

## The Picturesque and Reality in *Pictures from Italy*<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

In *Pictures from Italy* (1846), Charles Dickens writes about his 11-month stay in Italy from 1844 to 1845. Of the two travel books he has written, this latter work was still less appreciated than its notorious predecessor, *American Notes* (1842). It received harsh criticism a month after its publication: “There is nothing new in the book from beginning to end. It has no purpose, and attempts to work out no definite idea” (*Critical Heritage* 139–40). This review in *The Times* “indeed had an effect” and was “remembered over twenty years after publication” (*Critical Heritage* 139), according to Philip Collins. Even today, most readers of this book find the witty remark by G. K. Chesterton precisely to the point: “His travels are not travels in Italy, but travels in Dickensland” (Chesterton 78).<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, Chesterton’s words also suggest that Dickens’s original way of seeing things is as well represented in this little and ignored book as in his celebrated novels. We find among abundant unfriendly criticism some praise for the Dickensian details,<sup>3</sup> and the writer’s own satisfaction with his work is clearly expressed in a letter written just before the book’s publication: “I like [it] very much” (*Letters* 4:535). Dickens composed the main text of *Pictures from Italy* by assembling the letters he has written to his friends in England while in Italy, and one of the principal recipients of the letters, John Forster, also expresses approval of the way in which the separate letters were unified: “important scenes and cities, such as Venice, Rome, and Naples, received such filling-in to the first outlines sent, [and they] fairly justified the title of *Pictures* finally chosen for them” (Forster 372). Since then there has been enthusiastic praise such as that expressed by Kenneth Churchill in 1980,<sup>4</sup> and in the 1990s the book has started to attract some critical attention.<sup>5</sup> However, the critics have mainly discussed its relationship with

*Little Dorrit* (1857). The truth is that this book, 160 years after its first publication, still remains to be read for its own sake and apart from its creative influence to other fictional works. This paper aims to reassess the book, which has often been criticized for its lack of purpose, by revealing Dickens's consistent moral appeal through close textual analysis.

## I

The author makes his design of this book clear in the first few pages. In the prologue, "The Reader's Passport," he discourages his readers' expectations based on stereotypical notions:

There is, probably, not a famous Picture or Statue in all Italy, but could be easily buried under a mountain of printed paper devoted to dissertations on it. I do not, therefore, though an earnest admirer of Painting and Sculpture, expatiate at any length on famous Pictures and Statues. (5)

As Stephen Bann writes, "[*Pictures from Italy*] is [. . .] a text which is loaded from the start with a multitude of references to previously established conventions of writing, from which it seeks to emancipate itself" (Bann 204). British travellers on the Continent before the 19th century had sought out famous works of art in Italy, and consequently produced abundant writings on them. Dickens's statement derives from his awareness that no Continental traveller in his age could be indifferent to the tradition of the Grand Tour, which had reached its zenith in the previous century. The sentence with which he begins the first chapter of the book, "Going through France," again makes a similar announcement:

On a fine Sunday morning in the Midsummer time and weather of eighteen hundred and forty-four, it was, my good friend, when – don't be alarmed; not when two travellers might have been observed slowly making their way over that *picturesque* and broken ground by which the first chapter of a Middle-Aged novel is usually attained – but when an English travelling-carriage of considerable proportions, [. . .] was observed [. . .] to issue from the gate of the Hotel Meurice in the Rue Rivoli at Paris. (8, italics mine)

Leonée Ormond suggests in her notes in the Everyman edition that the remark about a "Middle-Aged novel" in the above quotation is "[a] joke [. . .] particularly aimed at the work of G. P. R. James" (Ormond, Notes 466). It is worthy of notice that Dickens here uses the word "picturesque" deliberately and declares that what he intends to create is

quite different from those conventional novels.

Bann, unlike Ormond, surmises that this “Middle-Aged novel” refers to Sir Walter Scott’s 1823 novel *Quentin Durward* (Bann 206). However, the first chapter of *Quentin Durward* describes only the setting’s historical background, and the second chapter introduces one young traveller being observed by two men. The contents differ from Dickens’s depiction of “two travellers [. . .] slowly making their way over [. . .] *picturesque* [. . .] ground.” Scott’s text is composed mainly of conversation, and any kind of depiction that can be called “picturesque” only appears when a church is later introduced among the woods. Although we may not deny the influence of Scott in *Pictures from Italy*,<sup>6</sup> as regards this passage Ormond’s suggestion is closer to the mark.

