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“A Pair of Naked Legs and a Ragged Red Scarf”: An Overview of Victorian Discourses on Italy

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Pictures from Italy, Dickens's idiosyncratic account of his reactions to a journey through the peninsula, offers a lively alternative to the more prosaic contemporary guidebooks such as those produced by Baedeker or Murray.¹ As many more readers were likely to consume Dickens's work than would ever venture abroad with the aid of the guidebooks, these *Pictures* provided influential material for the creation of discourse about Italy and Italians. In a typically ingenuous strategy, Dickens constructs himself as a plain man who is frequently shocked by his Italian experiences, cutting through any supposed cultural pieties or conventional listing of beauties by his plain speaking. Indeed, conventional beauties or supposedly pleasurable experiences are frequently used as a foil for his outspoken judgements on the Italian people, their qualities and their mode of life. Dickens's (partial) view can thus be accorded prestige as an exposé of the “real Italy”, effectively discrediting accepted wisdom as well as claiming superior authenticity. An example from his discussion of Naples illustrates the initial enumeration of exotic or pastoral pleasures (with “begging and stealing” subversively inserted in the midst of the catalogue of attractions), only to be mocked by the superior “reality” he discerns and the moral lesson he draws:

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

¹ The book was originally published in 1846; Murray's first guidebook to Italy (in competition with Baedeker's) had appeared four years earlier.

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 St. Giles so repulsive, and the Porta Capuana so attractive. A pair of naked legs and a ragged red scarf, do not they make all the difference between what is interesting and what is coarse and odious? (166-7)

This trope of contrast between paradisiacal natural environment and degraded inhabitants, or indeed contrast between perceived characteristics of England and Italy, was a key feature of the discourse about Italy and Italians in the mid-nineteenth century. Such oppositions were certainly not new; earlier in the century Shelley, in an 1818 letter to Leigh Hunt, had used similar adjectives to declare that:

There are two Italies; one composed of the green earth & transparent sea and the mighty ruins of antient times, and aerial mountains, & the warm and radiant atmosphere which is interfused through all things. The other consists of the Italians of the present day, their works and ways. The one is the most sublime & lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of man; the other the most degraded disgusting and odious. (Quoted in Kemp 152)

This equivocal pastoral discourse was presented by widely-circulated texts in the public domain, by such writers as the Brownings and Bulwer-Lytton. The pronouncements of Ruskin, advocating a prelapsarian simplicity, also influenced the opposition in industrial/pastoral discourse. However, there was also a wealth of other material featuring the pleasures of the Italian landscape – and the pleasures of despising the Italians situated within it – and this provides a valuable context for accounts of visits to Italy by public favourites such as Frances Trollope and Charles Dickens.

By the mid-century, Italy was already constructed in pastoral narratives by powerful residual discourse. The earlier taste for the Gothic, such as the novels of Ann Radcliffe, had inscribed in English culture a grammar of dramatic Italian landscapes, as well as dramatic behaviour and events. Pictorial descriptions of Italy by Romantics

such as Byron and Shelley had also made available a range of readings of the landscape, from the sublime to a comfortable, easeful, fecundity.² The development in range, intensity and use of pastoral discourse between 1840 and 1870 draws on, but also transcends, preceding cultural narratives, however. Within the setting of pastoral Italy, the popularity yet instability of Italians as cultural signifiers at this period demands examination.³ One factor in this was undoubtedly located outside England, as the Risorgimento progressed and arguments about the future of Italy were brought to public notice by writers as diverse as Carlyle and Barrett Browning, ensuring that Italy was foregrounded in the cultural field. But in the creation and use of English narratives about Italy, cultural, political, economic and technological developments in England itself were just as significant.

A practical agent of the increasing middle-class awareness of the pastoral landscapes of Italy at this period was the growth in availability of illustration in books and, even more, in papers like the *Illustrated London News* (ILN). Such images could enable the wider diffusion of cultural tropes, such as the pastoral, which were thus made available to middle-class readers. But perhaps the most obvious factor influencing a contemporary fascination with the Italian rural scene was England's rapid urbanization. John Bull may have been idealized as a country squire, but by 1851 the majority of his countrymen inhabited towns or cities, as the census of Great Britain that year revealed. Given what Lowe calls the rural idyll at the heart of the English national narrative, it is thus not surprising that excursions into the (English) countryside and paintings of rural scenes grew in popularity, providing a self- and national image of connection with the land.⁴ For example, William Collins made his name with *The Dispersal of a Favourite Lamb* in 1813, engraved twice with 15,000 smaller prints being sold, and capitalized on the theme with subjects like *Rustic Civility* (1832), *Cottage Hospitality* (1834) and *Happy as a King*, shown at the Royal Academy in 1836

² For discussion of the early nineteenth-century attitudes to Italy as revealed in travel writing see O'Connor, Chapter 2, and also Brand, Chapter 1.

