.

Dickens’ spotting of literary highlights on the horizon are not just limited to those with a link to Italy, but is part of a wider blending of fact and fiction as Dickens looks about him always with a heritage of storytelling in mind. The sociologist John Urry argues that one of the motivating factors of tourism is that “places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (3); Dickens spends his time in Italy daydreaming of different worlds, often imagined and from his childhood. En route to Carrara he sees men working in the hills “clearing away, and sending down the broken masses of stone and earth, to make way for the blocks of marble that had been discovered,” which Dickens “could not help” but see as the landscape “where the Roc left Sinbad the Sailor” (104). In Rome the sugar-plums he eats, “having lime in their composition,” are compared to “Falstaff’s unadulterated sack” (122); the pilgrimage to Juliet’s grave calls to his mind “Yorick’s ghost” from *Tristram Shandy*, who feels consolation “to hear the feet upon the

pavement overhead" (87). And in Genoa Dickens speaks of his sitting with "an old man named Antonio [...] upon a stone by the door, sometimes in the evening, like Robinson Crusoe and Friday reversed" (33). Such regular referencing to Dickens' childhood reading is not unique among his own writing, and the significance of this is therefore in how it serves to make *Pictures* distinctly Dickensian in tone. Dickens falls back upon his familiar writing techniques to compensate for the unfamiliarity with the landscape. In inviting the reader to consult Murray for facts, he implicitly infers that his book offers something else, an emotional response rather than a cognitive one. Dickens does not, as Murray does, simply tell us what can be seen in Italy. Instead, he shares with us what *he* sees in Italy, which has as much to do with his vivid creativity as it does with the landscape. *Pictures* is a form of armchair travel literature, allowing readers in England to imagine visiting abroad, but that process works both ways as Dickens extends upon the fancy of his readers, and himself, to project a literary landscape onto the Italian vistas.

The Goblin is a central figure in Dickens' fantasizing of fact into a quasi-fiction. His explicit claims to avoid facts and focus on fancy allow him to, on the surface, deflect from specific political commentary while actually permitting such criticism to occur with a benign veneer. His willingness to let the Goblin continue talking, despite his inner qualms, cannot simply be explained, as above, by the contradiction of Dickens as tourist and anti-tourist, but moreover in the distinction between Dickens the person and Dickens the writer. As the former he deplores her, as the latter he recognizes great source material to work into something new. One woman, transitory and destined for oblivion, becomes a fictional creation of lasting legacy. As much as Dickens defers to the voice of the locals, the frame of fantasy he places around his pictures distorts reality into an elevated fiction. We may never know who the Goblin really was, and that in itself is both a tragedy and a triumph. While the woman achieves lasting fame through his writing, nonetheless Dickens, the tourist, the invisible narrator, has made a real person into a mere shadow of his own creation, bound forever by his view of her. Dickens simultaneously celebrates the

Goblin as a marvelous source to write about, while implicitly condemning her ghoulish delight in the depravities of the past.

Dickens utilizes this dream-state of writing as a method of raising the substance of the book. Lawrence Frank, for instance, argues that Dickens employs Rome as “a metaphor for the mind” (53); it becomes a literal travel of the imagination as Dickens explores the interiority of cognitive space through the exteriority of physical space. His description of Venice in particular revels in its dreamlike qualities, “unreal, fantastic, solemn, inconceivable throughout” (80) and is the most ostentatiously literate chapter of the book, glorying in the ornate description that the conceit affords:

Before I knew by what, or how, I found that we were gliding up a street – a phantom street; the houses rising on both sides, from the water, and the black boat gliding on beneath their windows [...].

So we advance into this ghostly city, continuing to hold our course through narrow streets and lanes, all filled and flowing with water. (78)

Central to Dickens’ fantasizing of the city is the unique experience of a metropolis on the water, with the latter becoming the focal point of Dickens’ dream-state. Wherever he goes in the city, there “crept the water always. Noiseless and watchful: coiled round and round it, in its many folds, like an old serpent” (85). Contrast this to the grittier description of the “Neapolitan town Fondi,” infused with Dickens’ disappointment in Naples as a whole:

Take note of Fondi, in the name of all that is wretched and beggarly.

A filthy channel of mud and refuse meanders down the centre of the miserable streets, fed by obscene rivulets that trickle from the abject houses. There is not a door, a window, or a shutter; not a roof, a wall, a post, or a pillar, in all Fondi, but is decayed, and crazy, and rotting away. (163)

Dickens is very much a cultural traveler, taking great delight in those venues that feed his imagination, and showing greater disgust at those that check his fancy with degradation and reality. Just as Dickens expresses bewildered disappointment that Rome reminds him so much of London (115), Maria Chialant suggests that, similarly, "Dickens identified [Naples] with the East End of London because of its extreme poverty, filth and squalor" (92). To some extent the aversion he feels in such instances can be explained not only by the degradation of some areas but also its familiarity. In a work devoted to fanciful imaginations of the indefinable, confrontations with the mundane and common are unwelcome and sudden awakenings from the dream.