Although Ormond does not specify which among the numerous works by G. P. R. James Dickens actually had in mind, on the basis of what I have been able to observe, it seems very likely that *Richelieu: a Tale of France* was the work in question. This novel was written in 1829 and is said to have been the most widely read among James’s novels.<sup>7</sup> The book, though it deals with the 17th century political dispute and not with the Middle Ages, has its setting in France, just as the beginning of Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy*. In the first chapter of this historical novel, deep woods around Paris are depicted, and the land’s lack of industrialization and sparse population are emphasized. In the beginning of the second chapter, a poor woodman living there and two men slowly proceeding on their way are introduced:

The sun had long gone down, and the large clear autumn moon had risen high in his stead, throwing a paler, but a gentler light upon the wood of Laye, and the rich *wild forest scenery* bordering the road from St. Germain to Mantes. [. . .] On one of those spots where the full beams fell, stood the cottage of Philip, the woodman; and *the humble hut with its straw thatch*; the open space of ground before it, with a felled oak which had lain there undisturbed till a coat of soft green moss had grown thick over its rugged bark; the little stream dammed up [. . .]; all were displayed in the clear moonlight, as plainly as if day itself had shone upon them. [. . .] on the night of which I speak, two horsemen wound slowly along the road towards the cottage of the woodman, with a sort of sauntering, idle pace, as if thoughtless of danger, and entirely occupied by their own conversation. (*Richelieu* 19–20, italics mine)

First, notice the words, “wild forest scenery” and “humble hut with its straw thatch.” Malcolm Andrews, in his careful study of the development of picturesque ways of seeing in the 18th century, indicates the importance in picturesque taste of the ephemeral and powerless nature of human endeavours, which are exemplified in the ruin and

in the forms of shepherds and peasants, so-called “unrefined” men.<sup>8</sup> The landscape James depicts in the above quotation places deep woods in the background, and poor cottage and a woodman in the foreground. It is the composition of a traditional picturesque painting. Then, two men on horseback, who are absorbed in their conversation, are brought into this scene. They are evidently detached from the woodman living in poverty, and are thus represented as picturesque observers. The gap is psychological as well as physical. It exists between the observers on horseback and the woodman, and a similar gap exists between the supposed readers of this English novel, who are addressed as “our pampered countrymen” (*Richelieu* 10), and the French landscape.

Dickens, by declaring at the beginning of the book that his intentions are not to follow the Italian travel book conventions and furthermore by excluding the stereotypical picturesque image of a foreign country, proclaims his intention to write a travelogue with his original observations. He shows that his aim is not to become an observer from a high standpoint like that of the horseback travellers in *Richelieu*, but to see and depict Italy at close range.

As a matter of fact, as David Paroissien points out, travel books dismissing the interests of the Grand Tourists who sought out historical ruins on the Continent, and instead focusing on contemporary Italian daily lives were written since as early as the end of the 18th century.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, Mario Praz analyzes Victorian impressions of Rome, by contrasting them with Joseph Addison’s *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* written in 1705. Praz observes that Addison has carried “about with him his library of classical authors,” “verify[ing] his quotations on the spot,” and has seen the city of Rome as “the museum” (Praz 445). Dickens is to be classified among those Victorians “for [whom] there is no preliminary stage of reverence [for Rome]. Rome, however much her praises have been sung, is, for them, a city to be judged by the standard of all other cities” (Praz 445). In this context, therefore, Dickens’s intentions are not particularly striking in his era. On the other hand, it remained true that there were still many travellers who were bound by the conventional formula. Dickens comically depicts a lady he met in Rome, who sees around the famous sites without opinions nor impressions: “Deep underground, high up in St. Peter’s, out on the Campagna, and stifling in the Jews’ quarter, Mrs. Davis turned up, all the same” (129). She is Dickens’s foil. He satirically comments, “I don’t think she ever saw anything, or ever looked at anything” (129). This lady is later to be seen in part in Mrs General in *Little Dorrit*, who “might have been taken – had been taken – to the top of the Alps and the bottom of

Herculaneum, without disarranging a fold in her dress, or displacing a pin” (*Little Dorrit* 474–75) and for whom “[n]othing disagreeable should ever be looked at” (*Little Dorrit* 501).

Based on the above-discussed premise he shares with his readers at the beginning of the book, Dickens tries to make a radical statement at the book’s end. I will analyze this point later, but I would like to indicate here that his deliberate use of the word “picturesque” in the first chapter of the book is a preparation for the pronouncement in the last chapter.

