

VICTORIAN LITERATURE IN ITALY Prolegomena to Travel Writing -The Example of Dickens

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Abstract: This article reveals the complex relationship between British Literature and Italian Literature, British Culture and Italian Risorgimento, Roman Catholicism and Italian history and art. It aims at explaining what Dickens and other Victorian writers tell us about the history and theory of travel, and travel writing. Furthermore, at a time when what can be called modern visual culture began to take shape, the focus shifts to comparing written and visual descriptions of experiences "overseas" in general, and in Italy in particular. It also aims at showing that, by examining how Victorians imagined Italy, we can better understand some of the stereotypes that continue to shape modern tourism. One of the most interesting aspects of Victorian literature reflects the conflict between religion and a rapidly accumulating movement named the Enlightenment. In the Victorian era, poets were encouraged to argue with each other in the heat of Enlightenment. Romantic versus Victorian literature initially becomes a problematic subject.

Keywords: Victorian, literature, Italian, writers, travel writing

VICTORIAN ERA

The Victorian era refers to the years between 1837 and 1901, when Queen Victoria reigned as the monarch of Great Britain. Her reign made her the longest-reigning monarch in history. Her record was eventually broken by Queen Elizabeth II. Queen Victoria herself has questioned her religion and politics, and she has influenced the world around her. Her husband, Prince Albert, was one of her chief advisors and helped plan the monarch's role in the British government. Romanticism was a movement that placed the individual, emotion, subject matter, and the natural world above reason and intellect. It highly valued emotional experiences, sometimes delving into the supernatural. Romance got its name from its appreciation of medieval romances, usually centred on heroes. In fact, the hero is often the central figure in Romantic art. Romanticism arose as a response to classicism and the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment often focused on reasoning and knowledge. This often came at the expense of portraying and evaluating emotional experiences. Romanticism contrasted with the classicist forms.

Realism became popular in the early Victorian era. It focused on portraying reality as accurately as possible. The advent of the printing press appealed too much of the middle class, who had access to more artwork. Realism consisted of several shifts, including shifts from loneliness to society, from nature to industry, from concept to theme, from his spiritualism to pragmatism, from optimism to agnosticism, from poetry to criticism. There are several writers and plays that are classics of the Victorian era. Charles Dickens - Author of the "Pickwick Papers" (1836-1837). George Eliot

(pseudonym of Mary Ann Evans) - author of "Adam Bede" (1859), "Mill of Floss" (1860) and "Middlemarch" (1871-1872).

Realists concerned themselves with authentic depictions of the world around them.¹ This encompasses all its areas; the socio-economic reality as well as the cultural lenses through which the Victorians viewed the world. Many things were given attention, such as the speech patterns- as seen with "Silas Marner" (1861) or "Wuthering Heights" (1847). The Victorian Era was the age of expansion and industrialisation, thus much of its works were filtered through those lenses. We see a focus put on the condition of the working class and the ramifications of industrialisation like in Elizabeth Gaskell's "Mary Barton" (1848) or many of Dickens' works.

ITALIAN INFLUENCES

The first accounts of British travel appeared, naturally, at home. In "English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations", Barbara Korte mentions pilgrimages to Cambridge as an example.² The growing quality and safety of roads, both on the Isles and in Europe, meant that travel became more accessible and with the Victorian Era's penchant for industrial development, the opportunity to travel abroad opened up more, even if only for those who could afford it.

The advent of industrialisation led to a veritable revolution in the domain of travel in the British Empire. With new methods of traversing great lengths appearing in the 1800s- such as the steamboat or the great evolution of the railway system- mobility became something more readily accessible. Travel became quite the commercial venture, at times deeply intertwined with the expanding colonial Empire. Travel was no longer accessible to just the upper echelons of society, but something the newly emerged middle class could partake in.

