

Restlessness, Repose, and the Nature of Dickensian Biography

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In an 1857 letter to his friend, literary advisor, and eventual biographer John Forster, Dickens presents himself as a machine-like bundle of obsessive energy:

Too late to say, put the curb on, and don't rush at hills—the wrong man to say it to. I have now no relief but in action. I am become incapable of rest. I am quite confident that I should rust, break, and die, if I spared myself. Much better to die, doing.

(Forster 1980, 2:196)

This is an arresting image, powerfully conveyed. A mood of desperate dynamism seems even to seep into the rhythms of the passage's staccato syntax. Its mood is also seemingly representative. From the 1840s on, Dickens writes to Forster and a varied range of other correspondents about what he increasingly sees as a defining aspect of his personality: his restlessness. Since then it has been repeatedly adopted as a device to provide structure and consistency in retelling Dickens's life.¹ As Jean Ferguson Carr (1985) points out, “[restlessness] became one of Forster's organizing themes, and has since been used by Edgar Johnson as well” (464).

Close study of Peter Ackroyd's 1990 biography shows that restlessness has remained central to accounts of Dickens's life. Ackroyd's tendency, in fact, is to amplify the importance of this characteristic. For Forster, Dickens's restlessness, although evident earlier, begins in earnest in the period between 1857 and 1858 during the breakdown of his marriage (2:193–206). For Ackroyd, the habit starts when Dickens is a much younger man. He emphasizes Dickens's "general restlessness" even as a cub reporter on the staff of the *Morning Chronicle* in the 1830s (156). At this point, Ackroyd claims, "He seemed, through unhappiness or uncertainty [. . .] to wish to *tire* himself, to occupy himself so that he did not have time to think [. . .] Dickens [. . .] could not bear to relax" (157). From this stage of Dickens's life forward, it seems that hardly a page of Ackroyd's biography can be turned without reference to Dickens's restless energy. In the hundred pages or so after Ackroyd first notes Dickens's "general restlessness" as a young journalist, there is repeated mention of this aspect of his character: "he simply wanted to *work*, to exhaust himself, to place burdens on his own shoulders" (197); "he could not himself rest" (227); "Yet, in any case, he would never let himself rest" (254); "Of course he was still busy here" (285).

The first definition of "restless" in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is "Deprived of rest; finding no rest; *esp.* uneasy in mind or spirit." This description, especially its closing phrase, hints at the pressures on both mind and body endured by holders of such a disposition. Ackroyd, however, recasts what seems to be a difficulty, turning it into Dickens's heroic defining essence and the wellspring of his creative urge. Seeing restlessness as the root of Dickens's creativity is certainly not a new tendency in biographical study of the writer. As Richard Lettis (1993) has pointed out, "Restlessness is certainly the key factor in Dickens's creative state" (8). What is interesting about Ackroyd's use of the theme of Dickens's restlessness as a structuring device is that it is so insistent. This can be explained in part by Ackroyd's own well-known prodigious productivity. The following revealing exchange appeared in a recent interview with Ackroyd in the British press:

There is something machine-like about the way he lives his life: writing from 7.30am till 9pm, with breaks for household chores and food; drinking from 9pm till sleep. You seem ferociously disciplined about work and drink,

I say. "What else is there?" he says. Is there anything else? "Not in my life, no."

(Hattenstone)

It is possible to speculate, therefore, that Ackroyd over-emphasizes the "machine-like" side of Dickens because he identifies so closely with it.

It is also clear when we turn to accounts of the intellectual temper of the Victorian period that Dickens's apparent urge to be continually busy and never at rest is far from unique. His energy, instead, is representative of the active, industrious spirit of the age, often labeled the Victorian "gospel of work." The classic discussion of the conceptual roots of this particular phenomenon is provided in Walter Houghton's 1957 study *The Victorian Frame of Mind*. Best known as the compiler of the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals*, Houghton read extensively in the literature of the Victorian period, and his study is still influential in shaping our understanding of nineteenth-century attitudes to work. As he memorably and confidently states, "Except for 'God,' the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been 'work'" (242). He argues that

[i]n a business society, and one that was strongly under Puritan influence, work was an absolute necessity. Without it there was no hope of achieving the twin goals of life—respectability and salvation. Hence, parents and preachers, writers and lecturers, proclaimed as with single voice that man was created to work, that everyone had his appointed calling in which he was to labor for God and man, that idleness was a moral and social sin.

(189)

Work was not just everywhere as a part of the material existence of daily life; it was also elevated to the status of a moral value. In response to rapid and jarring social changes in the period, it came, in fact, to be seen as a kind of alternative faith. As Houghton puts it,

[a]s the difficulties of belief increased, the essence of religion for Christians—and for agnostics the "meaning of life"—came more and more to lie in strenuous labour for the good of society. That was not only a rational alternative to fruitless speculation but also a practical way of exorcizing the mood of ennui and despair.

(251)

In his chapter on the gospel of work, Houghton quotes an impressive range of nineteenth-century writers, including Matthew Arnold, John Henry Newman, John Ruskin, and Charles Kingsley. The most persistent presence of all, however, is Thomas Carlyle. Peter Gay (2002) suggests that “one could easily compile a little anthology on the subject [of work]” from Carlyle’s writings” (192). While this, to an extent, sidesteps the difficulties inherent in Carlyle’s endlessly fascinating writings, it is certainly true of *Past and Present* (1843). Here work is repeatedly discussed, and the details of what Carlyle writes provide a representative sampling of Victorian attitudes to the subject. Adopted as a kind of replacement religion—“the one God’s voice we have heard in these two atheistic centuries” (145)—he casts work as a solution to all of the social ills that have created the current “condition of England”: “All work, even cotton-spinning is noble; work is alone noble” (132). It is viewed, indeed, as the very founding stone of civilization itself: “It is all work and forgotten work, this peopled, clothed, articulate-speaking, high-towered, wide-acred World” (114). It functions too as a panacea for personal moments of doubt and indecision:

even in the meanest sorts of Labour, the whole soul of a man is composed into a kind of real harmony, the instant he sets himself to work! Doubt, Desire, Sorrow, Remorse, Indignation, Despair itself, all these like helldogs lie beleaguering the soul of the poor dayworker, as of every man: but he bends himself with free valour against his task, and these are stilled, all these shrink murmuring far off into their caves.