³ For further detailed examination of these issues, see McAllister.

⁴ On rurality identified with Englishness, see Thomas, and on increased visiting of the country (which ironically was aided by railway development), see Mingay 10 and Keith 81.

but much more widely known through the popular engraving of 1839. In 1847, still popular, a replica of this painting was presented to the Tate Gallery for the nation. Rosemary Treble in her study of Victorian rural paintings concludes that "this prettily sentimental view of country life was almost as mythical to its contemporaries as it is to the twentieth century, and seems to have owed its popularity as much to its unattainability as to the evident charm of the pictures it produced" (53). In *Aurora Leigh*, although poor Marian Earle is "worse than orphaned", at least her negligent parents sometimes take her "Emerging from the social smut of towns/To wipe their feet clean on the mountain turf" (Book 3; 959-60). The idea of Pastoral offers an escape from the urban but also a reminder of, or tribute to, a world which has been lost. It can therefore act as a critique of the current state of society. This traditional cultural form was therefore available in this period, to be re-used or transformed, to embody such concerns about urbanization and indeed industrialization, whether evincing nostalgia or more apocalyptic concerns.

Such a pastoral vision finds an outlet in Golden Age rural nostalgia, or the image of England as a garden, but it could also find a satisfying location in the Arcadian pastoral of another country. And additional concerns in England about the deteriorating urban climate made the contrasting climate of Italy seem even more paradisiacal. In *Bleak House* and *Hard Times*, for example, Dickens uses fog, dirt and squalor not merely symbolically but as a realist device, to anchor the story in the readers' experience. In *Aurora Leigh*, later rhapsodies over Italian countryside are set against Aurora's early memories of London, chiefly consisting of "Fog only, the great tawny weltering fog [...] as if a sponge/Had wiped out London" (Book 1, 3; 179, 182-3). Far more tangible dirt and squalor than mere fog, of course, were produced by urbanization and industrialism, and Chadwick's 1842 Sanitary Report revealed the unpleasant truth that London, at least, was far removed from the green and pleasant land with which England liked to identify itself. After the second cholera epidemic in 1848-9 the attraction of depictions of rural scenes, signifying healthy living, increased in imaginative power.

Pastoral images of Italy and Italians, whether conveyed visually or verbally, could perform many functions for the mid-nineteenth-century

consumer. A double cultural distinction was conferred by their possession and enjoyment, as by the initial selection of such material the viewer is separated from other consumers with less cultural discrimination and is also distinguished from the objects depicted, diminishing them. The power relations implicit in representation mean that although Italy was not in a colonial relationship with England, the strategies seen in colonial discourse of transforming foreign space into controlled, known, and therefore inferior space can also be seen operating (Bhabha, *Location* 110-1). Representations acted to reinforce the reader's own social and cultural assumptions, as any behaviour outside the rules of "human nature" or "correct behaviour" as currently perceived in England could be constructed as barbaric or absurd. Every time a pictured Italian scene included inhabitants in bare feet, for example, current concepts of primitivism were likely to be invoked.

Ruskin's notorious exhortation to racial excellence, delivered in 1870 to Oxford students, beginning "We are [...] a race mingled of the best northern blood" drew on beliefs about national racial identity which had been current since much earlier in the century (Ruskin's Slade speech was later published as *Lectures on Art* in 1894, 41). This anthropological/racial debate formed a significant strand of the English cultural climate against which Italians were presented "in their own habitat". Representations not only drew on the grammar of primitivism and savagery with which the middle-class reader of *Punch*, for example, was increasingly familiar, but were likely to be read against concepts of differentiated orders of culture in which the Italian "race" scored less highly than the Anglo-Saxon. From 1840 to 1870 there was a development in "racial" theories, as each decade saw the publication of seminal ethnological works, although already "by the late 1840s, the idea of the Anglo-Saxon 'race' was an intellectual commonplace" (Stocking 63). From Grey in the 1840s to Galton and Spencer in the 50s and 60s, the cultural remained interwoven with the biological in many of these theories, as the instinctive "savage" was set against the steady, reasoning English, and a moral determinism linked virtues or vices with degree of "civilization". Civilization was often seen in particularly English terms:

