

VICTORIAN LITERATURE AND THE ITALIANS

Drd. Maria Alexandra Gutuleanu, Universitatea din Craiova, Facultatea de Litere

Abstract: This article is meant to deal with the perception of 19th century Italy and its culture by the Victorian writers of that time, some less known and some representative one, the interactions and social and cultural influences among Italian and Victorian writers. Their fructuous time spent in Italy, help them better interpret the contradictions and contrast of their own English society and to differentiate between the pastoral and idyllic life of Italian natural landscape with the city's dirt and crime. Italian Risorgimento as well as Victorian England was a period of transition from the old to the new.

Keywords: Victorian writers, Italian Risorgimento, 19th century literature, cultural life, Victorian Age.

“British history is two thousand years old, and yet in a good many ways, the world has moved farther ahead since the Queen was born than it moved in all the rest of the two thousand put together.” ~Mark Twain during Queen Victoria’s 60th anniversary, 1897

The literature of the Victorian age (1837 – 1901, named for the reign of Queen Victoria) entered in a new period after the romantic revival. During this period, Britain became the wealthiest nation in the world, due to the rapid and widespread expansion of the British Empire. In addition, the Victorians made the first real attempts to fix the massive social problems caused by the industrial and democratic revolutions of the Romantic period.

The term “Victorian” is still used as a synonym for “prude” today, a term that reflects the extreme repression of the age (even chair legs had to be covered, because they were thought to be too suggestive). But this is a pretty limited view of the Victorians. The Victorian Age was a time of HUGE social and political development, and it can be more easily managed when broken down into three phases: early, middle, and late.

The literature of this era expressed the fusion of pure romance to gross realism. Though, the Victorian Age produced great poets, the age is also remarkable for the excellence of its prose. The discoveries of science have particular effects upon the literature of the age. Literature of this age tends to come closer to daily life which reflects its practical problems and interests. It becomes a powerful instrument for human progress. Socially & economically, Industrialism was on the rise and various reform movements like emancipation, child labor, women’s rights, and evolution.

The novels of the Victorian era are generally based on very strong concepts of morality. In a society where modern industries were emerging rapidly, many literary

works sought to bring out the grim reality of a landless working class and the precarious condition of a declining gentry. Charles Dickens proved to be highly adept in portraying the actual condition of the society. He used humour and satire for the purpose. **The Bronte sisters** produced some of the literary masterpieces of this period. Wuthering Heights by Emily Bronte, set amidst the forbidding moors of Yorkshire, is a tale of unresolved passions which draws a lively picture of contemporary society. Charlotte Bronte wrote Jane Eyre which narrates the growth of a young woman. The tales are firmly grounded in a sense of high morality. The other famous writers of the Victorian era include **George Elliot or Mary Ann Evans** who adopted a male pseudonym to distance herself from the lighthearted romances with which women writers of the time were associated. Her novels like *Middlemarch* and *Silas Marner* are based in realism and provide deep psychological insights. William **Thackeray's** *Vanity Fair* provide a satiric commentary on the age.

The 19th century saw the novel become the leading form of literature in English and it is often regarded as a high point in British literature as well as in other countries such as France, the United States and Russia. Books, and novels in particular, became ubiquitous, and the "Victorian novelist" created legacy works with continuing appeal. During this period, travelling became more accessible and writers were travelling a lot in search for inspiration and for acknowledging other cultures and literatures.

In all European literature the beginning of the 19th century was a time of contradictions, of social classes contrasts and an emerge of the middle class due to the industrialization. Rural areas remained somehow idyllic, but without any financial perspectives. People moved to big cities wherefor a better financial prospect, for education and in order to travel. All these were also reflected in literature, too. European writers of the time, as well as the Victorian writers were narrating and portraying all these contemporary realities in their works.

British writers travelled through Europe in order to study, to read and to observe. Others, on the other hand, tried to free themselves by the gloomy and dark atmosphere and by the false morality standards of the Victorian society. They were writing travel notes and letters in which they depicted European societies, similarities and contrasts towards Victorian society, and moreover towards British social etiquette which they had worshiped and praised. The English were used to measuring other societies against their own standards of modernity and could not help finding fault. Yet, some of the influential Victorian writers, including Charles Dickens, Marie Louise de la Ramee (known for her writer pseudonym as "Ouida"), John Ruskin, Elisabeth Barret Browning, George Elliot, Edward Lear, raised their voices against these stereotypes of British cultural and social supremacy. Their literary works were influenced by their travelling to Italy. Some of these writers found Italy so appealing that they even spent the rest of their lives there.