(169)

Here, Carlyle does not as such defeat or rationally reject any objections to his cause, but instead simply ignores them. The power of his conviction is such that even when the complexities of work challenge other aspects of his worldview, he retains his faith in the glory of labor. His dislike of mere money making, of what he calls “Mammonism,” is thus tempered when hard graft is involved: “There is endless hope in work, were it even work at making money” (126).

David J. Bradshaw and Suzanne Ozment (2000) argue that “Concern with work was pervasive, so much so that it seemed imperative to address the subject and to address it with passion and conviction” (xvii). These last two qualities are certainly the keynotes of Carlyle’s

engagement with the issue in *Past and Present*, and as critics have noted, the energy and earnestness of the sage of Chelsea were a strong influence on Dickens.² Recent scholarship has also begun to argue, however, for a less singular view of the gospel of work. Rob Breton (2005) claims that

[t]he idea of a single, unified Gospel of Work shared by all Victorians is grossly inadequate. Just as work ethics need to be sorted into career ethics, Smilesian ethics, performance ethics, and so on, Gospels of Work have to be disentangled. The work gospel of the middle class, of the working class, or of the titled, if indeed they had one, must also be distinguished from the gospels said unto the classes.

(6)

Approaching definitions of class from another angle, Martin A. Danahay (2005) traces the troubling influences of ideologies of labor on middle-class male identity in the period. His interest is in

the uneasy class position of the writers who professed admiration for the “Gospel of Work” but chose the working classes as their ideal rather than the middle classes. If the symbolic heart of work lies in manual labor then the intellectual is marginal to the industry of Victorian society.

(23–24)

Danahay and Breton, then, reveal the tensions behind “a single, unified Gospel of Work.” Within the context of such critical reassessments about this Victorian attitude, it becomes less convincing to claim straightforwardly, as Ackroyd does at points in his biography, that Dickens’s “vigour [...] earnestness [...] energy [...] and] compulsive need to work” mark him out as “so much a man of his period” (667–68). In what follows, I argue instead that, like the wider context of the gospel of work, Dickens’s own sense of restlessness has been oversimplified by Ackroyd and others. Close attention to evidence provided by Dickens’s correspondence shows that it is not entirely true to say that Dickens was so restlessly energetic he “did even his nothings in a strenuous way” (Forster 1980, 2:46).³ He in fact took creative energy from periods of rest and repose as well as times when he was particularly active or busy. This essay aims not to present any new biographical information as such, but

rather to critically reassess the response to existing materials. Much, though not all, of the primary material for such a reinterpretation comes from Dickens's collected correspondence, which Angus Easson (2000) argues are "important not only as biographical materials or a commentary upon his age, but as part of the Dickens canon" (335). Part of my purpose in writing is to treat them as such here—as literary texts worthy of close attention in their own right, rather than merely being ancillary to the main meal of Dickens's fiction. The essay also considers how all of this not only alters our understanding of Dickens as a man and artist, but also prompts reflection on the wider cultural resonances of the role of work in Victorian society and the nature, more broadly, of biographical enquiries into writers' lives.

“Setting up a Balloon”: Reinterpreting Dickens's Restlessness

On 6 June 1867 Dickens wrote a rather perplexing letter to W. H. Wills, his adviser and the sub-editor of his journal *Household Words*. It responds in some detail to a letter written by Wills concerning his “misgivings” about a potential American reading tour. Dickens suggests that his old spirit of restlessness is a central motivating factor for the trip. His account of the personal characteristic is, however, far from typical. He admits,

I shall never rest much while my faculties last, and (if I know myself) have a certain something in me that would still be active in rusting and corroding me, if I flattered myself that it was in repose. On the other hand, I think that my habit of easy self-abstraction and withdrawal into fancies, has always refreshed me in short intervals wonderfully. I always seem to myself to have rested far more than I have worked; and I do really believe that I have some exceptional faculty of accumulating young feelings in short pauses, which obliterates a quantity of wear and tear.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 11:377)

Ackroyd rightly interprets the last two sentences here as, in part, desperate attempts by an ill man to convince Wills (and perhaps even himself) that an arduous schedule of public readings will actually benefit his health rather than destroy it. Ackroyd therefore views Dickens's stated “habit of easy self-abstraction and withdrawal into fancies” as code

for “[r]eading his stories in public” (1059). This is an unsurprising interpretation for Ackroyd to make, especially since Dickens was apparently—or at least claimed he was—a revitalized figure when he read in public. But, in this particular instance, Ackroyd also elides what seems an almost reflective side to Dickens’s remarks. He notably does not quote the following intriguing words either: “I always seem to myself to have rested far more than I have worked.”

In his biography, Ackroyd frequently excises periods of rest during Dickens’s life or describes them as largely unsuccessful. Thus, in just one example of many, Ackroyd tells us that “After he had completed the first three numbers [of *Barnaby Rudge*] he stopped for a week—he felt ‘lazy,’ he said—but then once more he began work upon it in earnest. There could never be any real repose for him” (347). Ackroyd’s tactic is an understandable one, given the need to bring shape and consistency to biographical accounts: to avoid what he calls elsewhere in *Dickens* “the uncertainty principle” (942). Yet such stress upon a desperately, even tragically, striving Dickens ignores much of the subtlety and even “uncertainty” of the material left on record.