The 18th was the time of the Grand Tour, where the European nobility would send their sons on extensive journeys to various places in Italy, most desired being Rome. It was a very select activity only few could partake in; a learning experience for young lords coming from wealthy families. While the Grand Tour is associated with the 18th-20th centuries, the term itself first appeared in Richard Lassels' "The Voyage of Italy" (1670) and the core idea itself dates back to the Middle Ages. Rome still played a key role in that period of time, both as the seat of the yet-to-be-divided Christian Church and a place of culture and education³. Once the Victorian era had opened wide the gates to the new and eager middle class, it was no longer the domain of only the elite few of Europe, and the term "tourist" began taking a new meaning.

Maurizio Ascari in "The Rise of the Grand Tour: Higher Education, Transcultural Desire and the Fear of Cultural Hybridisation" (2015) argued that the Grand Tour was part of a process of cultural hybridisation, where European cultures continued the

¹ Landow, George, „Realism”, *The Victorian Web*, 11 February 2003
<<https://victorianweb.org/history/risorgimento/basdeo.html>>

² Korte, Barbara & Matthias, Caroline, "English Travel Writing From Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Exploration", Palgrave Macmillan, 2000

³ Sumption, Jonathan. "Pilgrimage: An Image of Mediaeval Religion". London; Faber, 1975

practice of cultural exchange that dated since the Roman Empire. The desire for knowledge and experience, for exploring the older world of the Romans also acted as a motivator for the Grand Tour. Thus we create the Romantic figure of the traveller, one in search of an identity that's wrapped in multiculturalism. Ascari also notes the role the figure of the traveller played in the process: "the travellers' experience of other countries encouraged transcultural attitudes, fostering a European consciousness, but it also resulted in the formation of stereotypes, reinforcing national and religious identities."⁴

With this idea in mind, we can then say these travellers are capable of a double role: those who cross the threshold and are agents of transcultural dissemination; those who allow for ideas from abroad to spread back home, but also enforcers of cultural hegemonies who can decide what is and isn't allowed to cross back. Thus the traveller can be either breaker or enforcer of cultural norms.

Italy has long held a special place in the British cultural imagination. Historical figures such as Thomas Beckett studied in Bologna and Latin served as the main language of the European elite. Less well-known, however, is the British perception of Italy and Italians, and the Italian perception of the British in popular culture in the mid-to-late 19th century. This is somehow paradoxical, as the British government actively interfered in Italian affairs during this period, especially regarding Italian unification. Although many of Risorgimento's English narratives have been published by Lucy Riall, the only study that focuses on the cultural interaction between the British and Italians is Maura O'Connor's "Italian Romance and British Political Imagination" (1998). O'Connor's outstanding work, however, included a cultural history of the exchange between Italian and English from about 1800 to about 1860. Derek Beals' "England and Italy" (1961) focused on the highly political relations between Britain and the early United Kingdom of Italy, but paid little attention to culture.⁵ There are other monographs in Italian on perceptions of Italy after 1860, but these have not yet been translated into English and do not explore the *Italo-British* perspective alone brings together historians, literary critics, and linguists to fill this knowledge gap.

To Victorians, Italy was to 20th-century Europeans what the East was to them, a place of mixed fascination and loathing. It was both an attraction and an aversion to ancient civilizations and Italy's current struggle to end a period of political and economic conquest. Against chaotic streets, filthy inns, stinking shantytowns, crime and depravity. In many ways, this attitude was an inevitable by-product of colonialism and imperialist thinking. Accustomed to measuring other societies against their own standards of modernity, the British could not help but find fault. It is perhaps no coincidence that both Italy and the Ottoman Empire held the same sway over the British traveller. As the colonial Empire expanded westward, some still looked to the East and South of Italy. As

⁴ Ascari, Maurizio, "The Rise of the Grand Tour: Higher Education, Transcultural Desire and the Fear of Cultural Hybridisation", *Linguae & -Rivista di lingue e culture moderne*, 2015
<<https://www.ledonline.it/index.php/linguae/article/view/859/711>>