Although the ostensible reference was still to a generalized progress of knowledge, technique, social organization, and morality, civilization often tended to imply [...] the factory system and free trade; representative government and liberal political institutions; a middle-class standard of material comfort and the middle-class ethic of self-discipline and sexual restraint; and the Christian religion in its Protestant form. (Stocking 35)

In 1851 Herbert Spencer in *Social Statics* entitled a chapter "The Evanescence of Evil", advancing the argument that men (sic) would distance themselves more from the instinctive, animal way of life, be drawn to progress, and "evil and immorality disappear" (65). Evil and immorality are thus satisfyingly located in the less evolved, who display less "progress", in Spencer's terms. The very title of Edward Tylor's influential study *Primitive Culture* in 1871 reflected beliefs in the link of culture with ethnology, and also in the evolution of cultures and races, in which the "primitive" were less advanced along the path of progress than "civilised" nations. Indeed, Tylor succeeded in constructing a "rough scale of civilisation" which located "the educated world of England and America" at one end of a continuum, with "savage tribes at the other". Between these poles, examples are given of the Australian [Aboriginal], Tahitian, Aztec, Chinese, and Italian "races" in this "ascending order of culture" (23-24). Italians were thus almost, but not quite, as civilized as the English, and as G. W. Stocking points out, "the European peasantry now served as a crucial link between modern civilized and primitive savage man". Such inscription provided a safe location of "primitivism" outside England, invaluable at a time of concern about statistics showing disturbing working-class behaviour and moral and physical degeneracy.⁵ Yet, even without such "scientific" support, Anna Jameson in the 1820s had anticipated Tylor's theories in her fictionalized diary of a visit to Italy:

Let the modern Italians be what they may, – what I hear them styled six times a day at least – a dirty, demoralized, degraded, unprincipled race, – centuries behind our thrice-blessed, prosperous, and comfort-

⁵ On concerns about internal "primitivism", see Stocking 212-16. There is also of course the ambiguity of projection onto the Irish, discussed by many writers from Curtis 1955 to De Nie 2004.

loving nation in civilization and morals: if I were come among them as a resident, this picture might alarm me [...] (293)

However, the discourse in which examples of Italian pastoral participate is one of greater complexity, diversity and ambiguity than a purely anthropologically-informed analysis might suggest. To contain Italians within the boundaries of the page was to establish the superiority of the reader by the controlling gaze, yet also, paradoxically, to allow readers to participate in Italian Otherness. Positive qualities, such as liveliness and spontaneity, could be gained by imaginative participation, whilst retaining the powerful distancing of the observer. Homi Bhabha stresses the ambivalence of national representations and traditions, "as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion, and cultural contestation" (*Nation* 5). Qualities selected for marking might be open for association or disavowal, or simultaneously available to signify both, such as the childishness which constituted Italians as contentedly pre-lapsarian but also implied their unreliability and inability to survive in the modern world. As Graham Dawson remarks, when discussing T. E. Lawrence's fascination with Arabia and the popularity of his myth in England:

Representations furnish a repertoire of cultural forms that can be drawn upon in the imagining of lived identities. These may be aspired to, rather than ever actually being achieved, or achievable. And into this gap flows the element of desire. (118)

Desire, predicated upon a lack, can encompass attraction and repulsion simultaneously. Such desire is evident in the mixture of fascination and fear which depicts behaviour that transgresses contemporary English self-ascribed norms, such as moderation or self-control.⁶ In what must have acted as a mimetic narrative for some readers, Aurora Leigh's father, the "austere Englishman" is "flooded with a passion unaware" at the sight of her Italian mother who "shook with silent clangour brain and heart/Transfiguring him to music" (Book 1, 68; 88-89). But however attractive the flirtation

⁶ On desire, the work of Lacan and Derrida is summarized and developed in Chapter 3 of Belsey.

with such an existence might be, the reader is recalled by the narrative to the cultural assumption that "normal life" in such a setting is impracticable. Leigh dies and his half Italian daughter is sent to England, to be formed and develop her vocation as a writer.⁷

Italy's potential for such equivocal imaginative identification perhaps contributed to the popularity in the mid-nineteenth century of personal or anecdotal accounts of travel which created a construct of "Italy" for the middle-class audience, the majority of whom would still never see Italy themselves. As John Pemble in his study of Victorian travel to the Mediterranean comments:

The presses plied the reading public with *Sketches, Notes, Diaries, Gleanings, Glimpses, Impressions, Pictures, Narratives, and Leaves from Journals about Tours, Visits, Wanderings, Residences, Rambles, and Travels* in all the quarters of the South (7)

Travel writers commented on "scenery" as if set out on a stage for their delectation, and on the inhabitants anthropologically, inscribing them as objects and therefore constructing the reader in a position of superiority. Roland Barthes has written of the mastery implicit in panoramic views such as that from the Eiffel Tower. In a dialectical process, we are lost in the overall experience, our "euphoric vision" (10), yet are simultaneously trying to impose a pattern, make sense, tie it down to what we already know. Such a process uses the view as material for our exercise of control. Once Baedeker had been joined by the reliably English Murray, guidebooks occupied the ground of factual description of Italy, and the individual writer was freed to make impressionistic and idiosyncratic comments, frequently using informal structures as the titles quoted above suggest – including "Pictures", in Dickens's case. By the mid-century the alterity of the Italians, and a certain typology, was firmly established in such texts. Appreciation of the culture and environment was tempered with the moral lessons, implicit or at times explicit, which the visiting English could teach the Italians.⁸

The idyllic physical environment of Italy was inscribed firmly in English mythology by residual cultural discourses, and frequently

⁷ This is in many ways an echo of Corinne's story in the novel by de Staël.

⁸ O'Connor contrasts eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attitudes, making a similar point (18).

reconfirmed in visual and verbal texts. In 1860, for example, just after a detailed news article on the "Proposed Italian [political] Settlement", the *ILN* found an excuse to show a pastoral scene (Figure 1).



Figure 1. "View of Bologna" *ILN* 3 March 1860, 205.

"As Bologna is now the centre of the Italian movement, we give a View of the exterior of the city, which, like the majority of Italian cities, offers a rich and picturesque outline" (3 March 1860, 205). It is an odd view of a city, as well over half of the illustration depicts a rural landscape, with a donkey in the foreground and peasant women drowsing in the shade of the large trees. The skyline of the city seems contained by the surrounding countryside and relaxed atmosphere, and thus the very concept of a city is inscribed in a fundamentally different way to that in which most English readers would understand the term. Indeed, the whole process of containment within frames, whether of paper or of trees, underlines the power relations in such apparent appreciation of the Italian landscape.

The trope of a "view" itself implies boundaries, by being presented for purchase, consumption and use, by being selected and put into a frame. The Italians in the picture are bounded by being set in a context of larger forces – in fact in hundreds of such illustrations, the figures are invariably small and set amidst mountains, trees, the sea, or of course ruins. This objectifies, and introduces scale to render the object less impressive. They are also bounded performatively by signifiers of simple rural life – transporting goods (or people) by donkey, gathering nuts, fishing, and herding animals. These figures could not be imagined performing the duties of a clerk or a shopkeeper. But in an illustrated paper such views are bounded in still other ways, by being juxtaposed with apparently unrelated material against which they may be read. The "View of Bologna", for example, appeared below a similar sized but much more formally impressive illustration of Christchurch Cathedral, Montreal, and text enumerating the splendid architecture and artefacts (many English in origin). Thus a narrative is inscribed intertextually, contrasting the sophisticated, productive North to the "primitive", static South, should the viewer choose to read it so. It must be remembered, however, that such material offers ambivalent pleasures, and so alternatively available is the myth of the warm, organic life of the Italians in which even the cities are set relaxedly within their environs, in contrast to the cold artifice of more Northern peoples. As Pamela Gerrish Nunn points out, it was "the imagined timelessness of Italy and its picturesqueness, which British gallery-goers were used to seeing" (122). As a location for day-dreaming or fantasy, Italy offered much, and there were undoubted delights to be gained by imaginative identification with carefree Italians in such an idyllic setting.⁹ They could be accompanied by the (perhaps more satisfying) sense of power conferred by the status of privileged observer from a position of self-ascribed superiority. Representations which might challenge the reader's own social and cultural practices could thus be recuperated and made to serve several needs. Verbal descriptions of the physical attractions of Italy ranged from those in guide books to depictions in poetry, but almost all were appreciative,

⁹ On longing or daydreaming, and its place with disillusionment in the cycle of consumption, see Storey 14-16.

indeed lyrical. Writing with a more personal tone than Murray's or Baedeker's handbooks, A. T. Gregory, the author of the *Practical Guide for Italy* of 1859, indulged in effusive comments, "gradually the road rushes astonishingly down a stupendous gorge with glorious prospects" (28) or added personal codas to descriptions such as "—most romantic" (108).