In this paper I will refer to the perception of Italy and how the Italian life was received by these Victorian writers mentioned above, but also how the Italian society embraced them. One the writers I will mention is Charles Dickens and his book *Pictures of Italy*. The image of "the beauty of the beast" Italy, that he builds with a realistic touch,

can be later found in his novels as *Little Dorrit*, *Bleak House* or *Hard Times*, related to his despising England society.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Italy - as we know it - did not exist. The peninsula was divided into separate dynasties, most of which were under Austrian rule. Dissatisfaction with these dynastic regimes galvanised a movement towards Italy's Risorgimento (1815-1861) or political resurgence, culminating in the Proclamation of the Kingdom of Italy as an independent nation state on 17 March 1861. The etymology of the word Risorgimento, which means a resurgence, rebirth or resurrection, lent itself well to feminine mythologies of the movement. The allegorical representation of Italy as *Italia* – a woman in chains – further accommodated proto-feminist interpretations of Italian nationalism. One book in particular, Madame de Staël's *Corinne, ou Italie* (1807), solidified the imaginative association of Italy with a *woman's country*, as a space where women could (paradoxically) enjoy greater freedoms than at home. A bestseller into the 1870s, *Corinne* offered a flattering model for later women travel writers to adapt by imagining Italy as the home of female creative genius. Declared “[T]he image of our beautiful Italy”, the eponymous heroine also provided a modern allegory for Italy's political situation, imbricating the woman question with the Italian question.

Disappointed with the initial sales of that novel, Dickens took a break with his large family for almost a year in Italy, July 1844-June 1845, in a decade when Europe, including Italy itself was seething with revolution. He stayed mostly in Genoa as a base, first at Albaro, and then at the Palazzo Peschiere ('palace of fish-ponds'). Again, he wrote letters home to Forster, and then published a travelogue based on these letters and his memories in 1846: *Pictures from Italy*. Part of this work had first appeared in *The Daily News* which he himself edited, as a series of 'travelling letters written on the road', a genre for which there was a current vogue. He returned to Italy in 1853, and both his journeys helped him for his novel *Little Dorrit* (1855-6).

Pictures from Italy is considered Dickens's challenge to conventional travel writings because he declares his intentions to write a travelogue with original observations. 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 signification to photographic and realistic depictions of Italian life. The word "picturesque" seems for Dickens synonym to poverty and misery in an attractive way. When he sees the realities of Rome and of Italy, it does not appear as beautiful and picturesque foreign land, but London itself.

His striking objectivity in describing the experiences and realities of Italian people, can be viewed as "a real Italy", opposed to conventional beauties or supposedly pleasurable experiences. An example would be his description of Naples: "a pair of naked legs and ragged red scarf, do not they make all the difference between what is interesting and what is coarse and odious?" (166-7). This type of contrasting discourse between idyllic natural environment and degraded inhabitants, or the contrast between perceived characteristics of England and Italy, was a key feature of the discourse about Italy and Italians in the mid-19th century. The nostalgia for the pastoral and paradisiac natural environments can be seen as an escape from the dirty urban, but also to remind

the readers in a moral way, characteristic to Victorian writers, about the lost world and the lost values.

This pastoral or bucolic vision of England as a garden can be replaced with a more satisfying location in the natural environment of another country. The writer's concern about the continuous deterioration of urban England, made the contrasting climate of Italy to be seem more paradisiacal. In the novels *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, for example, Charles Dickens uses fog, dirt and squalor not just symbolically, but as a realist device to set the background in the readers' experience.