⁵ Basedo, Stephen; Pili, Jacob „England and Italy: Cultural Exchange and Cross-Cultural Encounters, c.1840–c.1920”, *The Victorian Web*, 12 July 2020
<<https://victorianweb.org/history/risorgimento/basdeo.html>>

Ascari mentioned, it was here that both the glories of the past empire and the decay of the modern ones met, and where we might see this Victorian attitude as part of the phenomenon that would be the focus of Edward Said's 1978 work "Orientalism".⁶

VICTORIAN WRITERS

However, some Victorian writers objected to such stereotypes, thereby challenging contemporary attitudes towards Italy and debunking assumptions about Britain's social and cultural superiority. A few voices, including Dickens, have attempted to deconstruct the cliché by blaming their own citizens for their inability to speak beyond the pre-digestion experience of tourist guides, beyond the clichés.

Where some would try and assert the superiority of the British Empire and look down upon the old cities of Italy, Dickens also had a word or two to say, especially when it came to the state of London. In his article "The Boiled Beef of New England" (1863), he complains about the atmosphere of London, comparing everything he could see on the streets of the capital to the other great cities of Europe, including those in Italy. For Dickens, the key word he associates with London is "shabby". Everything in London is "shabby":

"The shabbiness of our English capital, as compared with Paris, Bordeaux, Frankfort, Milan, Geneva—almost any important town on the continent of Europe—I find very striking after an absence of any duration in foreign parts. [...] London is shabby by daylight, and shabbier by gaslight [...] The mass of London people are shabby."⁷

The image Dickens creates of the people of London is not that of individuals, but a mass of identically dressed shapes. Dickens attributes the lack of a distinctive dress as one of the factors to blame for such atmosphere, like the French cap or Genoese mezzero⁸. Dickens also, as always, had a few comments to address about the state of the working class in London, how the clubs for working men were quick to imitate the gentlemen's clubs.

Dickens's experiences in Italy also had an influence on his work, particularly "Little Dorrit" (1855) which had influences from his first journey to Italy. In "Pictures from Italy" (1846), his experiences while on a sabbatical are written down in a manner that less resembles the travel guides of the era, such as the well-known "Murray's Handbooks for Travellers", and instead takes on a more personal note, similar to the one Henry James would later adopt in 1881 when describing his experiences in Italy. In a way, it is surprising that Dickens has not been widely covered in the Italian media. As for the films, there were only three Italian silent film versions of Dickens' novels and short stories, and none of them had sound adaptations. Between 1958 and 1968 there were only four shows, two of which were eight episodes, 60-minute episodes, all produced by

⁶ Ascari, Maurizio. "The Rise of the Grand Tour: Higher Education, Transcultural Desire and the Fear of Cultural Hybridisation", *Linguae & -Rivista di lingue e culture moderne*, 2015
<<https://www.ledonline.it/index.php/linguae/article/view/859/711>>

⁷ Dickens, Charles, "The Uncommon Traveller" from "All the Year Round", Volume IX, August 15, 1863
<<https://www.djo.org.uk/all-the-year-round/volume-ix/page-588.html>>

⁸ Ibid

the Italian national television “RAI”. Turning to translations of Dickens’ works, one might think that the situation is rather similar.

Ouida’s reaction to Italy, examined by Jordan, shared Liars’ personal vehemence, and resembled that of Dickens and Badham. The writer was fluent in Italian and knew the country well. Jordan points out that Ouida was part of a small circle of travel guide writers who wanted to showcase remote Italian landscapes. Likewise, she sought to draw the reader’s attention to the countryside rather than the city, and to the context of the countryside she knew and loved, such as the Signa near Florence, her one of her favourite places. Her first-hand knowledge of the country allowed her to portray and empathize with Italian peasant life. In particular, in her novel “Village Commune”, her protagonist is wronged and suffers hardships - just like Italian peasants. Authors such as Carlo Levi and Ignazio Silone were written about half a century later. However, the writer did not sympathize with the peasants when they raised their voices of protest. In her non-fiction she compared the Italian tenants to the Irish and praised the former for not rebelling against the social order. He advocated changing the social conditions of the poor.