But it was probably through poetic descriptions that the English reader would be most likely to be seduced by the pleasures of the Italian landscape. Robert Browning's evocation of fertility and abundance in *The Englishman in Italy* depicts Italians as rooted in their community, involved in a relaxed way in activities such as fishing or wine-pressing, and above all enjoying fresh produce:

[...] gourds fried in great purple slices,
 That colour of popes,
 Meantime, see the grape-bunch they've brought you:
 The rain-water slips
 Oe'r the heavy bloom on each globe [...]
 And end with the prickly-pear's red flesh
 That leaves thro' its juice
 The stony black seeds on your pearl-teeth. (99-115)

Sensuality is clearly evoked here, but Browning's emphasis upon the availability, freshness and sheer naturalness of food adds a further aspect to the myths about Italians — one which is unequivocally enviable. In the increasingly urban living conditions of England, such "living off the land" had receded, for many, into folk memory, and contemporary English concerns about hygiene and the adulteration of food demonstrated dissatisfaction with this situation (Wohl 52-3). The reader of this poem, published in 1845, would thus have been confronted with an attractive mode of life which the English could be seen as having lost. This attraction, as well as providing an alternative reality, also fed insecurity about nationality and status and created a need for self-validation which in turn fed the construction of Italians as "primitive".

One strategy by which the pastoral landscape could be contained and managed verbally, as it was visually, was by its being defined in relationship to England. In the first part of *Casa Guidi Windows*,

published in 1851 although written in 1848, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's argument relies upon underlining the links between England and Italy, and in stanza XXIX she uses the description of her first sight of Vallombrosa to allude to Milton's use of its famous "beechen leaves". Here the beautiful environment is positioned not merely as a "view", but one which "helped to fill the cup of Milton's soul", and thus has earned a place in English history. There is little actual description of the scene, as if it exists fully only in the simile in *Paradise Lost* which has created it for the English: "Therefore is/The place divine to English man and child – /We all love Italy" (1156; 1162-4). To love a landscape, or country, largely because of its status as a source of intertextual references in one's own national literature places the reader firmly in control of the environment. John Pemble underlines this search for recognition rather than discovery, commenting that "indifference or hostility was aroused when landscapes failed to match preconceptions derived from art or literature and appeared strange when they should have been familiar" (126).

Even more overtly, in the majority of the 48 letters which compose Frances Trollope's *A Visit to Italy*, explicit comparisons with England are used to place Italian scenery and climate on a scale of worth. A few Italian sights are deemed to be incomparably beautiful, such as the "soft, liquid, rosy radiance, as I watched floating over the white mountains round Turin" (I: 28) or the setting of Genoa:

It is the overflowing fertility of the golden garden in which she lies basking, with its orange-groves, its lemon-trellises, its myrtles, oleanders, and pomegranates, which altogether give it an aspect and a charm, that would be sought in vain elsewhere. (I: 43)

But such unequivocal appreciation is rare, and the outstanding feature of her construction of Italy is the inferiority of its climate. England may seem grey:

but turn the medal, and you will see amidst the amber, jasper, topaz and lapis lazuli of Rome the demon of disease, lurking where all seems fairest, and turning the air, that looks like an elixir extracted from diamonds and pearls, into a draught of venomous poison, and untimely death [...] while the reverse of our humbler medal shows

health and exercise, labour and its sweet reward, a paler sun, but a more ruddy cheek. (II: 286)

Pisa is supposed by English visitors to be a very healthy location, but "I have seen a meteorological calculation, the result of which is to prove that twice as much rain falls at Pisa within the year, as in London" (I: 71) and according to "a certain Dottore Berliani [...] pulmonary affections of the most fatal kind are frequent at Turin" (I: 20). Trollope exclaims at one point in amazement that the English climate is so misjudged:

How singular it is that England, whose defective climate is the theme of such an enormous proportion of all foreign observation upon her peculiar and characteristic features, how singular it is that the gardens of this poor, cold and foggy England should as much excel all others in every species of beauty, as in every species of produce. But so it is, beyond all reach of decently-plausible contradiction; and the consequence is, that it is very difficult for any of us, on being led into a garden on the Continent, to say, honestly, that we see any thing to admire in it. (II: 284-5)