The dominance of a dark view of Dickens’s restlessness can be traced to Book 2 Chapter 8 of Forster’s *Life*, entitled “What Happened at this Time.” The concentration of several letters from a period of years dealing with Dickens’s restless energy in somber fashion only serves to make the tendency all the more striking. Even here, however, it is possible to read skeptically. The letters may appear to be authentic expressions of self in epistolary form, to quote his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth and daughter Mamie Dickens, “a portrait of himself by himself” (qtd. in Easson, 337). But they also contain many performative aspects, and are written in a style that, if not precisely theatrical, is certainly rhetorically overstated. They sound best spoken aloud, rather than read quietly, since interjections, exclamations, and exaggerations recur frequently. He informs his friend in one such letter: “What I am in that way, nature made me first, and my way of life has of late, alas! confirmed” (Forster 2:196). A similar tone is evident elsewhere in Forster’s *Life*. Having just visited the newly retired William Macready, Dickens reacts in horror to how rest has affected his friend and hopes the same will not happen to him. Instead, he writes, “I have always felt of myself that I must, please God, die in harness” (Forster 2:197). In this letter, moreover, there is even evidence that Dickens was aware of the

energy and performance of his letters on the subject to Forster, since he describes it as having “the appearance of a small sermon” (2:198).

This overwrought setting is, however, not a default one. Not all of Dickens’s letters on the subject are mini-sermons. Several letters written to correspondents other than Forster in the 1850s suggest that he presents different versions of his restlessness to each of them. Thus what seems at first a serious letter to Angela Burdett Coutts, dated 25 October 1853, unfurls into something much lighter. Making what is his second Italian tour, this time accompanied by Wilkie Collins and Augustus Egg, he informs her:

I am so restless to be doing—and always shall be, I think, so long as I have any portion in Time—that if I were to stay more than one week in any one City here, I believe I should be half desperate to begin some new story!!!

(Dickens 1965–2002, 7:171)

Dickens uses triple exclamation marks elsewhere in his correspondence,⁴ but they are surprising in this context and highlight his keen sense of the ridiculous even in times of difficulty, stress, or strain. This quality is revealed again in a letter to Wilkie Collins dated 11 May 1855. Dickens’s account begins in predictable enough fashion. By its close, however, there is evidence that Dickens’s own perception of his restlessness is inflected by a surprisingly absurd sense of whimsicality:

The restless condition in which I wander up and down my room with the first page of my new book before me, defies all description. I feel as if nothing would do me the least good, but setting up a Balloon. It might be inflated in the Garden in front—but I am afraid of it scarcely clearing those little houses.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 7:616)

Forster’s serious, authorized account of Dickens’s restlessness, then, is clearly not the only one that we have. Its central role in determining a sober view of that restlessness is further challenged when placed alongside the collaborative, slightly off-kilter travel piece Dickens wrote with Wilkie Collins, “The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices.” Published in serial parts in *Household Words* in the autumn of 1857, the essay was written during the difficult period of Dickens’s life to which Forster devotes Chapter 8 of Book 2 of the *Life*. Admittedly, Francis Goodchild,

Dickens's persona in "The Lazy Tour," is restlessly hyperactive throughout the two main characters' adventures in Cumbria and Doncaster. He describes himself in the first installment, for instance, as a "laboriously idle" man who "would take upon himself any amount of pains and labour to assure himself that he was idle; in short, had no better idea of idleness than that it was useless industry" ([Dickens and Collins] 3–24 October 1857, 313). Subsequently Thomas Idle, Collins's persona, berates him because he tries to "make work of everything" (385). Yet the whole mood of the piece is absurd, even slightly surreal. It certainly sits curiously with the letters to Forster on the subject and thus further underlines Dickens's own inconsistency of response to this personal characteristic.

It is possible, therefore, to analyze several versions of Dickens's restlessness rather than a single vision of it.⁵ There is convincing evidence to claim further that Dickens was capable of enjoying repose. Not all of Dickens's biographers have entirely ignored this perhaps unexpected ability. Fred Kaplan (1988) mentions the "occasional languid collapses [that] kept him ready for any amount of activity" (264). Kaplan's phrasing, however, makes it evident that he views these pauses as relatively unimportant within the larger pattern of Dickens's life. Ackroyd, as we have seen, discounts Dickens's idle moments in similar fashion, claiming at one point that "Idleness wearied him more than labour" (255). Both biographers, Ackroyd especially, align Dickens with the traditional view, espoused by Walter Houghton but also adopted by Martin Danahay in 2005, that idleness was seen as a sin by the Victorians.⁶ More broadly, a brief glance at the *OED* shows that the negative connotations of the word "idle" have a long history, extending to such terms as "ineffective, worthless, of no value, vain, frivolous, trifling." What these general assumptions downplay, however, are the pleasurable associations of being lazy. As demonstrated by the close attention I give below to specific examples of biographical evidence neglected by Ackroyd and others, Dickens was not only capable of reflective repose of several kinds, he also benefited imaginatively from it.

Even during the early phases of his career, those years in which Ackroyd suggests Dickens "could not bear to relax" (157), Dickens occasionally enjoys the experience of not doing very much. An 1840 letter to Leigh Hunt shows Dickens taking exactly this kind of pleasure. Hunt had sent him a manuscript copy of his blank-verse poem "A Rustic Walk and Dinner"; Dickens clearly enjoyed it and responded in kind by

playfully informing his friend, “Oh Hunt I’m *so* lazy, and all along o’ you! The sun is in my eyes, the hum of the fields in my ears, the dust upon my feet—and a boy, redolent of the steam engine and sweltering in warm ink is slumbering in the passage, waiting for ‘Copy’” (Dickens 1965–2002, 2:67). Another early moment of idleness is recorded by Forster in the *Life*. Dickens writes, “‘I have done nothing to-day’ (18th March [1841]: we had bought books together, the day before, at Tom Hill’s sale) ‘but cut the Swift, looking into it with a delightful laziness in all manner of delightful places, and put poor Tom’s books away’” (Forster 1:147). As we shall see, however, it is from what Kathleen Tillotson labels an “unprecedented pause in his writing life” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:vii), the period spent living and travelling in Italy in 1844 and 1845, that the most striking pieces of this evidence come.

