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Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and the Spirit of the American Place

Abstract: A map of travel writing from antiquity to the Victorian age opens this reflection on the distinction between quest and travel, as two modes existing within the same genre, which yet can harbour a variety of discourses, ranging from letters to autobiography, from satire and fantasy to the scientific account and the Baedeker style. However, despite the many narrative masks adopted by travel writing, and the essential ambiguity its literary discourse may adopt, it can be argued that quest and travel can still be seen as bearing distinct features, inasmuch as the personality and the final aims of the traveller provide elements of response to the place visited that dispel the ambiguity of the genre. In the XIX century, history, culture, aesthetics and visual culture enhance the traveller's response to the spirit of the place. Charles Dickens's *American Notes* and Anthony Trollope's *North America*, respectively published in 1842 and 1862, while accounting for the writers' experience in the United States, are remarkably dissimilar. My contention is that in Dickens's case the travelogue takes the shape and nature of a quest: a journey that had started under the best auspices ended up in bitter disappointment as the writer did not compromise with local newspapers on his plea for international copyright; Dickens's American experience is loaded with spectral images that make it nightmarish and, on the whole, unpleasant. For Trollope, who started with the best intentions to provide readers with plenty of information, the place proves ungraspable, unmanageable, despite pages of figures and tables of products, prices, values. In Trollope's case, for different reasons, the spirit of the place instigates a kind of response that produces, instead of the best possible travel book, an unwieldy documentary account of the United States in 1862.

Keywords: travel writing, classics, Victorians, United States, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope

Quest or Travel: A Map from Antiquity

Quest or travel? The aim of the present essay is to illustrate the nature of two remarkably different representations of the United States, namely *American Notes. For General Circulation* (1842) by Charles Dickens, and *North America* (1862) by Anthony Trollope. At a certain point in their lives, those two eminent Victorian writers of fiction wrestled with a different genre, the travel book, with results, I suggest, that offer a prismatic view not only of the places Dickens and Trollope visited within the cultural-historical context of the age, but also of the capability of such a traditional genre to enclose, relate and illuminate the response of the visitor to the spirit of the place. Inasmuch as they reveal the authors' deeply divergent attitudes, these two books about the United States may be viewed as either a "quest" or a "travel book."

In *Kinds of Literature. An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Alastair Fowler reminds us that "Ambiguity of literary status is confined to a few genres Especially letters and travel books" (11). In his study of early travels between 1500 and 1720, William H. Sherman includes figures as different as errant knights, merchants, explorers, colonisers, and remarks that "early modern travel writing was so varied that it may not even be appropriate to describe it as a single genre" (30). Travel books indeed had been offering the kind of literary discourse that would easily metamorphose into autobiography, into letters, into satire, as well as into the scientific account, and, later on, the Baedeker genre. Such forms, however, despite the ambiguity that tended to conceal the primary theme of the travel account, had an ancient aristocratic lineage. This is the element that, even today, allows to draw a distinction between quest and travel. Travels bordering on the quest mode could boast of famous ancestors, such as Homer's *Odyssey* and Vergil's *Aeneid*, John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), but also recent classics like Frank Lyman Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again* (1937), Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972). What these texts share is the mantra "there is no place like home" voiced by young Dorothy in Baum's masterpiece—whether it be the original home motivating the hero's return, or the attempt at finding and founding a new home, be it even a symbolic country of the mind. Such quests involve a challenge, and as a result imply self-discovery. To attain a new home means to accomplish a personal, sometime a collective, goal. In a general way it could be maintained that in quests the focus is on the protagonist, rather than on the territory explored. On the contrary, in travel books the focus insists on the territory, rather than on the traveller: with all the exceptions and oscillations determined by history, cultural context, fashion.

The Latin poet Horace in his fifth satire described his journey from Rome to Brundisium (Brindisi) along the Appian Way. Published in 36 or 35 BC, besides dwelling on practical events occurring during the journey, this travelogue acknowledged established modes of travel writing, varying between the visual or picturesque variety, mostly set on description, or the politico / historical kind, relating military feats leading to conquest and exploitation (Jensen). In Horace's wake, other classical travelogues, such as Pausanias's *Greciae Descriptio*, (*Ἑλλάδος περιήγησις*, II century AD), would spawn a number of followers within the XVIII century neoclassical mode: Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy, &c. in the Years 1701, 1702, 1703* (1705); Daniel Defoe's *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–1727); Samuel Johnson's *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1755); Henry Fielding's *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (1755); Tobias Smollett's *Travels Through France and Italy* (1765). These texts share the author's commitment to giving a realistic account of the journey, with plenty of useful details, travel itinerary, geographical features.

The success of the genre in the XVIII century provides the focus to Charles L. Batten jr.'s *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-century Travel Literature*. Batten highlights the complex relationship between novel writing and travel writing. When the novel was considered a low and vulgar genre and looked upon with suspicion, the classic illustrious ancestors of the travel book would lend it greater dignity of literary status. "Pleasurable instruction," almost literally Horace's "prodesse et delectare," was the recipe followed by travel book authors who favoured authenticity, in opposition against the romances and fantastic voyages of past accounts; they recommended order, as the account had to follow the stages of the journey; they focussed on the objects observed rather than on the observer; and followed in their description a hierarchy of topics, such as character, custom, religion, government, police, commerce, arts and antiquities. Such hierarchy was also recommended by Bishop Tucker's *Instructions for Travellers* (1757) and Leopold Berchtold's *Essay to Direct and Extend the Inquiries of Patriotic Travelers* (1789). It could be added that the "delectare" or pleasurable kind of account aimed at pleasing and entertaining the reader, eliciting a moral-aesthetic response, comes closer in kind to a quest; whereas the "prodesse," or instructive kind of narration, appears as the travel book keyword, offering reliable descriptions and useful information.

