RHIANNON EVANS

The W.H. Allen Memorial Lecture is an annual lecture held at Ormond College to commemorate the life and work of Barney Allen (1875-1949), who was a teacher of Classics, Vice-Master at Ormond College and the first secretary of the Classical Association of Victoria, as well as its second president—a combined service to the CAV of 37 years.

Charles Dickens is not usually associated with Classical antiquity: instead his novels and essays are easily read as works which promote modernity and progressive reform. His first trip abroad was to North America in 1842, rather than to the older civilisations of Europe; and Dickens scholars tend to emphasise his interest in social justice and Italian unification movements – in other words the future, rather than the past. But in his first publication on travels to France, Switzerland and Italy, it is the Colosseum, that most iconic ancient Roman monument which immediately captures his attention. In a letter to a friend in January 1845 he writes, ‘I have been to St. Peter’s, and to the Coliseum (sic). The former struck me of course, immensely. But the latter is the great sensation. And I never can forget it.’ (Letters 4.258)

These comments on the Colosseum mirror those which Dickens makes elsewhere, but his writing on the Vatican is often far less generous. As we shall see, he was much more outspoken in the travelogue he published the following year, Pictures from Italy. Here he claims that he returns to the Colosseum on a daily basis, and on this same first encounter with the Colosseum in the Pictures from Italy he writes, ‘Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Coliseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one’s heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. GOD be thanked: a ruin!’ (Pictures from Italy 118).

Dickens’ approach to Roman civilisation is quite different to that taken by other nineteenth century publications, such as travelogues and guidebooks, and it is one which primarily involves a direct and emotional response to antiquity, rather than an attempt to contextualize monuments historically. Although he does here mention the amphitheatre’s ‘bloodiest prime’, the reference to the past is allusive rather than precise. It is interesting to compare his comments with some contemporary British writing on Rome. There is no mention in the Pictures from Italy for example of why the Colosseum is a ruin, largely because it was being quarried for stone until the eighteenth century; nineteenth century guidebooks nearly always mention the fact, so it would have been known to Dickens. Notably, the Colosseum often elicits both wonder and horror in the nineteenth century, given its unquestioned, but almost certainly incorrect, association with Christian persecution. For Dickens, it does bring to mind the savagery of Roman spectacle—hence his response: ‘GOD be thanked: a ruin!’ But he never mentions martyrdom in the arena, while two other significant publications of the time take Christian deaths in this location for granted. Charlotte Anne Eaton, whose Rome in the Nineteenth Century was a bestseller, republished many times wrote that the Colosseum was:

deep in blood...well may we call this amphitheatre the School of Cruelty!... the enlightened Romans seem to have enjoyed the exquisitely gratifying spectacles of wild beasts tearing to pieces condemned malefactors, or innocent Christians exposed defenceless to their rage...human nature can scarcely bear to picture a situation of such overpowering horror, or adequately estimate the invincible constancy and sublime fortitude of those who voluntarily supported its tremendous tortures.

1 Eaton (1826), 290-91.
During the persecution of the Christians the amphitheatre was the scene of fearful barbarities. In the reign of Trajan, St. Ignatius was brought from Antioch purposely to be devoured by wild beasts in the Colosseum.²

The Flavian Amphitheatre, famous for its triumphs and spectacles, dedicated to the gods of a pagan people with their unholy cult, redeemed from vile superstition by the blood of the martyrs. So that the memory of their fortitude was not destroyed Pope Benedict XVI, in the jubilee of 1750, the tenth year of his papacy, had rendered in marble words originally painted on the walls by Pope Clement X in the jubilee of 1675, which had disappeared through the effects of time.

The Murray guide was the English language guide book at this period, and considered itself the superior guide—a culturally and historically-informed publication, quoting literary figures, particularly Byron, widely. Dickens was disparaging of guidebook use, but we know from his letters that he ordered several Murray guides before his trip of 1844–5, and still had some of them in his library at his death. In addition it has been argued that he must have made use of the guides to Italy, as he follows exactly the itinerary which Murray lays out for travel in that region.³

Through guide books, if not from other sources, Dickens must have been familiar with accounts of martyrdom in the Colosseum, but chose not to write on it, largely because the narrative of Christian deaths in the arena had already been coopted by the Catholic church.

The Catholic church’s association with the Colosseum had been gradually growing since the sixteenth century; in the eighteenth century it had been granted status as a sacred space, and thus saved from further quarrying. By the nineteenth century the fact that cruelty in the amphitheatre was now so strongly associated with the papacy made it difficult for Dickens to comment on it, as throughout the Pictures from Italy he is unswervingly hostile to Catholicism, characterising its stance as reactionary, a force which is holding Italy back, and its ritual as empty theatrics:

On Sunday, the Pope assisted in the performance of High Mass at St. Peter’s. The effect of the Cathedral on my mind, on that second visit, was exactly what it was at first, and what it remains after many visits—A large space behind the altar, was fitted up with boxes, shaped like those at the Italian Opera in England, but in their decoration much more gaudy. In the centre of the kind of theatre thus railed off, was a canopied dais with the Pope’s chair upon it. The pavement was covered with a carpet of the brightest green; and what with this green, and the intolerable reds and crimsons, and gold borders of the hangings, the whole concern looked like a stupendous Bonbon. (PI 118f.)