Idling in Italy

The image of a restlessly active Dickens probably first springs to mind when we think of his travels in Italy. Kate Flint claims that *Pictures from Italy* “is the record of travelling impelled by restlessness” (Dickens 1998, vii). The book and letters to various correspondents during the journey provide ample evidence of his displays of immense reserves of energy, whether travelling two days and nights with only two or three hours rest on the way back to London via the Simplon Pass, or climbing a smoldering Vesuvius in daring and inimitable fashion. More often played down, however, is the pleasure he takes in much less strenuous activities performed both by himself and others. Both the restless man of action and the relaxed idler need to be seen together, I would suggest, and the tension between the two personae tells us a great deal about Dickens in Italy and, importantly, how he captures that experience in his published account.

These contradictory impulses reveal themselves even when Dickens is merely thinking about the possibility of an Italian trip. The reasons he gives to John Forster in 1843 for making such an excursion are well known,⁷ but it is worth repeating them here to focus exactly on what Dickens’s intentions entailed. The renewal of his imaginative powers, the desire, as he puts it to Forster, “to fade away from the public eye for a year, and enlarge my stock of description and observation by seeing countries new to me” (Forster 1980, 1:287), is given as an important factor. He also acknowledges the financial benefits of moving his family to the continent. As he tells Forster, “I am convinced that my expenses abroad would not be more than half of my expenses here” (Dickens

1965–2002, 2:47). The travel book itself is also important in this context since, as Dickens suggests, it “would cost me very little trouble; and surely would go very far to pay charges” (Dickens 1965–2002, 2:48). Taken together, then, these motivations show Dickens restless to see new things and enlarge his “stock of description” as well as reduce his expenses and write an account of the trip to help defray costs. Yet, at the same time, Dickens presents another important motivation for going to Italy: the need to rest. As he strongly puts it to Forster, “I feel that longer rest after this story [*Martin Chuzzlewit*] would do me good. You say two or three months, because you have been used to seeing me for eight years never leaving off. But it is not rest enough” (Dickens 1965–2002, 2:48). Further, if much more light-hearted, evidence of this desire for a restful holiday is repeated in a less well-known letter of 13 March 1844 to his friend T. J. Thompson. Enthusiastically outlining the enjoyably idle manner in which he will spend time in Italy with Thompson, Dickens wryly suggests,

We must have a few books, and everything that is idle, sauntering, and enjoyable [. . .] I see myself in a striped shirt, moustache, blouse, red sash, straw hat, and white trousers, sitting astride a mule, and not caring for the clock, the day of the month, or the day of the week. Tinkling bells upon the mule, I hope?

(Dickens 1965–2002, 4:72)

The extant correspondence from the family’s eleven-month stay in Italy reveals that Dickens’s mood once there is as equally divided as his intentions. Periods of rest and stasis, mainly in Genoa, alternate with spates of energetic activity and motion. The latter quality is especially evident in a number of letters home from the periods in which Dickens was on tour, first in November 1844, and then for three months in late January, February, March, and early April in 1845. Reporting back to Angela Burdett Coutts about his November travels, for instance, he writes, “I have been to Modena, Parma, Bologna, Ferrara, Cremona, Venice, and a hundred other places. Florence, Rome, Naples, and Palermo lie before me” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:237). The haste of his itinerary is well conveyed here in the way Dickens ticks off the Italian cities he has seen in boastful and list-like fashion. In a late January 1845 letter to Emile De La Rue, the rapidity of Dickens’s movements are made clear again. He writes,

We remained with Mr. Walton until Thursday Morning—started for Pisa that day [. . .]—dined and slept at Pisa that night—climbed up the Leaning Tower next morning—took the Railroad to Leghorn that afternoon—and dined at Mr. Gower’s that Evening. Next day we started from Pisa, alone—slept at the other La Scala, that night—at Siena last night; [. . .]—and arrived here this evening, at Six.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 4:253)

That Dickens is in almost constant motion here—from Pisa to Leghorn to Siena and on in a matter of days—is expressed in the staccato pulse of his syntax.

Other letters, however, mainly those written from the Villa Bagnerello and the Palazzo Peschiere in Genoa, give a very different, and perhaps more surprising, impression of his time in the country. In a strikingly lyrical and reflective letter to Daniel Maclise dated 22 July 1844, also reprinted in Forster’s *Life*, Dickens describes the view from the Pink Jail to the sea below:

But such green—green—green—as flutters in the vineyard down below the windows, *that* I never saw; nor yet such lilac and purple as float between me, and the distant hills; nor yet—in anything—picture, book, or verbal boredom—such awful, solemn, impenetrable blue, as in that same sea. It has such an absorbing, silent, deep, profound effect; that I can’t help thinking it suggested the idea of Styx. It looks as if a draught of it—only so much as you could scoop up, on the beach, in the hollow of your hand—would wash out everything else, and make a great blue blank of your intellect.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 4:159)

With its almost painterly quality, what is most interesting about the extract in this context is the way in which it conveys movement. The sequentiality of other Italian letters I have quoted is replaced by something else entirely. While Dickens traces the swaying vines and other vibrantly colored forms of vegetation with his perceptive eye, their gentle fluttering and floating attracts his attention. The still waters of the bay of Genoa, which are so “absorbing, silent, deep, profound,” seem to

refresh Dickens further as he imagines taking a “draught” of them and making “a great blue blank” of his intellect. His imaginative powers renewed, he is able to plunge, two-and-a half months later, into the more turbid waters of one of his angriest works, *The Chimes*. The composition of this Christmas Book, unusually, was a relatively easy process for Dickens. To Forster, in more energetic mood, he writes: “I am in regular, ferocious excitement with the *Chimes*; get up at seven; have a cold bath before breakfast; and blaze away, wrathful and red-hot, until three o’clock or so” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:201). It is entirely possible to credit some of the ease of this writing project to the restful reflection he achieved earlier during his stay in Genoa.