In *Pictures from Italy* Dickens too sought to re-imagine the version of Venice as it emerges in the Murray guidebooks. The text itself makes reference to the ubiquitous guidebook: If you want to know all about the architecture of this church, or any other, its dates, its dimensions, endowments, and 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! (Dickens 1846) The function of this section is to stress a marked deviation from the form of the Murray guidebook style, but it also importantly notes a relationship with it. It makes clear that the chapter on Venice and the guidebooks have proximity but no congruity. Like Ruskin, Dickens organised his formulation of the tourist gaze largely in opposition to the generic tendencies of Murray's text. The chapter begins with the figure of the tourist on the road. He is remembering his travel so far in 'half-formed dreams' and dissolving images that, as soon as they became visible, 'melted into something else' (Dickens 1846). Already this marks a contrast with the guidebook. Rather than imagining an objective and deceptively clear representation of travel, Dickens' vision is partial, fleeting, and aberrant. At the beginning of the chapter the traveller drifts off to sleep as he is being conveyed to Venice, only then to be awakened '(as [he] thought) by the stopping of the coach' (Dickens 1846). The question about the narrator's waking state expressed in parenthesis, and the title of the chapter – 'An Italian Dream', leave no doubt that the representation of Venice is a dream sequence. Straight away Dickens is playing with the authority of the guidebook's gaze. The Murray guidebooks are intensely visual, relying only on the tourist's ability to see Venice as the guide rendered it to be understood. Dickens is playing with the relationship between seeing and knowing that the guidebooks established. Rather than assuming the authority to decide what is knowable and then facilitating the relentless consumption of this knowledge, as in the case of the guidebooks, Dickens questions the capacity of the perception of the tourist and in consequence unsettles the ability of the tourist to know anything authentic and unhampered. Dickens' narrator is in an in-between state of sleep and wakefulness. Immediately this complicates the cognitive and conscious state of the tourist. The text produces a distortion in the visual and conceptual field, which problematises notions of illusion and reality. The affected gaze relinquishes all prescriptive guidebook-like tendencies, opting instead to represent an image of the city as out-of-focus and obscured, prompting questions about how much a tourist can truly know about the culture he or she visits. Rather than devouring every artefact in order to freeze or memorialise Venice in the text, Dickens resists the taxonomical tendencies of the guidebook offering instead a more impressionistic tourist experience; an experience

marked by its ephemerality and incoherence, with only the flickering images of a gaze from a gondola, literally and metaphorically skimming the surface of Venice. In *Pictures from Italy*, the gaze of the figure of the tourist is constantly interrupted, as when Dickens approaches Venice by boat: 'I turned to gaze upon it [...] when it was quickly shut out from my view.' Significantly, his gaze is interrupted upon entering the vicinity of the city: 'Before I knew by what, or how, I found myself gliding up a street – a phantom street [...] [in a] ghostly city' (Dickens 1846). The city is seen and then cut from the field of vision alternately: 'I saw some figures coming down a gloomy archway [...] It was but a glimpse I had of them; for a bridge [...] blotted them out, instantly' (Dickens 1846). A loss of vision in Murray's guidebook would be unthinkable as it is defined by and engaged in predefining the relationship between seeing and knowing. 'An Italian Dream' debunks the interpretative framework of Murray's guidebooks by offering an alternative to the all-consuming, itinerant, and systematised tourist gaze, one based not on seeing and knowing but on the experience of seeing differently. Dickens' account of Venice writes against the practical realism of the guidebook, offering instead an impressionist aesthetic that confuses dream and reality, representing the city's architecture as being 'as light to the eye as garlands of hoarfrost', and describing St Mark's Basilica as 'unreal, fantastic, solemn, inconceivable throughout' (Dickens 1846).

The way Dickens handles the representation of the history of the city is also in opposition to Murray's generic parameters. Rather than attempt to achieve cultural mastery by fetishising over selected historical artefacts in an encyclopaedic form, Dickens' tourist experiences history unfold before his eyes, because, although the field of vision is continuously problematised and interrupted in 'An Italian Dream', the gaze is, at points, hypersensitive to the historical expressions of the architecture of Venice. Rather than feeling the will to document exhaustively all the archival details of the built environment on the basis of taste, the tourist who seeks knowledge of the city by physical, instead of textual, experience can see history emerging through the architecture of the city. The tourist's vision 'often intermingled with the old days of the city: with its beauties, tyrants, captains, patriots, merchants, courtiers, priests: nay, with its very stones and bricks, and public places; all of which lived again, about me, on the walls' (Dickens 1846) Dickens re-imagines Murray's representation of Venice, inverting and parodying the guidebook's generic articulations. Like Ruskin, Dickens refused to make selections of what ought to be seen based on what is 'peculiar' about Venice. The guiding principle of taste in Dickens' representation is to present Venice as a city of perplexing dreams and as an example of a once mighty but now ruined empire. Brian Murray reads Dickens' representation of Venice as a dream sequence that marks a deviation from the realism of his domestic urban aesthetic. In 'Mere Shadows in the Water', Murray presents Venice as the Other to Dickens's urban realist home, rather than a premonition of the potential fall of London (Murray 2012). He places Dickens' generic preference to write Venice in ruining and impressionistic terms as an excursion from his detail-heavy realist accounts of London in his novels. However, the novel Dickens wrote and published directly before he left for Italy in 1844 was *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4). Yet this text in fact offers a comparable urban aesthetic to one