The defence of English gardens, here, is a defence of English values, and the value of such a work for the reader may well lie in the confirmation of superiority conferred. The hyperbolic denial of admiration for any continental gardens whatsoever (at this point Trollope is discussing the Borghese gardens, renowned for centuries) inscribes writer and reader as "plain men" on a Dickensian model, insightfully exposing cant. The introductory summary of this particular letter's contents presents a representative sample of the significant juxtapositions and explicit moral standpoint to be found informing Trollope's commentary:

Disappointment in the Borghese Gardens.—Gardens of England.—Necessity of Scientific Cultivation everywhere.—The unwholesome Beauty of the Campagna.—The Pincio Hill.—View of Rome from the Terrace.—The English Church.—English Equipages.—Numerical Proportion of Priests.—Forests.—Crimes of Violence.—State of Roman Morality.—The Statu Quo System.—Roman Catholic Sermon.—Roman Catholic Faith. (II: x - Table of Contents)

And yet ambivalence persists, and the softer pleasures of escapism are provided in comments such as "the towns, the villas, the villages, the air and sky, gave me, I think for the first time, fully to understand what people meant by talking of the surpassing beauty of Italy" (II: 173).

Another way in which the reader can contain the pleasures of escapism within a structure of superiority is to include signifiers of poverty or primitivism within representations of the idyllic environment.



Figure 2. "Under the Vines-Italy" *ILN* 17 March 1860, 268 (detail).

The engraving of the painting shown in Figure 2 was printed in the *ILN* with certain prestige conferred through its having been exhibited in the British Institution. Appearing in 1860, such an illustration was bound to be read against knowledge of the recent successful Italian campaign and the declaration of the Italian state – a constitutional monarchy like Britain. The picturesque components of lake, mountains and pergola with vines are combined in a beautiful framing device, but the composition foregrounds the sun-dappled space under the vines, and I would argue that this is the most

significant space for the reader, which is shown in detail. Here the main figure of a woman stands, looking out across the water, and a barefooted child crouches, perhaps with responsibility for the surrounding animals, as he holds a stick. There are no walls as such, just stone piers, but this is clearly an outdoor living space – yet it is also home to a herd of goats. An item of farm machinery lies derelict, and birds peck the ground. This is clearly a "primitive" level of life, in Tylor's terms. But to point the comparison, the illustration is encountered on the same page as a detailed account of a grand English society ball and a brief mention of the several hundred rifle volunteers drilling in London. There is a brief commentary on the picture, enumerating the vines, lake and "goats and birds completing the pastoral scene", yet it is the description of the human element in the painting which is most instructive. The anonymous writer begins:

BELLA ITALIA! So richly endowed with every gift of nature, with bright skies and bounteous soil, 'tis man alone that prevents your beauteous land from becoming a perfect paradise. (*ILN* 3 March 1860, 268)

This could be read as a reference to recent political oppression, but I would argue that, given the iconography of the picture, it is just as likely to link with the prevalence of animals, lack of civilized comforts and the bare feet depicted to connote innate Italian primitivism. Particularly in the late 1850s and early 1860s, it is actually very rare to see any representation of an Italian scene in the *ILN* which does not include either animals or bare footed humans – or both, indeed. Even in a sumptuous supplement on Rome (26 March 1859) the Piazza del Popolo is robbed of some of its splendour by the appearance in the foreground of peasants bearing produce, one of them a woman who is riding a hefty looking ox.



Figure 3. "The Piazza del Popolo, Rome" *ILN* 26 March 1859, 313.

Bearing in mind contemporary concerns in the 1850s and 60s about the definition of a gentleman and the recognition of professional status, the importance for a middle-class reader of being distanced from such manual labour would be vital (Gilmour 92). Such images, contrasting with a desired self-image, would degrade Italy and the Italians by association. When the reader of the *ILN* for 14 May 1859 discovered in the piece "Statistics of Italy" that the population in 1858 was 27,107,047 and that Italy is "one of the countries in which the largest cities and towns are to be found", with 19 having more than 50,000 inhabitants and 8 cities exceeding 100,000 (474), these facts of Italian urbanization would seem hard to reconcile with the preceding illustrations.

When constructing the rural landscape, the trope of English/Italian contrast also applied – in other words, even the rural inhabitants of England could be read as superior. The casual reader opening the 26 March 1859 of the *ILN* would be convinced of this directly, seeing Figures 4 and 5 on the same page:



Figure 4. "Pifferari playing to the Virgin" *ILN* 26 March 1859, 305.



Figure 5. "The Cottage Door" *ILN* 26 March 1859, 305.