A letter written to Lady Blessington during his final period of residence in the same city in 1845 further demonstrates the idly, even romantically reflective side of Dickens. Having just returned to the Palace of the Fishponds after his Italian tour, he politely rejects her offer to attend a local feast day in Pisa. His excuse, as it turns out, is profound consideration of what he has experienced on his journey:

I have seen so many wonders, and each of them has such a voice of its own, that I sit all day listening to the roar they make, as if it were in a seashell; and have fallen into an idleness so complete, that I can’t rouse myself to go to Pisa on the Twenty Fifth.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 4:303)

Almost Wordsworthian in spirit, these recollections are particularly intense ones. Not merely “pictures,” Dickens’s impressions are something much more mysteriously abstract than that. They are instead “wonders” whose visual essence has been transformed into an almost sublime, sea-like roar heard “in a seashell.” The experience Dickens describes here is self-evidently not that of one who “gets his impressions at once.” Dickens claims, moreover, that his spell of “idleness” will not be a foreshortened one, lasting from 9 May, when this letter was written, until at least the 25th. Close attention to the Pilgrim edition of Dickens’s letters confirms this: until he leaves Genoa on 9 June, not a great deal seems to happen. Several engagements are cancelled, the Dickenses’ cook decides to marry an Italian and settle there, Dickens arranges some home improvements in a letter to Thomas Mitton (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:302–20). As the letter to Lady Blessington predicts, the dominant mood remains one of relaxed meditation, conveyed perfectly in a letter to

Thomas Beard, dated 20 May 1845, in which Dickens writes, “There is a perfect forest of orange trees below the windows: which are now in blossom; and the air is sleepy with their fragrance” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:312). It is also worth mentioning that in a letter to Thomas Mitton written on 12 August 1844 during his earlier spell at Albaro, Dickens did not plan, at that point, to prolong his stay in Genoa so long. As he puts it in that letter, after returning to Genoa “at the end of Easter week [in 1845], I shall pick up the Caravan, and go straight to Paris: arranging to be there, if I can, by the end of April: and remain there, in a lodging, until about the Second week in June” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:177). Worn out after the exertions of his Italian tour, time spent relaxing at his palazzo seems to have become a more attractive option than the delights of Paris.

By considering together the varied tone of letters that were not carved up and adapted for final publication in *Pictures from Italy*, it is possible to see Dickens adopting not just a restless travelling persona, but also a more reflective one. The contradictory impulses presented in these letters are, moreover, an important context for thinking about the discontinuities in the narrative voice of the published account.⁸ A tension is created in the travel book, in fact, between the recreation of the reflective stasis Dickens experiences in Genoa and his accounts of the urgent activity of being on the road. On the one hand, much of the text is defined by a fairly linear kind of progress. We can see this at the level of its chapter headings: “Going *through* France,” for instance, or “*Through* Bologna and Ferrara” (my italics). Such an emphasis on travelling through places in *Pictures from Italy* reaches its climax in its closing chapter, “A Rapid Diorama.” The Greek composite roots of the word “diorama” mean “through” and “that which is seen.” Since the party is constantly “bound for” or on the way to another exciting sight as Dickens rattles through Naples, Pompeii, up Vesuvius, and onto Florence, this optical illusion device makes a particularly apt structuring motif for the chapter.

At the same time, however, other sections of the text are defined by a very different kind of movement, and this is especially true of the long chapter on Genoa. Dickens adopts another early moving picture device to categorize his experience of the city, calling it “A bewildering phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream, and all the pain and all the pleasure of an extravagant reality!” (Dickens 1998, 40). Yet little in this chapter speaks of a purposeful traveler with a definite destination in mind. Rather Dickens “loiters” to and fro (Dickens 1998, 36), and even though, as he puts it at one point, he “walk[s] on, and on,

and on,” he does so in a flaneur-like circuit around the place that allows him to describe things and people that catch his attention and appeal to his imagination (Dickens 1998, 40).

I would argue, indeed, that the chapter on Genoa, inflected as it is by the same relaxed spirit of the unpublished letters written from the city quoted earlier, is one of the most satisfying in *Pictures from Italy*. There is a strong sense, much less apparent in other chapters, that Dickens already knows the city well and, rather than being a somewhat detached tourist, is familiar with its daily sights and rhythms. As a result, his descriptions alight on particularly precise and striking details: “the voice of a young-lady vocalist, practising bravura lustily,” which “came flaunting out upon the silent evening” (Dickens 1998, 37), for instance, or the “solitary firefly [. . .] showing against the dark bushes like the last little speck of the departed Glory of the house” (Dickens 1998, 37–38). The dominant mood of the chapter, moreover, is a happily lazy and decaying one. This moldering decay does seem at points to distress him, especially in his description of the garden at Albaro, where “everything was green, gaunt, weedy, straggling, under-grown or over-grown, mildewy, damp” (Dickens 1998, 37). Yet aspects of such an environment also fascinate him, as he gazes with pleasure at another moment at the “perfect Italian cows enjoying the *dolce far niente* all day long” (Dickens 1998, 33), or later at the faded grandeur of Albaro’s “great villas” with their lightly comic “fountains, too dull to play and too lazy to work” that “have just enough recollection of their identity, in their sleep, to make the neighbourhood damp” (Dickens 1998, 34). It is true that at one point Dickens commends the people of Genoa for being “good-tempered, obliging and industrious” (Dickens 1998, 46). The calm, objective, and somewhat flat phrasing here, reminiscent of the practical guidebooks published by the likes of John Murray, is revealing. It shows that Dickens is not really deeply inspired by these Genovese qualities. He takes much more imaginative and specific interest instead in some of the city’s idlers. In one tableau, his attention lingers on the “group of loungers” typically found in its apothecaries’ shops, who are “so still and quiet, that either you don’t see them in the darkened shop, or mistake them [. . .], with a hat like a stopper—for horse medicine” (Dickens 1998, 45). This, moreover, is not an isolated example. In visiting Marseilles, Dickens is also quite taken by the spectacle of another idle man, a “corpulent hairdresser” who, on Dickens’s first acquaintance in the chapter “Avignon to Genoa,” enjoys “the gratification of the passers-by, with lazy

