



Notes on the Dickens excerpt

INTRODUCTION

- In Ferrara this time. Northern Italy. During Dickens's long trip back to London (through Northern Italy, Switzerland, and France) to read his second Christmas carol (*The Chimes*) to his friends. Ferrara visited just before Venice.
- Between sunset (1) and sunrise (44) "one fine morning" → landscape description, contemplative mood, peace & quiet, Gothic leanings ("spectral" 46) due to an intermediary timeframe between sleep (death) and early morning (rebirth).
- Once again, as in the whole Venice chapter described as one long, meandering dream (or nightmare), an atmosphere of unreality – a surprising element in what purports to be a travelogue. An excerpt that is more Romantic or impressionistic than realistic.
- **Thesis: an original description, where we learn more about the observer than about the sight he describes.**
- Plan: See below.

1- Dickens's Italy

- **An extreme experience:** in Ferrara, everything is supposedly more... or less... than elsewhere (14, giant grass 15, markedly depopulated area 17-8), but it is Dickens's mind that gets carried away. The same exaggerations & contrasts are used by Dickens elsewhere (certainly a product of his Romantic mind).
- **Gothic atmosphere:** blood red light, only a scattering of trees (desolate landscape), mournful-seeming water (to the narrator at least), deep bell sounding in the distance, approaching night (sunset), a striking memory that could not have been clearer if it had been made the night of a murder → "chilling of the blood" (11)! Later on in the excerpt, a particular stress on night, obscurity, & the dangers associated with them. End of the excerpt: Ferrara as "a city of the dead" due to a pestilence (plague?)
- **(Pre-)Romantic mood:** loneliness, resting animals, feeling of *déjà vu* (destiny, absence of control), importance of "imaginary recollection" (that is to say, of a mixture of memory & imagination), a poetic landscape, stillness of that Italian sunset, etc. (Cf. meditation on mortality in various 18th-c. "Graveyard School" poems)
- **Ferrara as archetype of all Italian towns:** Cf. 20 "in an Italian town" → these characteristics actually prevail in *all* Italian cities.
- What are those characteristics? **An impractical people:** coppersmith's forge situated in the worst of places (near a hotel), unnecessary doors ("these distrustful geni" 25) & jealous corridors (pathetic fallacy, personification) in hotels; feeling of insecurity in hotels due to rats & openings in the walls; rooms are cold because wood sticks afford no heat at all; rooms are full of smoke due to architectural incompetence → 5 criticisms summarized in lines 35-6.

2. Dickens's visual imagination

- A memory **created in a matter of a few seconds** only; but remembered long after → similar to Wordsworth's poetic recollections, but with a gory (bloody) twist.
- Not only **long-lasting, but also powerful** (now just as it was then).

- This is what the whole travelogue is about: a series of images brought back from Italy by **Dickens's all-seeing eye** (Cf. panorama, diorama, shows, pictures, etc. described all along the book.)
- This landscape stayed with him because of its **"picturesque" quality** (45). In other words, a sight struck him, & he now uses literary devices to convey that haunting picture to the reader. A form of *ekphrasis*, then (literary description of a painting, for instance, with natural landscapes considered as paintings or Nature considered as a vast canvas).
- **Allows the narrator (Dickens) to foreground himself & his own sensitivity, as always:** the pounding from the forge has an impact on the narrator's heart (oxymoronic phrase "a deadly energy" → sounds associated both with life & death); "I wonder" (anaphora in lines 20-34) → an excerpt focused on Dickens's personal response to Italy; paranoid feeling of insecurity (he's being watched at night through open doors and "portholes")
- Poetic dimension of this excerpt: reminds us of Pre-Romantic & Romantic poetry, tries to encapsulate a beautiful sight, alliterations in the last four lines (single, solitary survivor, streets, squares, sack and siege)
- In a way, *he* is that one survivor, & his task seems to be to convey images & emotions to the reader, as if he were some kind of witness. Literature keeps such memories alive, then, and is opposed to death & oblivion in that sense.

3. Dickens's kind of travelogue

- **Dickens's (recurrent) superior and ironic attitude to Italy** → he uses his recurrent array of literary devices: anaphora, exclamations, pathetic fallacies, contrasts and repetitions (24 "can't be shut" / "will not open," 30-1 "agony of heat / cold"), exaggerations, incongruities, original images, irony (32 great feature"), etc.
- **And yet, quite a surprisingly upbeat tone towards the end of the excerpt:** Dickens pays homage to what he likes in Italians: their kindness, smile, simplicity, light-heartedness → he's ready to go back to Italy (as he did indeed in 1853) any time.
- **"Jewels set in dirt"** (37): a phrase which could summarize Dickens's take on Italy & Italians. They are kind hearts that make do with a poor economic reality. This also reveals Dickens's attitude to social issues in general: the good in any society comes from **individuals, not institutions**. Therefore, if Dickens's attitude is always highly critical, a measure of hope or optimism is still possible because a few good individuals are always to be found, who make progress possible & unnerving situations bearable.
- Dickens *does* refer to 2 literary figures from the Italian Renaissance (among the most famous in Italy – and Europe) and to "a rare old Gothic cathedral" – **in under two lines!!** His travelogue is not your usual travel guide (as published by Murray, for instance, at that time) → if the reader wishes to know more about architectural or literary details, let them read a travel guide... Cf. the dismissive phrase "and more churches of course" (40-1): Italy is replete with them, and such descriptions are so boring (according to Dickens).
- Better see the "long silent streets" of a desolate old town, where "ivy" (natural, common plant) has replaced "banners" (man-made, associated with power). A Romantic aesthetic (ruins 50, solitary meditation on the vanity of pomp & circumstance, morbid attraction to death & gory details, etc.)

CONCLUSION

- *Summarize the 3 parts above in a few lines only.* Dickens's "pictures" from Italy are therefore of an original kind: not those that hang from the walls of museums, but striking sights seen along the way. Even "without a single figure in the picture" (48), such a sight is well worth the trip.
- *Then branch out, for instance by saying:* True, we do not necessary learn much about Italy (Cf. Sylvère Monod's description of Dickens's limitations & the limitations of his travelogue) but this a striking description, in which a Gothic atmosphere strangely conveys an optimistic belief in the greatness of human possibilities & the beauties of natural landscapes.