## II

Despite Dickens’s intention to differentiate himself from conventional travellers, he also simply and straightforwardly expresses his fascination with the exoticism of a country he is visiting for the first time: he writes of Genoa, “[it is] like an enchanted place in an Eastern story” (54). Yet what he sees are not only things that are agreeable. Michael Hollington, analyzing the grotesque in *Pictures from Italy*, remarks that “[the] ‘attraction of repulsion’, [. . .] is a major feature of the grotesque in *Pictures from Italy*,” and “[t]hus there is continuous emphasis on the ubiquity of contrast in Italian life – the kinds of contrasts that habitually mingle the ‘attractive’ and the ‘repulsive’” (Hollington 143). Contrasts are what many readers find in this book,<sup>10</sup> and what Dickens finds in Italy is evocative of opposite elements: beautiful houses and poverty-stricken streets; the landscapes that remind the traveller of Arabian Nights and *Romeo and Juliet* and actual seaports with nasty smells; and at once the dreamlike and realistic town of Venice.<sup>11</sup> As he had done previously in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), here again he shows that “everything in our lives affects us most by contrast” (*The Old Curiosity Shop* 412). This is, in my view, best exemplified in a passage that describes a picture he has encountered in Rome.

Faithful to his own proclamation in the prologue, Dickens mentions few pictures in detail in this book. However, there is a painting he explains with much enthusiasm. It is the *Portrait of Beatrice Cenci*, long supposed to have been painted by Guido Reni.<sup>12</sup> This famous portrait, which has inspired various artists including Shelley, shows the face of a girl just before her public beheading. She has committed a murder of her own father who had compelled her to suffer an incestuous affair.

Dickens spares a lengthy paragraph on this painting:

The portrait of Beatrice di Cenci, in the Palazzo Berberini, is a picture almost impossible to be forgotten. Through the transcendent sweetness and beauty of the face, there is a something shining out, that haunts me. [. . .] *Some stories say that Guido painted it, the night before her execution; some other stories, that he painted it from memory, after having seen her, on her way to the scaffold.* I am willing to believe that, as you see her on his canvas, so she turned towards him, in the crowd, from the first sight of the axe, and stamped upon his mind a look which he has stamped on mine as though I had stood beside him in the concourse. The guilty palace of the Cenci: blighting a whole quarter of the town, as it stands withering away by grains: had that face, to my fancy, in its dismal porch, and at its black, blind windows, and flitting up and down its dreary stairs, and growing out of the darkness of the ghostly galleries. (147–48, italics mine)

According to Ormond (Ormond, “Dickens and Painting” 140), Dickens quoted the sentence I have shown in italics almost directly from one of the guidebooks he brought with him, Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* (1843). It is evident



Fig. 1. Guido Reni, *Portrait of Beatrice Cenci*. Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome

that the theme of this painting, the expression of a human face confronting death, has attracted Dickens's strong interest. He prefers to consider it to be her countenance not the night before her execution but at a moment on her way to the scaffold. His imagination extends further as to fancy a more extreme moment in her life: when she actually sees the axe. In the following sentence, his imagination roams over to the house of the Cenci, in which the girl wanders in a fashion similar to that of Florence in his later novel *Dombey and Son* (1844–46). These are the images descending from Kate Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838) and Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*: Dickens's Beatrice Cenci is another "pure child in a decaying house," to borrow John Carey's formulation (Carey 150).

The account of the portrait has a direct relationship with an actual public execution Dickens has witnessed in Rome. By referring to this painting soon after writing about a real beheading, the author heightens the impact of both the painting and the execution. The scene of the criminal's execution in reality is depicted as follows:

[The effigy of Christ upon the cross] was hardly in its place, when [the criminal] appeared on the platform [. . .].

He immediately kneeled down, below the knife. His neck fitting into a hole, made for the purpose, in a cross plank, was shut down, by another plank above; exactly like the pillory. Immediately below him was a leathern bag. And into it his head rolled instantly.

[. . .] Every tinge and hue of life had left it in that instant. It was dull, cold, livid, wax. The body also.

There was a great deal of blood. When we left the window, and went close up to the scaffold, it was very dirty; one of the two men who were throwing water over it, turning to help the other lift the body into a shell, picked his way as through mire. [. . .]

Nobody cared, or was at all affected. *There was no manifestation of disgust, or pity, or indignation, or sorrow.* My empty pockets were tried, several times, in the crowd immediately below the scaffold, as the corpse was being put into its coffin. *It was an ugly, filthy, careless, sickening spectacle;* meaning nothing but butchery beyond the momentary interest, to the one wretched actor. (144, italics mine)

The executed man in this scene is treated as a criminal without any extenuating circumstances who has committed theft and murder. The man's face at the moment of his beheading is scarcely shown, and the death penalty is carried out in an instant.<sup>13</sup>

Dickens, by mentioning the portrait of Beatrice Cenci, which is also concerned with a beheading, soon after this ugly execution, places the filthy death and the beautiful painting in an effective contrast. Here in the scene of real punishment, there is no

“beautiful sorrow” (147) as we have noticed in the expression of Beatrice. As I have highlighted in italics, no one feels pity or sorrow, and even while the body is put in the coffin, pickpockets attempt to steal from the traveller. Seeing such a spectacle, Dickens emphasizes his disgust and lists negative adjectives: “an ugly, filthy, careless, sickening spectacle.” Thus, the writer presents to the reader, by contrasting the fine art in the gallery and the event in the real world, the reality of Italy observed at close quarters. His style reveals that real society and daily life are not composed of beautiful and ideal things alone.