dignity” (Dickens 1998, 28) and then, once more in the excursion to Marseilles described in the Genoa chapter, is seen “still sitting in his slippers outside the shop door there” (Dickens 1998, 56).⁹

Elsewhere in *Pictures from Italy*, of course, we are given glimpses of a much more restless Dickens for whom, as he claims in one chapter, “it is such a delight [...] to leave new scenes behind, and still go on, encountering newer scenes” (Dickens 1998, 70). Dickens’s seemingly characteristic bursts of energy and activity come to the fore especially strongly in the published account of his visit to Rome. There, he categorizes his sightseeing in the city in the following terms:

[W]e went conscientiously to work, to see Rome. And, by dint of going out early every morning, and coming back late every evening, and labouring hard all day, I believe we made acquaintance with every post and pillar in the city.

(Dickens 1998, 170)

The successive mood of the extract’s syntax reinforces the fact that here the routine of a tourist is recast as work, and hard work at that. The end result of Dickens’s toiling travel, however, is disappointment rather than satisfying enrichment. He admits that the group had “in particular, explored so many churches, that I abandoned that part of the enterprise at last, before it was half finished, lest I should never, of my own accord, go to church again, as long as I lived” (Dickens 1998, 129). Because of a packed itinerary, and because of his hurried visits to so many churches, Dickens’s powers of perception have hit saturation point. He has been reduced, in fact, almost to the kind of English tourist that he satirizes in the form of Mrs. Davis, who Dickens doubts “ever saw anything, or ever looked at anything” (Dickens 1998, 129).

This is a point James Buzard also notices in his study *The Beaten Track* (1998), where he wryly claims that “There is no record of what Mrs Davis thought when she saw a certain English gentleman reappear wherever *she* went” (93). The humor of the lines from *Pictures from Italy* quoted above suggests that Dickens was not unaware of this fact, which is corroborated by looking closely at the relationship between published and letter accounts of his tourism in the city. The section on Mrs. Davis and her “company of English tourists” is taken almost verbatim from a letter to Lady Blessington dated 9 May 1845, yet in the letter there is no reference at all to Dickens’s own restless travelling (Dickens 1965–2002,

4:302–5). Their proximity in the *Pictures from Italy* version implies that Dickens was conscious of his fevered and ultimately unsatisfying activity being rather like Mrs. Davis's and also that he was able to submit it to gentle parody.

This kind of restless travelling is also at odds with the manner in which *Pictures from Italy* is predominantly written. The text forcefully distinguishes itself from the “mountain of printed paper” that has already been devoted to the study of Italy (Dickens 1998, 5). It is emphatically not a detailed or exhaustive travel guide in the manner of those published by John Murray in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Nor is it, as Dickens highlights, a learned or analytical “dissertation” on a “famous Picture or Statue” (Dickens 1998, 5). Instead, in his Introduction to the work, “The Reader’s Passport,” Dickens sketches out the determinedly personal and improvisational origins of the book: “The greater part of the descriptions were written on the spot, and sent home, from time to time, in private letters” (6). Stephen Bann (1997) labels the style of *Pictures from Italy* an “essentially artless, uncontrived mode of writing” (204). As Dickens less prosaically has it, the book can be imagined as a “series of faint reflections—mere shadows in the water” (Dickens 1998, 6). He explains,

If they have ever a fanciful and idle air, perhaps the reader will suppose them written in the shade of a Sunny Day, in the midst of the objects of which they treat, and will like them none the worse for having such influences of the country upon them.

(Dickens 1998, 6)

In her introduction to the Penguin edition of the text, Kate Flint claims that in *Pictures from Italy* Dickens often “finds his attention compulsively drawn to Italian decay, desolation and deformity” (Dickens 1998, xviii). It is true, as she continues to point out, that Dickens seems slightly disappointed by the more modern, businesslike side of Italy, for instance, “the long streets of commonplace shops and houses” (Dickens 1998, 116) to be found in parts of Rome and also the “cheerful, stirring” but not typically Italian streets in Parma (Dickens 1998, 66). He takes much more pleasure instead in the moldering, shabbily lazy scenes in Albaro and Genoa that I discussed earlier and also in such qualities in other towns and villages en route. One such place was Piacenza, and I want to bring this section to a close by discussing the potential meanings of some interesting

textual changes between his personal letter and the final published version of Dickens's account of the town.¹⁰

Dickens's impressions of Piacenza are first recorded in a letter to Catherine Dickens on 8 November 1844. They are of a fairly cursory sort: he tells his wife it is "a very grim, despondent sort of place" and leaves as soon as he can (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:214). In this letter, Dickens is also very evidently restless, perhaps uneasily so, as he claims, "My only comfort is, in Motion" (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:215). A very different picture of the town is given in final travel book form. The brief description he gives Catherine becomes a much more expansive paragraph on this "deserted, solitary, grass-grown place" (Dickens 1998, 65). More puzzling is the fact that much of the next paragraph is transcribed from a letter written to the Count D'Orsay not from Piacenza but from the Pink Jail in Genoa. Here, rather than feeling anxiously restless, Dickens, in a "strange, half-sorrowful and half-delicious doze," describes himself sinking temporarily into a kind of pleasurable ease. He writes,

I feel that I am getting rusty. That any attempt to think, would be accompanied with a creaking noise. That there is nothing, anywhere, to be done, or needing to be done. That there is no more human progress, motion, effort, or advancement, of any kind beyond this.