It is stressed in the accompanying description that Figure 5 shows a "little family party" in England, whereas the former focuses more on the Madonna and child iconography so common in "Old Master" paintings and therefore Italian by association. The English family are all conspicuously, nay gleamingly, shod, although we cannot see the infant's feet, of course. They stand at the eponymous door, symbol of their security, and we see signifiers of cleanliness such as the broom and child's pinafore, and the books and newspaper of literacy. Nature is further tamed in the symbol of the birdcage. Although set in "great" Rome, the Italian grouping stand or kneel in the street, outside a decaying public building with a faded fresco of the Virgin. The shepherd/pipers' clothing is worn and patched, and the woman and child are bare to a degree which would not have been thought suitable in England, and might connote licentiousness. The centrality of a sheep to the picture should prepare the reader for the child's indicative lack of shoes. Both of these engravings are taken from paintings, displayed at contemporary exhibitions, and the powerful discourse about rural life in England and Italy which they exemplify is set in perspective by the third element in the double-page spread, a very impressive full page view of "Exeter College, Oxford University" with an accompanying article about its extensive history and the care taken over recent renovation and improvements. Comparisons with Italy might suggest themselves.

Images of otherness and difference which seek to keep the other firmly in its place are rarely unproblematic. Such inscriptions also serve as a site for the location of fantasies for a bourgeois audience – for example, the fantasy of being free, instinctive and without anxiety about social status or gender roles. Representations of Italians in pastoral settings, especially large and complex visual images in which the reader could lose himself, offered a stage upon which to play another part for a brief time, almost a holiday in which he too could be capricious and dance the tarantella. But the demands of constructing one's own identity in the world outside the text also required satisfaction of the powerful needs to project fear and guilt, to validate one's desired self-image, and to achieve distinction. There is a complex dialogue in such reading, between the desire to be like and the desire to show oneself unlike, and superior. Sussman, in his study of Victorian masculinities, points out the

"complex mix of repulsion and envy for what [readers] saw as the relaxed and undisciplined physicality of working-class manliness", and this, despite images of loungers in pastoral landscapes, could operate just as powerfully in an Italian setting (12). The English reader could shuttle between repulsion and envy, or even hold both in creative tension as the texts do, constructing Italians as lazy, yet relaxed, mired and yet grounded in their environment, and culpable yet strangely innocent.

One of the ways in which this tension could be managed was to figure Italians as inherently dirty, disreputable, and villainous. Poverty too near to home would evoke fears and concerns and might signify contagion in more than one sense, and a general questioning of English probity would be similarly threatening. A useful strategy was to project these fears and concerns onto another group, and to experience the pleasures of discovering the primitive status of the Other, especially when that Other, the Italians, had traditionally been represented as historically advanced and culturally superior. The attractions of a state of nature might well be seductive; such images possess an ambivalence and are open to a variety of uses by maker and consumer. In particular, the attribution of villainy or cunning to Italians figured them as culpable if honesty was privileged, but might well have positioned them as more sophisticated than the rather stolid John Bull and have provided an alternative model of masculinity for those who felt him rather limiting. But there was a further refinement in the case of "the Italian", who had been used conventionally as a signifier for amorality since the first English readings of Machiavelli in the sixteenth century. Amorality can be even more threatening than deliberate evil. Its unpredictability can call into question the foundations of morality upon which "our" society rests. If there is a possible way of viewing moral issues, or everyday *mores* from outside our framework, our construction of reality, this raises very uncomfortable questions. A more manageable distinction can be based upon the attribution of external dirt or lack of hygiene, however, which might even be seen as an outward indicator of moral laxity in some cases. Mary Douglas's work on taboos and pollution eschews a simple binary opposition, but does stress the uses of such a dual structuring of experience, with particular reference to cleanliness:

As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder [...] eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment [...]. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (2, 4)

It is clear that the differentiation of needs of any group means that if an opposite is identified and constructed as disordered, the result will be improved bonding, and feelings of order, cleanliness and superiority. Certainly these symbolic boundaries are key points from which to investigate cultural values and assumptions. The likelihood would be that insecurities, particularly those of a "new" middle class, focusing upon social and moral status, would give rise to the negative attribution of dirt to others.