Some critics have shown that the visual quality of Dickens’s writing in this work is no less prominent than that in his highly-praised novels. Drew remarks of the passage on the public execution, “[i]t is ghosted rather glaringly by the methods and rhetoric of the court reporter, theatre reviewer, and leader writer,” and concludes, “[c]learly, this kind of daguerreotyping has its appeal” (Drew 239). Drew’s use of the word “daguerreotype,” an early type of photography, and the word “*skiagraphy*” (Bann 205) which Bann refers to remind us of Dickens’s letter written to W. H. Wills in 1858 while travelling in the north of England, in which he says, he “made a little fanciful *photograph* in [his] mind” (*Letters* 8:668, italics mine). Though this is more than a decade after writing *Pictures from Italy*, it is, I suggest, not improbable that Dickens meant by the word “pictures” in its title not the traditional and fictional paintings but realistic photographs.

### III

Dickens does not simply stop and point out the coexistence of the beautiful and the ugly. He also insists that we should not fall into the bad habit of looking at ugly things as attractive by viewing them from a distance. This is the point I have touched on at the beginning of this paper; namely Dickens’s radical statement in the last chapter:

All this, and every other kind of out-door life and stir, and macaroni-eating at sunset, and flower-selling all day long, and begging and stealing everywhere and at all hours, you see upon the bright sea-shore, where the waves of the bay sparkle merrily. But, *lovers and hunters of the picturesque, let us not keep too studiously out of view the miserable depravity, degradation, and wretchedness, with which this gay Neapolitan life is inseparably associated!* It is not well to find Saint Giles’s so repulsive, and the Porta Capuana so attractive. A pair of naked legs and a ragged red scarf, do not make ALL the difference between what is interesting and what is coarse and odious? Painting and poetising for ever, if you will, the beauties of this most beautiful and lovely spot of earth, let us, as our duty, try to associate *a new picturesque* with some faint

recognition of man's destiny and capabilities; more hopeful, I believe, among the ice and snow of the North Pole, than in the sun and bloom of Naples. (167, italics mine)<sup>14</sup>

Dickens asserts that it is wrong to feel attracted to Italian slums just because it is exotic, while feeling disgusted by poverty in one's own country. He states that we should not regard poverty or misery, no matter how new and striking it looks, as something "picturesque."<sup>15</sup>

The tourists from the upper class who searched for picturesque scenery in the countryside as painted by Salvator Rosa had been criticized for their limited views by the end of the 18th century, and in the following years, there were abundant criticisms of the picturesque exemplified by John Ruskin's *Modern Painters* in 1856.<sup>16</sup> Ruskin classified the picturesque way of seeing in two kinds, noble and vulgar, and the vulgar picturesque was something superficial and detached, without feeling "sympathy" (Ruskin 6:16) towards the object like chaos and ruins. The detachment or distance was one of the major essences in picturesque aesthetics.

Dickens, observing the reality of poverty-stricken cities in Italy and without being blinded by its exoticism, condemns in his Italian travel book the superficial ways of seeing that Ruskin critically called the "vulgar picturesque" ten years later. There is more. Dickens's experimental artistic approach toward objects transcends mere criticism of the picturesque.

As regards Dickens and his idea of the picturesque, Nancy Hill makes an important remark.<sup>17</sup> She concludes her comprehensive analysis with these words: "It was not just the poverty concomitant with the picturesque that disturbed Dickens, but the lack of correspondence between the appearance and the reality of a thing" (Hill 28). In her view, since *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens had dealt with the picturesque not only with irony, but also with the strong recognition that the picturesque appearance and reality does not coincide with each other (Hill 12–43).

Hill's discussion sounds highly persuasive. I find, however, that she has missed a significant aspect of Dickens's in her analysis of this book. That is, Dickens is not only irritated at the gap between the appearance and the reality inherent in picturesque modes of seeing, but also is aware of a crucial problem in the viewer's distance from its object when taking a picturesque point of view. In *Pictures from Italy*, he presents us with a new way of seeing things that reaches beyond irony and criticism. In the following argument, I hope to show that Dickens uses the word "picturesque" with an intense moral consciousness striving to free the word from its conventional limits. His term

“new picturesque” derives from this challenge to the convention.