His anti-Catholicism frequently results in a preference for antiquity, and the fault line often falls along the perceived falseness of the Catholic church, which he contrasts with the authenticity of the ancients. To Dickens, Catholic churches are gaudy theatre spaces and St. Peter’s interior is full of stage images, and in keeping with this Catholic ritual is staged, empty show, the mere ‘performance of Mass’, and when the Pope is borne around the basilica in his chair, Dickens thinks ironically of the fifth of November and the stuffed effigy of Guy

² Murray (1843), 49. Eusebius actually says he ‘was sent to Rome and became food for wild beasts’ (Hist. Eccl. 3.36), but does not mention the Colosseum.

³ McNees (2007), 217.
Dickens arrived in Rome at Easter, and Holy week is dismissed as ‘these shows’. In fact the festivities drive Dickens to ‘the Ruins again’, while the papal ritual of reconstructing the Last Supper is described as though it were a play being performed. And this in turn is compared with the ‘reality’ of Pagan Rome, as Dickens escapes the mêlée of Easter Sunday at St. Peter’s by turning to the Pantheon, which he describes as ‘majestic…all seamed and furrowed like an old face’. (PI 159). The Pantheon is serene and reliably aged, in contrast with yet another scathing indictment of St. Peter’s, whose very architectural form seems frenzied, in turmoil. To some degree it is surprising that the language of performance and artificiality is often used by Dickens to undermine Catholicism, as Dickens was interested in drama and staged several productions himself. However it’s the type of performance which seems to matter to Dickens. His first trip to Rome is framed by Italian ritual—the rituals of Easter as he’s about to leave, and of Carnival as he arrives in late January 1845. He clearly approves of the latter, seeing it as spontaneous, democratic and honest; and he likes the theory that Carnival, particularly its ‘closing ceremony’, the snuffing out of candles or Moccoletti, may be what he calls ‘a remnant of the ancient Saturnalia’, using the Roman festival which reversed roles, in order to emphasise the status levelling qualities of the Carnival. This of course suggests again a preference for ancient over modern practices in Italy. Perhaps to reinforce this link, in referring to the Carnival and the Moccoletti he uses a similar expression of excitement to that he had used for the Colosseum ‘I shall never forget its innocent vivacity’ (PI 128 compare ‘I never can forget it’ in the letter, above, on the Colosseum).

When Dickens left Rome in April 1845, it was ‘the old ruined Rome’ to which he returned with a checklist of ancient monuments filling his final moments in the city, and predictably, the Colosseum is singled out, and has to be personally farewelled: By way of contrast [to the fireworks and ceremonies of Holy week] we rode out into old ruined Rome, after all this firing and booming, to take our leave of the Coliseum. I had seen it by moonlight before (I could never get through a day without going back to it), but its tremendous solemnities that night is past all telling. The ghostly pillars in the Forum; the Triumphal Arches of Old Emperors; those enormous masses of ruins which were once their palaces; the grass-grown mounds that mark the graves of ruined temples; the stones of the Via Sacra, smooth with the tread of feet in ancient Rome; even these were dimmed, in their transcendent melancholy, by the dark ghost of its bloody holidays, erect and grim; haunting the old scene; despoiled by pillaging Popes and fighting Princes, but not laid; wringing wild hands of weed, and grass, and bramble; and lamenting to the night in every gap and broken arch—the shadow of its awful self, immovable! (PI 161)

This is at the very end of the ‘Rome’ section of Pictures from Italy, a fitting conclusion to Dickens’ visit. But it is clear that Dickens’ relationship with ancient Rome was already developed before he had set foot in the city: Rome’s ruins are what he anticipated as he entered Rome and at end of the previous section ‘To Rome’, he was disappointed as he approached the city and saw no ruins at all. In fact he described the ‘Eternal City’ as looking ‘like London!!!’—more exclamation marks than anywhere else in the work (PI 115). He approached Rome from the north, on the Via Flaminia and thus saw none of the remains of antiquity and complains, ‘There were no great ruins, no solemn tokens of antiquity, to be seen’ (PI 116). Like others Dickens had come to Rome with a preconceived idea of the city he would find. William Hazlitt, whose books were in Dickens’ personal library, also records his disappointment, claiming that ‘[n]o one from being in it would know he was in the place that had been twice mistress of the world…you are lost, for the most part, in a mass of tawdry, fulsome common-places.’ Both Dickens and Hazlitt object to post-antique Rome as unexpected and vulgar. ‘What has a green-grocer’s stall…a putrid trattoria…to do with ancient Rome? No! this is not the wall that Romulus leaped over: this is not the Capitol where Julius Caesar fell’ exclaims Hazlitt, confusing both the Capitol with the Theatre of Pompey, and Romulus with Remus!5

One of the problems, perhaps is that images of Rome available to travellers before their departure tended to show monuments in isolation, outside of the everyday existence of nineteenth century Romans. For example, Charlotte Eaton’s frontpiece, 4 Elsewhere, Dickens makes clear that he is no fan of the baroque, and in his visits to museums and churches with artworks, he condemns anything which is not classical or neoclassical (PI 144-48).