During the second half of the XVIII century, the mood changes, as Archibald Alison's theory of psychological associations sets stronger focus on the feelings, involuntary memories and emotions of the traveller, as in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768).

According to Sterne, travellers can be classified as idle, inquisitive, lying, proud, vain, splenetic; indeed, Sterne is the initiator of a kind of travel book that moves away from Samuel Johnson's definition of travel as "science connected with events" (Batten 46). Sterne's sentimental traveller is rather bent on his subjective response to the environment, so that the topographic account elicits his response, as a depository of images that stimulate at once impressions and memories, and thus lend to the text a quality that is imaginative, psychological, visual and spectral, rather than realistic. Features that might be seen and yet are missing, traces of losses and empty spaces quicken the writer's imagination and feed his response to what appears to be the spirit of the place. In addition, another important element that will increasingly stimulate subjective response to place is generated by the new emphasis on visual perception and the visual experience of the traveller. Reverend William Gilpin, who defined the nature of picturesque beauty in his *Observations on the River Wye: and several parts of South Wales, &c. relative chiefly to picturesque beauty; made in the summer of the year 1770* (1782), gave practical implementation to the aesthetic theory he had devised with his *Dialogue on the Gardens at Stowe* (1748); in Gilpin's wake, Richard Payne Knight would suggest that the category of picturesqueness depended on personal sensibility and on the optical nerve of the viewer, thus moving away from Gilpin's stern formalism to aesthetically upgrade the romantic, moral, subjective and idealist appreciation of landscape (Orestano 2010; Orestano 2012). The emphasis on visual perception, verbally translated into the genre of the sketch (Sha), would also mould and characterize Dickens's early writings, from his *Sketches by Boz. Illustrative of Everyday Life and Every-day people* (1836), to *Pickwick Papers* (1837), in which Mr Pickwick is "the great traveller ... whose fondness for the beauties of nature even led him to penetrate to the very borders of Wales in the height of summer" (*Pickwick Papers*, p. V). *American Notes*, of which more later, is greatly indebted to Victorian mass-visual culture, as Dickens deploys the many techniques of the observer that make retinal perception relevant although unreliable: a kind of useless tool for the pen of the informed traveller, but a useful device when the writer's deepest feelings, fears and desires, are triggered and brought into light (Crary).

Describing the New World: Practical Travelogues and Political Issues

After the revolution, which marked American independence, and the Anglo-American War of 1812–1814, exchange between the United States and England became more and more frequent. Several travel books did follow

the utilitarian mode: Thomas Cooper's *Some Information Respecting America* (1794), Joseph Pickering's *Inquiries of an Emigrant, being a Narrative of an English Farmer During the Year 1824–1830*, Isaac Fiddler's *Observations on Professions, Literature, Manners, and Emigration in the United States and Canada* (1833), clearly catered for a wave of immigrants (emigrants, when seen from the opposite shore of the Atlantic), providing the potential settlers with practical information. The American federation, its climate, soil, products, laws and religion, were described by William Cobbett in *A Year's Residence in the United States of America* (1818), and by Basil Hall in *Travels in North America in the Years 1827 and 1828* (1829). The mother of Anthony Trollope, Frances Trollope, recorded her unsavoury impressions of society in *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832); whilst Fanny Kemble's *Journal* (1839), Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* (1833) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838), and James Silk Buckingham's *America. The Northern and the Free States* (1841) were less prone to criticism. The political bias would influence Tory writer Frederick Marryat, whose *Diary in America* (1839) was admittedly written "to do serious injury to the cause of democracy" (*The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. III, p. VIII). Whilst the travelogues that were produced to ease the immigrants' settling in the new world could be seen as endorsing, just in parts, the nature of a quest, other descriptions rather partook of the travel book genre, offering a well-documented account of the United States.

Boz in America

On January 4th, 1842, a very young Dickens leaves for America, with his wife Catherine, having already stipulated a contract with Chapman and Hall for a travel book on the United States. He will send his letters to John Forster, and to a few other friends, and compose the manuscript of *American Notes* on his return to England. Like the conscientious travellers of the past, Dickens is equipped with guides and travel books, many already quoted. His strong expectations are those of a radical writer, and an admirer of American democracy (Ledger). In addition to this, his purpose is to promote international copyright: an act of justice towards many English writers, such as Walter Scott and himself, as their books are being regularly pirated by the American newspapers. After a perilous crossing, the first place Dickens visits is Boston. Here the report is about public institutions—hospital, orphanage, lunatic asylum, prison—and full of praise for the United States. Near Boston he appreciates the Lowell factory, where girls seem to be treated in a very civilized way and even have a magazine of their own, *The Lowell Offering*; he dwells at length on the Perkins Institute for the Blind,