Heading towards Nice from Genoa, Dickens describes a view of a town seen from a steamer along the seacoast. He uses the word “picturesque” (56) in the passage, but is very careful with its context:

The steamer had come from Genoa [. . .], and we were going to run back again by the Cornice road from Nice: *not being satisfied to have seen only the outsides of the beautiful towns that rise in picturesque white clusters* from among the olive woods, and rocks, and hills, upon the margin of the Sea. (56, italics mine)

In the sentence, Dickens uses the word “picturesque” in describing the “outside” of the town, and by doing so suggests that its beauty is merely superficial. The emphasis is on the distance between the viewer on the steamer and the town, the viewed, across the sea. Dickens is repeatedly attracted by the beauties of each town while travelling across the country, but he never forgets to add that it looks beautiful because it is seen from afar. He writes: “In every case, each little group of houses presents, *in the distance*, some enchanting confusion of picturesque and fanciful shapes” (61, italics mine).

What is characteristic in this book is the depiction of an object from a point of view that is in movement. Dickens writes as follows and calls attention to the difference in appearance depending on the standpoint of the viewer: “[m]uch of the romance of the beautiful towns and villages on this beautiful road, disappears when they are entered, for many of them are very miserable” (60). Many towns, beautiful when seen from a distance, disclose the dirtiness of the streets and the unhealthy lives of their inhabitants when seen close.<sup>18</sup>

In this manner Dickens repeatedly shows that the conventional picturesque mode of seeing requires distance from its object, and reveals how the appearance differs from the reality seen at close range.

The distance between the seer and the seen is correlated to the way it is seen, and this is also suggested by the book’s illustrations. Two illustrators drew for the book: Samuel Palmer in the first edition and Marcus Stone for the Library Edition in 1862. One of Palmer’s illustrations is shown in Figure 2. As is evident at first sight, this drawing of the town of Pompeii shows the Italian landscape picturesquely. The mountains and trees are placed in the distant background; ruins are drawn in the center; and the small shepherd with his little goats is put in the foreground: the composition is based on traditional picturesque paintings. Stone’s illustrations are different, as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4. Compared with those by Palmer, it is clear that Marcus Stone nar-



Fig. 2. Samuel Palmer, *The Streets of the Tombs: Pompeii*



Fig. 3. Marcus Stone, *The Chiffonier*



Fig. 4. Marcus Stone, *Italian Peasants*

rows his focus to the objects, the local people, and draws from a very close viewpoint. In his letters Dickens expresses his high opinion of Palmer as a painter. However, they had only met once in person before the painter drew for the writer, and it is said that Dickens did not check Palmer's illustrations for *Pictures from Italy* before publication, which was very unusual for him.<sup>19</sup> It is doubtful whether Dickens was fully satisfied or thought all the illustrations conformed to his conception of this book. In the first place, the illustrations for *Pictures from Italy* were intended to have been drawn by Clarkson Stanfield. However, Stanfield refused to draw for it just before its publication because he did not like the book's criticism of the Catholic church.<sup>20</sup> Palmer was asked as an emergency replacement.

Stanfield, it must be recalled, is the illustrator who has drawn for one of the Christmas Books, *The Chimes* (1844), which was published two years before *Pictures from Italy*. Dickens, having finished it after much struggle, writes to his friend, Thomas Mitton, with strong enthusiasm: "I believe I have written a tremendous Book; and knocked the Carol out of the field. It will make a great uproar, I have no doubt" (*Letters* 4:211).<sup>21</sup> Though he was away from his country, "he never lost sight of his concern [. . .] with 'the condition-of-England question', especially in the related fields of education for the poor and the prevention and treatment of crime" (*Letters* 4:xii). In *The Chimes*, Dickens strikes "a great blow for the poor" (*Letters* 4:200), showing sympathy for the lower class, and harshly satirizing the tyrannical upper class, modelled on his contemporaries.<sup>22</sup> The former are represented by the characters of Trotty Veck, Meg, Will Fern and Lilian, and the latter by Filer, Alderman Cute, and Sir Joseph Bowley. Stanfield faithfully visualizes the following remark by Will Fern at Bowley Hall:

'Gentlefolks, I've lived many a year in this place. *You may see the cottage from the sunk fence over yonder*. I've seen the ladies draw it in their books a hundred times. It looks well in a picter, I've heard say; but there an't weather in picters, and maybe 'tis fitter for that, than a place to live in.' (*The Chimes* 154, italics mine)

Figure 5 shows the illustration for this passage. The picturesque scenery, again with woods in the background and a cottage and a farmer in the foreground, is represented here as being sketched by a lady, apparently of high class, from a distance. Dickens's remark through the voice of Will Fern and through this illustration by Stanfield strongly criticize the distance kept away from the object the picturesque taste presupposes.<sup>23</sup>

Peter Conrad points out that "[t]he picturesque [in Victorian England] was a way, [. . .] of protectively putting a distance between oneself and the problematic object"

(Conrad 78), and then concludes, “Dickens is the least picturesque of the Victorians, and thus the truest to the rowdy, grotesque, chaotic life of London” (Conrad 105). He is absolutely right. *The Chimes* is written during Dickens’s stay in Italy, which means that its composition is synchronous with his writing of letters to his friends in England. Those are, as I have previously mentioned, the letters that were later to be united into a book as *Pictures from Italy*. The statement on the “new picturesque” in its last chapter must have been made on the basis of the criticism of the picturesque which has been in Dickens’s mind throughout his stay in Italy.