Shakespeare is equally patriotic, but Italians, Jews, Moors and English are included in his universal circle of sympathies. “In Memoriam” is, in a way, an apology essay. It was for this reason that it appealed to its contemporaries, but it survives anyway, not because of it. Beauty is timeless, but certain doubts and beliefs are not. Men can agree to use the same expressions, but there can be no effective agreement to mean the same thing. He was able to weave reminiscences into his lines. However, his method of conception was essentially his own, and his work did not easily merge with that of others. References to Shelley in his early poems do not seem entirely relevant. He felt out of place and learned early on to rely only on himself. The slight success achieved after much effort made it almost inevitable that he would give up drama. Browning had been to Italy before and had already felt the charm of the Italian Renaissance. He knew and loved Italian literature. But his own work remains in the Teutonic spirit. Perhaps no English poet knew foreign countries as well as Browning knew Italy. Indeed, no one has more devoted his best work to a country that does not belong to him.

Meanwhile, Henry James finds himself lost in the word of travel, a “sentimental tourist” as he had called himself. Perhaps it is no surprise then that his works straddle the line between Romanticism and Realism. In “The Portrait of a Lady” (1881) the figure of Isabel Archer is that of someone who has the free spirit of the Romantic hero, only to end up a victim of the crude reality around her. “Italian Hours” (1909) is a love letter to James’ experiences in Italy. Ironically, the book opens with a rather negative description of Venice:

“The Venetian people have little to call their own—little more than the bare privilege of leading their lives in the most beautiful of towns. Their habitations are decayed; their taxes heavy; their pockets light; their opportunities few [...]The canals

have a horrible smell, and the everlasting Piazza, where you have looked repeatedly at every article in every shop-window and found them all rubbish [...]”.⁹

Despite this bleak impression, he still manages to praise the country and his love for it without ignoring the negative aspects. To him, poverty and degradation are not something that detract from the experience, but are rather, as he calls it, “part of the spectacle”. For James the joy comes from experiencing Venice the same way its people would, making most out of the simplest pleasures. Consequently, the worst thing one can experience while visiting Venice is the inability to be the first in everything they wish to experience: “The sentimental tourist’s sole quarrel with his Venice is that he has too many competitors there. He likes to be alone; to be original; to have (to himself, at least) the air of making discoveries.”¹⁰

In the end, James still manages to find the charm of Italy around him, calling his love for it a luxury in his closing words. “These things are personal memories” he writes, “with the logic of certain insistences of that sort often difficult to seize.” Like Dickens before him, Henry James’ appreciation for Italy comes from a deeply personal place, where the experience is crafted not just by the great sights mentioned in the travel guides, but in the smaller moments. In “Italian Hours” he doesn’t just experience the world around him like the lords of the Grand Tour, in viewing the beauty of Naples Bay at sunset or visiting the grave of Dante, which he found “anything but Dantesque”¹¹. James finds the beauty in brief impressions, be they of engravings of Nereids and Tritons on a Renaissance plaque or of a porphyry pillar holding up an old bust of marble.

CONCLUSIONS

All the changes that characterize the Victorian Era have changed people in England and around the world. No civilization as we know it, will ever be the same, thanks to Britain's idea of responsibility and rights to the world. Just as this change affected England, the influence of Queen Victoria's reign shaped the world we know today. It is hard to imagine what the changes would have been without Queen Victoria's impact on world economics, philosophy, biology, geology, psychology, religious beliefs and more. In conclusion, Victorian era was marked by technological advancements, but it was also a dark age for low-income earners.

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⁹ James, Henry. 1909, “Italian Hours”, Heinemann, London, 1909
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¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

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