At periods when social boundaries are rapidly shifting and the middle classes have perhaps recently "escaped" from relatively primitive conditions, dirt, poverty or other forms of disrepute, this protective mechanism is likely to be called into place frequently. Chadwick's crusade against dirt in the 1840s constructed water as an agent of purification, in a secular form of sacrament, and cleanliness came into an intimate relationship with godliness. This is well illustrated by the surprising amount of coverage in newspapers and magazines of concern about the state of the Thames, especially during the cholera outbreak of 1848-9. The population of London seemed to be seized by sudden indignation, no doubt proving how refined, clean and particular they were by their disgust at the filth so near to them (as Freeland says, "The Victorians made dirt itself a crime" [805]).

In Anne Manning's 1865 *Selvaggio*, Miss Sparkes, a visiting Englishwoman, embarks on a campaign to improve the village. (As *Selvaggio* means "wild, savage, or uncivilised", she has clearly taken on a massive task.) Entering a cottage, where "dirt and discomfort so evidently reigned within that Miss Sparkes hesitated", she bribes a child to wash himself, and adds "and look here, I am going to give your sister all these *centesimi*, to give one at a time to good boys who wash their face and hands" (173-4; 176-7). By the end of the improbable plot which features coincidences, conversions and battles, the author tells us that:

Selvaggio looked just as seedy and weedy as when we first made acquaintance with it. But there was a noteworthy change at the inn. [...] The Crane became as distinguished for cleanliness as it had been notorious for dirt; as famous for its excellent cookery as it had been infamous for its horrid minestra and risotto [...] for Rosina had lived so long in England, that she knew and had acquired English tastes. (299)

And an approving Miss Sparkes is Rosina's first guest. The positioning of the English as superior in hygiene and cuisine might have been surprising to some readers, especially those who remembered the cholera outbreaks fifteen or so years ago, and various readings of this tale are possible. But the rather caricatured representations in this text do draw on current discourses about national attributes, real or imagined.

This may give some insight as to why foreign filth is one of the main themes, surely comfortingly for the English reader, in Dickens's *Pictures from Italy*. As he enters Genoa (his favourite Italian location), Dickens bursts out:

I never in my life was so dismayed! The wonderful novelty of everything, the unusual smells, the unaccountable filth (though it is reckoned the cleanest of Italian towns), the disorderly jumbling of dirty houses, one upon the roof of another; the passages more squalid and more close than any in St. Giles's or old Paris; in and out of which, not vagabonds, but well-dressed women, with white veils and great fans, were passing and repassing [...] and the disheartening dirt, discomfort, and decay; perfectly confounded me. (29)

There are plentiful examples of this focus on dirt and squalor throughout his tour of the peninsula, and in all contexts; the houses, great or humble, the churches, and above all "whole worlds of dirty people" (40), although at least the Genoese are industrious, he tells us. Immediately this is qualified by "industry has not made them clean, for their habitations are extremely filthy, and their usual occupation on a fine Sunday morning, is to sit at their doors, hunting in each other's heads" (46-7). Other destinations reinforce the association of Italy with dirt: "the beggars seem to embody all the trade and enterprise of Pisa"; "Ronciglione; a little town like a large pig-sty" and in Fondi "a filthy channel of mud and refuse

meanders down the centre of the miserable streets, fed by the obscene rivulets that trickle from the abject houses" (109, 114, 163). Dickens's description of a sunlit Rome is certainly inimitable, if not unrecognizable, "every squalid and desolate hut in the Eternal City [...] was fresh and new with some ray of sun", he admits, grudgingly (159). *Pictures from Italy* has been read as a typical Dickensian celebration of variety and as a series of oppositions between conventional representations and their antitheses (e.g., Churchill 137; Bann 206). But the options Dickens offers us on how Italians can be constructed are severely skewed, if only by sheer frequency, towards an almost pathological listing of dirt, squalor, indolence and mendacity. Dickens, characteristically, is as prodigal with his distaste as with other emotional responses. However, similar judgements about the Southern European character were quick to spring from the pens of English travellers. For example, Frances Trollope briskly remarks of Rome that "the only place outside the drawing-room doors, that is really clean, is St. Peter's" (II: 263). One may posit a relationship to current concerns about the place of cleanliness (and godliness) in the English communal identity. Kate Flint has remarked on the "protean function" of racial others in Dickens's work, acting as "less a subject in themselves than agents utilized within other debates [...] invoked in order to feed specific cultural demands" (103), and the dirty and disreputable Italians we meet in *Pictures from Italy* are certainly drafted into service in several current debates about what it meant to be English. They reveal as much about the needs of the English producer and consumer of these pictures, as they do about any "real" Italians, however naked their legs.

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