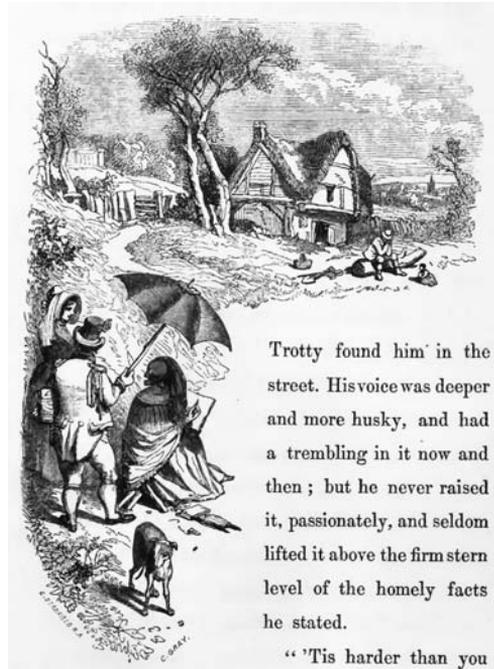


Fig. 5. Clarkson Stanfield, *Will Fern's Cottage*

Trotty found him in the street. His voice was deeper and more husky, and had a trembling in it now and then; but he never raised it, passionately, and seldom lifted it above the firm stern level of the homely facts he stated.

“’Tis harder than you

## Conclusion

*Pictures from Italy* is Dickens’s challenge to conventional travel writings. At the beginning of the book, he states that he will not follow Italian travel book conventions and that his descriptions of the country will not be the stereotypical and picturesque depiction of its exoticism. Thus revealing his motives, Dickens emphasizes that his way of travelling the Continent differs from those of the Grand Tourists whose legacies still had an eminent influence in his age. Dickens declares his intention to write a travelogue with original observations. His use of the word picturesque in this context in the first chapter prepares the reader for his emphatic statement at the book’s ending.

Dickens describes what he has observed in Italy effectively through the use of contrasts. The beauty of a painting in Rome is impressively put in contrast to the ugliness of a beheading he witnesses in reality. The word “pictures” in the book’s title appears to

be a reference to the fine arts found in abundance in Italy, but Dickens shifts its meaning to photographic and realistic depictions of Italian life.

In the final chapter of the book, Dickens advocates the “new picturesque,” which is a new conception of the picturesque mode of seeing that is emancipated from the conventional way of seeing misery and poverty as attractive. The “new picturesque” has derived from Dickens’s criticism of the essential indifference to the object as well as the physical distance kept from it within traditional picturesque taste. Dickens himself writes, as I have already quoted, he is “*not [ . . . ] satisfied to have seen only the outsides of the beautiful towns that rise in picturesque white clusters from among the olive woods, and rocks, and hills, upon the margin of the Sea.*” He states that it is not his intention to make distant observations but to step into the narrowest of streets. By comparing the book’s illustrations drawn by two illustrators, this intention of Dickens becomes particularly clear.

Dickens famously writes as follows about his disappointment with Rome:

When we were fairly going off again, we began, in a perfect fever, to strain our eyes for Rome; and when, after another mile or two, the Eternal City appeared [ . . . ]; it looked like – I am half afraid to write the word – like LONDON!!!” (115)

When he intends to see the realities of Rome and of Italy, it does not appear to him as a beautiful and picturesque foreign land, but London itself.<sup>24</sup> Dickens, who is able to depict “the rowdy, grotesque, chaotic life of London” as Conrad remarks, sees Rome from the same point of view. Therefore his Italy is shown without picturesqueness or detachment.

Malcolm Andrews, in his analysis of the 19th century metropolis and the picturesque, points out the fact that in London

the street vagrants and communities of the poor become indistinguishable from the criminal underworld to which every citizen was immediately prey. [ . . . ] In the open spaces of the countryside, the destitute and disaffected could be distanced in the spectator’s view: they did not seriously disturb the security or the economy of the classes from which the Picturesque tourists generally came. Such detachment became harder to maintain in the metropolitan context. (Andrews 288)

In Dickens’s age, poverty and its picturesqueness were no longer something that could

be kept at arm's length. The characters in *The Chimes* are all representatives of contemporary social concerns in England that are not present in the countryside but found within the city: Lilian as one of the fallen women who becomes prostitutes in order to earn their living; Meg as one of the desperate and lonely mothers speeding onward to the River with their babies; Will Fern as one of the labourers rushing forth into London looking for work. Dickens claims in *Pictures from Italy* that people should not be indifferent and detached toward the poverty and wretchedness within a society no matter how exotic and picturesque these conditions look; they are the same in substance to the problematic conditions within their own country. This strong conviction is expressed also in *The Chimes*.