5 Hazlitt (1826), 279.
although it does include contemporary Romans, displays them in an idealised and stylized fashion. There is no real impression of the hustle and bustle of a living city. We should also note that Eaton’s list of contents for Rome is dominated by ancient monuments, as though nothing else exists in Rome.

Dickens was not really playing the same game with the past; he did not have a strong Classical education, and this is probably why many Dickens scholars tend to ignore Classical references in his work. However, he is clearly caught up in the same kind of discourse, which privileges the aged and ruined over the modern and complete monument.

Dickens’ disdain for guidebooks was based in his preference for an immediate and unaffected response to Roman ruins. A guidebook selects and makes judgments for the traveller, and Dickens objected to the authoritarianism of following the book’s dictates. His attitude is most entertainingly seen in way he treats the subject in his novel of 1857, *Little Dorrit*, which was written after his second visit to Rome in 1853. It is a novel of two distinct halves: at first set in a debtor’s prison, the Marshalsea where ‘Little’ Dorrit (Amy)’s father is imprisoned, where Amy is born and where her whole family lives for two decades, until the Dorrits are found to have a fortune of which they knew nothing. The second half of the novel throws them into aristocratic circles and enables them to travel on the continent, where Mr Dorrit is keen to bury his disgraceful past, and he hires a woman called ‘Mrs General’ to educate Amy in the ways of the wealthy. One of Mrs General’s obsessions is guide books, particularly John Eustace’s *A Classical Tour through Italy* and she constantly refers to this. Before the Murray guide was published, Eustace was the standard guide, but Dickens despised it; he did own a copy, but he wrote that he bought it ‘that I might lay my hand upon an instance or two of his worthlessness’ (*Letters* 8.196).

When Mrs General consults it in Rome, she is described as ‘scratching up the dryest little bones of antiquity …like a Ghoule in gloves’ (*LD* 639). This is obviously a model of how not to respond to ancient Rome, by treating it as a dead, dry subject.

Amy responds in a quite different way: she was happy in the Marshalsea prison and has trouble engaging
with Italy and the family’s new social position, until reaches Rome. The rest of Italy does not seem ‘real’ to her (LD 488), but Rome merges with her old life, quite literally, as without a guidebook, she goes out, alone to visit:

the ruins of old Rome. The ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old tombs, besides being what they were to her, were ruins of the old Marshalsea – ruins of her own old life – ruins of the faces and forms that of old peopled it – ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys. Two ruined spheres of action and suffering were before the solitary girl often sitting on some broken fragment; and in the lonely places, under the blue sky, she saw them both together. (LD 639)

Amy empathises with ruins, and they become one with her ruined past - it is only when she sees its antiquity that Italy becomes real to Amy. Like the terrible poverty of her life in the prison, the ancient past was far from perfect, but the loss of both is bemoaned, and it is clear that what has replaced it is inferior in spirit. The other Dorrits, her father and siblings, embrace their new wealth and the glamorous but shallow connections it buys. However, their lives are far from happy for it, and on his second visit to Rome the two realities of his rich new life and his past in the Marshalsea merge for the self-deluded Mr Dorrit. Shortly before the collapse which leads to his death, he hallucinates that he is still in the gaol while he is actually at an elaborate dinner party. It is in fact a gaol which he has never left in his mind and which the Dorrits will carry with them forever. Amy’s ability to remember the Marshalsea through Rome’s monuments makes her the stronger character: she will survive and flourish by the novel’s end. Rome and its ruins are an important metaphor in the novel—they represent what is solid, real and worth cultivating. Rome is also important instrumentally: its faded nobility is in sympathy with the main character, who is isolated as many Dickens heroes and heroines are, and her relationship with Roman antiquity leads her to deeper understanding of her own past.
For Dickens, Italy was a place of extremes, and the remains of ancient Rome encompass these contrasts in solid form: they represent a compelling, but derelict past, which has given way to a stagnant present, held back by Catholic superstition. Antiquity is useful in this critique, as it provides an alternative world, against which the present can be judged. In both *Pictures from Italy* and *Little Dorrit*, the ancient past needs to be embraced, so that the present can be understood and future improvement made possible.

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Bibliography