(Dickens 1998, 65)

So far as I have been able to discover, Dickens does not pass off descriptions of one place as accounts of another elsewhere in *Pictures from Italy*. It also seems unlikely that his memory was faulty since there is evidence in the Pilgrim edition that he had requested copies of letters sent to Count D'Orsay and Lady Blessington.¹¹ Ultimately, of course, it has to remain unclear precisely why he transposes a part of this particular letter about his rusty mood in Genoa to a description of Piacenza, a place in which another letter suggests he was especially restless. I would claim, though, that aside from the less interesting possibility that Dickens wanted to pad out the descriptive material in this chapter, this transposition gestures towards something more significant. The writerly pleasure he took in accounting for the lazy mood he experienced in Genoa was strong enough, as a kind of idle epiphany, to filter into his memories of another place entirely, and into his vision of the whole country.

“The idleness into which I have delightfully sunk”

With his novel writing, journal editing, amateur dramatics, and reading tours, amongst other things, Dickens faced several competing demands on his time during the 1850s and '60s. His ability to enjoy enriching repose in this period certainly does not reach the kind of pitch achieved during his time in Genoa during 1844 and 1845. But this is not to say that it disappears entirely.¹² Especially in letters documenting holidays spent in Boulogne between 1852 and 1854, Dickens often playfully describes his idle moments. One may easily counter, of course, that these three spells in Boulogne were very productive ones for Dickens. As W. J. Carlton (1966) puts it, “Here *Bleak House* and *Hard Times* were finished, a part of *Little Dorrit* was written and much of *A Child’s History of England* dictated to Georgina” (71). While this is undeniably true, it also only captures a part of Dickens’s time there. A letter to Collins dated 24 June 1853 shows that Dickens’s residence in Boulogne was a good place for him to work *and* to rest: “If you have anything to do, this is the place to do it in. And if you have nothing to do—this is also the place to do it in to perfection” (Dickens 1965–2002, 7:101). It is this pleasurable, healthy inactivity that makes Dickens’s correspondence to varied recipients in the summer of 1854 so engaging. Dickens seems to have spent much of his time relaxing in a kind of “half-delicious doze,” occasionally with a book in his hand. In a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell he makes the following admission: “I am dreadfully lazy (after finishing *Hard Times*), and lie so much on the grass, reading books and going to sleep, that I am afraid I observe a new illegibility in my handwriting?” (Dickens 1965–2002, 7:383). Dickens is similarly playful in a letter written to W. H. Wills only a few days later:

I will endeavour to come off my back (and the grass), to do an opening paper for the starting No. of North and South. I can’t positively answer for such a victory over the idleness into which I have delightfully sunk, as the achievement of this feat; but let us hope.

(Dickens 1965–2002, 7:384)

Doing nothing is here recast as a delight rather than something to be avoided at all costs. Dickens’s letter ends, in fact, with mock surprise at his ability even to correspond with his sub-editor: “I cannot sufficiently

admire my prodigious energy in coming out of a stupor to write this letter” (Dickens 1965–2002, 7:384).

There is a note of facetiousness about this, and in much of the Boulogne correspondence, so that it seems a kind of pose or comic performance of idleness. In *The Beaten Track*, James Buzard argues that

[A]nti-tourists or practitioners of the “romantic gaze” required the crowd they scorned and shunned. [. . .] Even celebrated moments of solitude (for example, in travel books) must be seen as in some measure *existing to be celebrated*.

(153)

Given that the letters to Maclise and Lady Blessington from Genoa were written with half an eye on later publication, a similar point can be made about them as serious and reflective epistolary performances. And, as I demonstrated earlier, the presentation of his restlessness shows strong elements of performance too. This penchant for performing in print is a side of Dickens that has been acknowledged before; in an essay on Dickens and autobiography, Jean Ferguson Carr (1985) calls Dickens “a chameleon actor who could assume new roles as frequently as he could change his signature from Boz to Bobadil to Joe to Sparkler” (447).

If we admit that both Dickens’s restlessness and potential for idleness are performances by a “chameleon actor,” it is perhaps surprising that his facility for repose as opposed to only constant action has been largely ignored up to now. To argue against the dominant view that Dickens was only ever restless, moreover, is not mere idle speculation. As well as countering received notions about the limited literary value of Dickens’s correspondence, it leads also to a reconsideration of Dickens’s attitude to lazy men in his life and his work. Relatively early on in the *Life*, Forster makes the intriguing claim that “Nor was there anything that exercised a greater fascination over Dickens than the grand enjoyment of idleness, the ready self-abandonment to the luxury of laziness, which we both so laughed at in Maclise” (1:104). Partly because it was a side of Dickens that Forster did not see, or partly perhaps because it was a side of him he chose to play down, Forster categorizes Dickens’s “grand enjoyment of idleness” as merely a “fascination.” But, as the letters discussed here show, Dickens does, on occasion, give himself up to “the luxury of laziness.” This tendency helps explain why he often seems unexpectedly to identify with idle men—men like Maclise, but also less

remembered, and less successful, figures like the sculptor Angus Fletcher or the literary critic Peter Cunningham.¹³ This aspect of Dickens's temperament also helps us better understand some of his literary characters, especially in his later career. The fact, for instance, that, in *Our Mutual Friend*, he seems to identify with the cynically idle lawyer Eugene Wrayburn is something that has often puzzled critics.¹⁴ A reading of the biographical evidence that stresses his ability to enjoy idleness provides a possible theory to explain this unexpected reversal of sympathy.