His English readers have always been present in Dickens's mind. He has, therefore, always been concerned about England. Though he later remembers Italy with nostalgia,<sup>25</sup> we must admit that Chesterton's words again best describe the writer: "[h]e never travelled out of England" (Chesterton 78). We find Dickensian elements in the portraits of Marionette in Genoa and of the comical Mrs. Davis during Rome's Holy Week, a depiction that Dickens himself was also pleased with, but they, as other critics point out, could have been written in England. The dirty and filthy streets in Lyons are, as Kate Flint suggests, the very slum of Tom-all-Alone's in *Bleak House* (Flint xviii).

Dickens endeavours to view the people of Italy without preconceived notions, and consequently, when he observes them at close range, his portraits of them turn out to resemble those of the Londoners that he usually creates. In this context, *Pictures from Italy*, which has often been criticized for its lack of consistency, has at its foundation Dickens's consistent will to describe reality as truly as possible without any idealization.

## Notes

- 1 An earlier version of this essay was delivered orally at the Annual Meeting 2008 of the Japan Dickens Fellowship, Osaka Gakuin University, Osaka, on 4 October 2008.
- 2 "Dickensland" is, of course, the province of the author's imagination. However, in this paper I have emphasized Dickens's intention to depict the reality of contemporary Italy in *Pictures from Italy*. Indeed he intended something else, too, as the "Reader's Passport" at the beginning reveals:

This Book is a series of faint reflections – mere *shadows* in the water – of places to which the imaginations of most people are attracted in a greater

or less degree, on which mine had dwelt for years, and which have some interest for all. (5, italics mine)

Dickens seems fond of the metaphor of “shadows in the water” to paraphrase his own writing, as he uses it repeatedly. It was in fact first used in his letter to Forster, a month before the book’s publication: “[. . .] it is a great pleasure to me to find that you are really pleased with these shadows in the water” (Forster 372). The way he metaphorically identifies his writing with the image of shadows links itself to his later letter to Forster written three years after *Pictures from Italy*, in 1849, when he was planning *Household Words*. He writes:

Now to bind all [the magazine] together, and to get a character established as it were which any of the writers may maintain without difficulty, I want to suppose a certain SHADOW [. . .] *in which people will be perfectly willing to believe, and which is just as mysterious and quaint enough to have a sort of charm for their imagination*, while it will represent common-sense and humanity. (*Letters*; italics mine)

Both in *Pictures from Italy* and in *Household Words*, the “shadow” Dickens intends and actually presents is at once realistic and imaginative. Thus in the case of *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens certainly did not observe and depict the foreign countries, as he did any other place, merely as realistic. Dickens’s ability to combine reality and imagination has received extensive critical attention, but there is insufficient space to examine it further here.

- 3 “There are in this volume numerous little quaintnesses, obliquities, and oddities of expression, peculiar *locutions*, all Mr Dickens’s own, such as we have been used to in his previous works, modes of thinking and writing that have been habitual to him, that he cannot do without [. . .].” (*Critical Heritage* 142–43)
- 4 Kenneth Churchill, *Italy and English Literature 1764–1930*. Totowa: Barnes, 1980.
- 5 See John Drew’s brief summary in his article, “Pictures from *The Daily News*: Context, Correspondents, and Correlations.”
- 6 The influence of Scott is observed by Michael Hollington in “Dickens and Italy.” *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 1 (1991): 126–36.
- 7 See Rudolf Dircks’s introduction to *Richelieu*: vii–ix.
- 8 See Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760–1800*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989.
- 9 For example, Paroissien names Smollett (Paroissien 13) as one of the writers. Among the 19th century writers, the critic also mentions Shelley (Paroissien 13), and Churchill names George Sand (Churchill 137).
- 10 Kate Flint also begins her introduction to the book with a comment on this point: “Dickens’s Italy was composed of violent contrasts” (Flint vii).
- 11 The dream motif in this book is well discussed by Bann, who remarks, “the distinctive feature of [the] view which incorporates contradictions without aspiring to resolve them is that it can only be made harmonious [. . .] in the modality of a dream”, and this is the reason “why, as *Pictures from Italy* progresses, the ‘dream’ becomes the definitive mode through which the many and various appearances of the ancient Italian towns are registered and re-enacted” (Bann 213); and also by Susan S. Thurin, in her perspective