Dickens adopts in his description of Venice. In the novel, London appears dislocated, disorientated, and labyrinthine 'as if it were a city in the clouds' where a 'resigned distraction came over the stranger as he trod those devious mazes' (Dickens 1843-4). Architecture in London is given non-realist treatment in *Chuzzlewit* just as Venice is in *Pictures of Italy*. 'An Italian Dream', rather than marking a holiday from architectural realism or the author's 'usual style', deploys its generic formulations in opposition to the stylistic choices of John Murray's guidebooks. Dickens' impressionist techniques replace the guidebook's hyperrealism and pretention to completeness. By contextualising *Pictures of Italy* in proximity to Dickens's domestic fiction we can see that Dickens offers a counter gaze to Murray's ubiquitous visual omniscience and engages the guidebook in a generic dialogue to do so. It attempts to reconstitute how the British perceived Venice, and how the domestic perceives the foreign. Venice to Dickens is an experiment in seeing, reading, and knowing a foreign space that tells of the function of travel writing as a domestic ritual and method of critique (O'Neill 2012). There is nothing new in the argument that travel writing is an irreducible hybrid genre. Tim Youngs is 'deeply suspicious' of any attempt to define generic boundaries in travel writing (Youngs 2006). Jan Borm asks 'whether travel writing is really a genre at all' concluding that 'it is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts [...] whose main theme is travel' (Borm 2004). Rather than settling on its generic hybridity as a generality or rejecting the idea of genre in the discussion of travel writing altogether, the crucial question is to ask what it is that produces such hybridity. It would be unhelpful to disregard the ability to talk about travel writing in generic terms. By analysing travel writing about a certain place, Venice, and at a certain time, the midnineteenth century, this article has shown that generic hybridity is produced by a textual dialogue or domestic dialogic friction between travel texts. How the genres of travel writing are formed depends on how the traveller's gaze is governed and formulated, and how generic hybridity is produced depends on the reactions, oppositions, and counterpoints of subsequent representations, emanating from domestic publishing houses, in reference to the guiding authoritative text(s) or authenticating eye. Murray's *Handbook for Travellers to Northern Italy* imagined Venice for the Victorian armchair or actual tourist, while Ruskin and Dickens re-imagined it in opposition to Murray and, in doing so, offered their own way of seeing, writing, and knowing other cultures.

Another Victorian writer that praised the beautiful rural Italian life was Ouida. "Ouida" (Louise de la Ramee, 1839-1908) was a Victorian phenomenon. From a provincial lower middle class, with an unusual French father, she became a highly successful, highly paid, popular novelist and some kind of literary celebrity. At the age of 32, Ouida moved from London to Florence and spent the rest of her life in Italy and died in Viareggio. Her novels were romances that dealt with high-life among the aristocratic and officer class. After her move to Italy, her novels tend to deal with Italian artistic life, sculptors, musicians, actors. Ouida admitted that women in Italy were more emancipated and more aware of their social role than women in England. She published stories about Tuscan peasant life, through poetic evocations of Italy. "After the Italy of Goethe, of Byron, of Alfred de Musset and George Sand (let alone Ruskin's).. comes the

Italy of Browning and of Ouida”, said Vernon Lee about her definite vision of Italy. The Victorian writer praises the genuine beauties, the distinctions, the landscape and quality of Italy. The beauty of peasants’ lives described in her novels may come in contradiction with the social changes in Britain, the urbanization and displeasure for rural areas.

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Without any doubt, in Ouida’s writings and recording an Italy of the past, and in her fears of its passing, she agreed with the majority of British travel writing about Italy in the late 19th century: “every visit intensified a sense of loss and impending bereavement”. Ouida was writing at a very specific period, the early years after Italy’s unification. She did not want an ideal Italy, but the Tuscan way of life, the customs of the particular area of Tuscany in which she lived, Signa, which was threatened by industrialization.

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