Given biographers' need to shape the varied events of his life into a cohesive pattern, it is also entirely understandable that Dickens's idle moments have been neglected. Some details are inevitably left out. Through discussion of one particular literary life, this essay has attempted to underline the more general difficulty of grasping the "whole truth" about a biographical subject. It has also highlighted the potential dangers—if perhaps rather inevitable ones—of giving in to what the biographer Richard Holmes (2002) calls "the novelistic urge" to "find[s] shape and meaning within the apparently random circumstances of a life" (16–17). Within the constraints of a speculative biographical essay, it has been much easier to resist that "urge" here. What has been reinforced instead is the very contradictoriness of Dickens's personality, astutely perceived in a statement by Edwin Pugh, an early twentieth-century Dickensian:

[T]here are already almost as many versions of the man Dickens as there are people who remember him in the flesh. I have talked with some of his contemporaries, and have been amazed at the diversity of their varying impressions of his personality.

(qtd. in Ackroyd 1001–2)

Dickens's potential for enjoying rest is, finally, just another of those "varying impressions."

Notes

1. It has also been considered by several notable biographically minded critics. In "The Homes and Haunts of Dickens," a little-known descriptive essay, George Gissing (2004) claims, "Never lived a more restless man" (1:55). Restlessness is read as a recurring trope in Steven Marcus's discussion of *Barnaby Rudge* in his *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (1965, 206). In *From*

Copyright to Copperfield (1987) Alexander Welsh suggests that “Dickens was hardly one to be idle in any circumstances” (10). Michael Slater’s *Charles Dickens* (2009), on the other hand, pays plenty of attention to Dickens’s “extraordinary dynamism” (xiv), but uses Dickens’s writing life rather than his restless energy to structure its account.

2. Two full-length studies, numerous journal articles, and passing references in more general critical works have explored the connection between the two writers in some detail. See Goldberg (1972), Oddie (1972), Kenney (1970), and Thomas (1975).

3. Forster (1980) stresses this facet of Dickens elsewhere in his biography. He claims, for instance, that “his ‘doing nothing’ was seldom more than a figure of speech” (2:238).

4. See, for instance, the light-hearted note of surprise in an 1845 letter to John Forster about his cook, who had decided “that she was not going to return to England, but intended to be married, and to settle here [in Italy]!!!” (Dickens 1965–2002, 4:306).

5. The general multiplicity of Dickens’s epistolary voices has been noted by Rosemarie Bodenheimer: “His letters to an enormous range of other acquaintances display his unlimited novelistic ability to create different voices for different correspondents and different situations” (2006, 49).

6. See Houghton 1957, 245 and Danahay 2005, 7.

7. David Paroissien (1973) discusses them, for instance, in the introduction to his edition of the text (11–12).

8. In analyzing *Pictures from Italy* John Drew (2003) also notices “the discontinuities in the traveller’s persona, a flexible and at times troubled entity built up from the successive revisions of personal letters to different readers, who does not always handle the change from grave to gay with the assurance of the London-based ‘Boz,’ as early reviewers noted” (89).

9. Dickens’s surprising fascination with other idlers is suggestively discussed by Trotter (1996). In the *Life* Forster also describes the wry interest Dickens takes in another “old idle Frenchman” in Naples in his later visit to Italy in 1853 (2:137).

10. Dickens wrote home “travelling letters” to a number of correspondents, planning to use them later in published, travel-book form. Some were initially published serially in the *Daily News*, which Dickens edited between 1845 and 1846, and then in volume form as *Pictures from Italy*. For more on the complicated composition and publication history of *Pictures from Italy*, see the thorough introduction in David Paroissien’s 1973 edition of the text (Dickens, 19–34).

11. This correspondence, dated 1 March 1846, is reprinted in Dickens 1965–2002, 4:510.

12. Even during the restless activity of the 1860s when Dickens was giving his public readings, we get glimpses of his idle side, especially during

summers spent at Gad's Hill Place. In a letter to Captain E. E. Morgan, dated 6 July 1863, he mentions "a favourite spot of mine, between this [Gad's Hill] and Maidstone, where I often smoke your cigars and think of you. We often take our lunch on a hill-side there, in the summer, and then I lie down on the grass—a splendid example of laziness—and say 'Now for my Morgan!'" (Dickens 1965–2002, 10:268).

13. Fletcher's early career was a seemingly active one: he completed busts of Dickens, Felicia Hemans, Joanna Baillie, and William Wordsworth and exhibited at the Royal Academy from 1831 to 1839 (Dickens 1965–2002, 1:514n). In later life he was known predominantly for his eccentricity; despite the apparent lack of application to his work, Forster claims that Fletcher's "unfitness for an ordinary career was, perhaps, the secret of such liking for him as Dickens had" (1:153). Cunningham was a writer whose early promise was blighted by what Forster euphemistically calls "his relish of social life"; "His presence," nevertheless, "was always welcome to Dickens" (2:130).

14. As Juliet John interestingly notes in *Dickens's Villains* (2001), this problem is not resolved straightforwardly by Dickens's recuperation for a life of responsibility and hard graft: "Far from negating his own Byronism, or nobly thwarting the conventions of society, for example, Eugene's decision to marry Lizzie is clouded by his uncertainty and dubious though well-meaning motives" (195).

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