- article, “*Pictures from Italy: Pickwick and Podsnap Abroad.*” *The Dickensian* 412, 1987: 66–78. She observes, “Dickens often deliberately restricts himself to his tourist persona by using dream imagery and allusions to fantastic literature to describe extraordinary sights. [. . .] He [. . .] uses dream imagery, though, to distance himself from a scene which discomfits him [. . .]. Another device used to disengage himself from a scene is to allude to the Arabian Nights, especially when he seems unable to measure what he is experiencing against familiar sights and sounds or when he wants to indicate the psychological effect of an experience” (Thurin 68).
- 12 See also Thurin’s interesting discussion on Dickens’s particular interest in this female portrait (Thurin 74).
  - 13 Drew finds in this passage Dickens’s contemporary concern about capital punishment (Drew 239).
  - 14 Dickens writes to Forster using a similar expression: “I am afraid 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 onward” (*Letters* 4:265).
  - 15 As Kate Flint also notes, we find an expression “picturesque lazzaroni” (*Adam Bede* 179) in another Victorian writing, George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859). The “lazzaroni” indicate the lowest class of people famously abundant in Naples. It was a sort of cliché among Continental travellers to note Italian beggars as such. Dickens writes to Forster as follows and tries to convey the real state of the lazzaroni, who are not at all attractive: “What would I give that you should see the lazzaroni as they really are – mere squalid, abject, miserable animals for vermin to batten on; slouching, slinking, ugly, shabby, scavenging scarecrows!” (*Letters* 4:271). Dickens’s criticism of the picturesque, however, is not expressed for the first time in *Pictures from Italy*. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839), the words “picturesque” and “poverty” are used together in an ironical context (*Nicholas Nickleby* 615–16). Both Nancy Hill and Alexander Ross, who discusses Dickens’s use of the picturesque in his book, *The Imprint of the Picturesque on Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1986, agree that characters like Mrs Skewton in *Dombey and Son* (1848) and Blandois in *Little Dorrit* (1857) who are critically depicted as favoring the “picturesque” derives from Mrs Nickleby in *Nicholas Nickleby*.
  - 16 Another famous and earlier example is William Combe’s *The Tour of Dr Syntax in search of the Picturesque, A Poem* (1812). However, it is also true that the conventional picturesque taste remained among English travellers continuously: Henry James expresses Neapolitan and Roman poverty as “ragged picturesqueness” in *The Italian Hours* as late as 1873.
  - 17 It is evident from the frequency of the word picturesque in this book that Dickens was very much concerned with the word when writing it. Among his other works, work in which the word picturesque appears second most frequently is *Little Dorrit*, in which he uses it 10 times. The usage of the word 22 times in this short book is conspicuous. Hill remarks as follows and points out the importance of this travelogue in terms of Dickens and the picturesque: “Dickens’ use of the picturesque in *Little Dorrit* (1857) is so different from what it was in *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) that one is bound to ask what accounts for the change in view. [. . .] it is the little-read *Pictures from Italy* (1845) that furnishes the substantive link to *Little Dorrit*” (Hill 27).
  - 18 Thurin also remarks this point: “From afar, the pastel-coloured houses, the spired cathedrals, the magnificent art, the gaily dressed people present a romantic picture. At close range, the picture blurs under its coating of dirt” (Thurin 69).

- 19 See Jane R. Cohen, *Charles Dickens and His Original Illustrators*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1980.
- 20 Paroissien finds reason for this in Stanfield's Catholic faith and harsh criticism of Catholicism on Dickens's part in his essay, "Pictures from Italy and its Original Illustrator." *The Dickensian* 67 (1971): 87–90.
- 21 As to making "a great uproar," "CD's expectations were fulfilled:" writes editors of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, "a fortnight after publication the book had been 'attacked and defended with a degree of ardour which scarcely any other subject is capable of inspiring' (*Globe*, 31 Dec)" (*Letters* 4:211).
- 22 See Michael Slater, "Dickens (and Forster) at Work on *The Chimes*." *Dickens Studies* 2 (1966): 106–140.
- 23 Dickens expresses his satisfaction for this illustration in his letter to his wife: "[Stan]field's readiness – delight – wonder at my being pleased – in what *he* has done is delicious" (*Letters* 4:234).
- 24 Lawrence Frank, in his "*Pictures from Italy: Dickens, Rome, and the Eternal City of the Mind*." *Dickens, Europe, and the New Worlds*. Ed. Anny Sadrin. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999, notes that later in *Little Dorrit*, Dickens treated the two cities as such that "[in] the novel, Rome and London become mirror images of each other" (Frank 57).
- 25 Dickens writes to his friend in Genoa, Madame De la Rue, after looking at the diary he has written in Italy: "Good God how distinctly everything has been present to me as I have gone over all the ground again! And what a miserable Devil I seem, to be cooped up here, bothered by printers and stock jobbers, when there are bright Genoas [. . .] and ruined Coliseums in the world" (*Letters* 4:535).

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