Dickens' conscious attempt to wrap and muffle detailed description within the fanciful vagueness of imagination moves away from the razor-sharp precision of reporting toward the more impressionistic style of the visual arts. Stephen Bann surmises that Dickens "constantly enacts and displays in his text the operation of converting the experience of otherness into visual schemata" (215). The very name of the work is one that invites consideration of it in a visual manner. Where Boz produced sketches, now Dickens was writing pictures. Despite his insistence in "The Reader's Passport" that he will not "expatiate at any length on famous Pictures and Statues" (5), in many ways the work is a series of pictures. It can be argued this best befits both the nature of Italy, and the romanticizing of the landscape and its history that Dickens has been shown to both critique and follow. Malcolm Andrews notes the "affinities between Dickens and the painter J.M.W. Turner and their relationship to certain Picturesque principles and practices" (177), noting the specific prompts that Dickens may have unconsciously picked up from Turner for *Pictures*:

Turner's renderings of Venice – form dissolving in light, uncertain margins between buildings and water, and water and sky, deep, deep reflections – perhaps these gave Dickens his chosen mode for his 1844-5 travel book, *Pictures from Italy*, as a whole: 'faint reflections – mere shadows in the water' [...] and particularly for the Venice

section, written as a dream journey. He very likely saw Turner's paintings of Venice at the Royal Academy in the Spring exhibitions in 1843 and/or 1844 just before seeing Venice for himself. He almost certainly saw Turner's *Approach to Venice* [...]. (183)

In *Pictures* then we see Dickens engaging with art, fantasy and literature, mapping them onto the landscape and bending it to his own imaginative framework. Yet if Dickens is engaging us in journeys of the mind, he is also battling with anxieties about authentication. Ormond argues that Dickens' protestations in "The Reader's Passport" of avoiding cliché and striking new ground is in part an attempt to pre-emptively challenge any objections to believing the account that follows: "Dickens attempts to establish his authenticity. Many of his readers would never go to Italy, so how were they to know that he was telling the truth?" (283). All travel writing requires an assumption of faith on the reader's part that all that is being described to them is verifiable and accurate. Dickens' swift descent into the realm of imagination in *Pictures* therefore counters this by wearing inaccuracies on its sleeve. By deliberately wrapping his account within this framework of dreams and imagination, he openly professes a haziness in detail that encourages readers to be both less and more interrogative of the text: less, because as a dream-like vision we are advised to read it all as some pleasant dream rather than witness testimony, and more because the overt nature of distorting reality through this blurred lens incites us to search for the detail within the haze.

Perhaps the most apt analogy within *Pictures* for the text as a whole is the Cicerone who guides Dickens around the cemetery in Bologna. The guide is "excessively anxious for the honour of the place, and most solicitous to divert [Dickens'] attention from the bad monuments: whereas he never tired of extolling the good ones" (70). This "good-humoured little man" (70), like Dickens, infuses the sights before him with his own enthusiasm, and just as all seems pleasant and marvelous, Dickens notices the Cicerone "looking wistfully at a certain plot of grass" and asks him "who was buried there":

Pete Orford, "Dickens on the Outside in 'Pictures from Italy'"

"The poor people, Signore," he said, with a shrug and a smile, and stopping to look back at me – for he always went on a little before, and took off his hat to introduce every new monument. "Only the poor, Signore! It's very cheerful. It's very lively. How green it is, how cool! It's like a meadow! There are five," – holding up all the fingers of his right hand to express the number, which an Italian peasant will always do, if it be within the compass of his ten fingers, – "there are five of my little children buried there, Signore; just there; a little to the right. Well! Thanks to God! It's very cheerful. How green it is, how cool it is! It's quite a meadow!" (70)

Just as Dickens' fictionalized landscape is riveted together with harsh visions of degradation and poverty, so the Cicerone unconsciously slips in this harrowing moment of personal loss into a pleasant tour. The contrast only serves to emphasize the pathos of the moment, in the same manner that Dickens' consciously convivial tone adopted throughout *Pictures* does not detract from the keener observations of human frailty, but strengthens their impact. After identifying the graves of his five children, the Cicerone makes "a little bow; partly in deprecation of his having alluded to such a subject, and partly in memory of the children and of his favourite saint" (70). The moment is briefly observed before the business of guiding the tourist around the sights continues: "Immediately afterwards, he took his hat off altogether, and begged to introduce me to the next monument; and his eyes and his teeth shone brighter than before" (70). In *Pictures* Dickens reveals more than he professes. He lies in his opening chapter, for he does indeed discuss politics, and religion, and moreover several observations of loss, sorrow, decay, and death. But each time these points of solemnity or cynicism pass by fleetingly as Dickens' teeth shine brighter than before and he guides us ever gleefully on to the next monument. Italy may not have been familiar territory to Dickens, but his response is altogether familiar in character. His drawing upon fantasy and culture, peppered with social

critiques, shows that however Dickens stood in Italy, in *Pictures* he is absolutely in his ground.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to *Pictures from Italy* are from Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, ed. Kate Flint.

<sup>2</sup> Note on envelope of letter sent to Thomas Beard, 28 June 1844. The editors of the Pilgrim letters note that Dickens wrote the same message on the back of an envelope of a letter sent to Forster on the same day. See Dickens, *Letters* 4:151.

<sup>3</sup> For a fuller account of Gallenga and his relationship with Dickens, see Carlton.

<sup>4</sup> The article was originally published under the heading of “The Uncommercial Traveller” in the 13 October 1860 issue of *All the Year Round*.

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