PICTURES FROM ITALY

Charles Dickens

Analysis by Valérie Tosi

Travelogue

Charles Dickens's *Pictures From Italy* is a travelogue published in 1846. In the chapter 'A rapid diorama', the author narrates his account of an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in winter 1845. The view of the eruption triggers a reflection on the Sublime, while Dickens's figurative language ‘domesticates’ and dramatises the geological uncanny.

Year of Publication	1846
Publication Place	London
Editor	Bradbury & Evans
Entity	1845 eruption of Vesuvius

GEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Volcanic eruption 1845 eruption of Vesuvius

REAL EVENT

Time	1845
Location	Campania Italy
Coordinates	40.821360, 14.426208
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base
Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Explosive, Effusive
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Caldera
Anthropization Level	Cities, Towns, Villages

Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape

"nel mese di febbraio del 1845, il cono interno si era di tanto innalzato, che il suo vertice, superando gli orli del cratere, era visibile dalla città di Napoli" 'In the month of February 1845, the inner cone had risen so much that its summit, overtopping the rim of the crater, was visible from the city of Naples' (Baratta, Il Vesuvio 140; my trans.)

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Charles Dickens
Age	33
Gender	Male
Nationality	English
Reactions	Calm

Reactions

Name	Charles Dickens
Age	33
Gender	Male
Nationality	English
Reactions	Astonishment, Euphoria

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Travellers
Reactions	Calm

Affects/Reactions

Name	Travellers
Reactions	Astonishment, Euphoria

Volcanic eruption 1845 eruption of Vesuvius

LITERARY EVENT

Time	February 21, 1845
Location	Campania Italy
Impacted Areas	the volcano's base

Emphasis Phase	Disaster (phenomenal and social dynamics)
Base/Complex	Volcanic complex Somma-Vesuvius
Volcanic Risk Ref.	Referenced

Typology	Emission Of Lava, Ash Rainfall, Volcanic Bombs, Gases
Volcano/Eruption Typology	Terrestrial, Stratovolcano
Anthropization Level	Cities, Towns, Villages
Ecological Impacts	Changes In The Volcano's Shape

INDIVIDUAL REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Charles Dickens
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Heroism, Awareness, Wonder, Curiosity, Fascination, Awe

Reactions

Name	Charles Dickens
Age	Adult
Gender	Male
Native Place	England
Nationality	English
Reactions	Heroism, Fascination, Astonishment, Wonder, Curiosity, Irony

COLLECTIVE REACTIONS & AFFECTS

Attitudes

Name	Tourists
Reactions	Awareness, Wonder, Curiosity, Fascination, Awe

Affects/Reactions

Name	Tourists
Reactions	Heroism, Fascination, Astonishment, Wonder, Curiosity

LINGUISTIC & STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Keywords	City Of The Dead, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Ghostly Ruins, Charles Dickens, Genius Loci, Picturesque, Sublime
Metaphors	"the Hell of boiling fire" (421)
Similes	"as if the earth had been ploughed up by burning thunderbolts" (Dickens 419) "as if they were toiling to the summit of a antediluvian Twelfth-cake" (419) "red-hot stones and cinders, that fly up into the air like feathers, and fall down like lead" (420)
Motifs, Topoi, Mythologemes	Locus Horridus, Locus Amoenus, Hell, Fire, Death, Ruins, Thunder
Syntax	Parataxis, Complex Noun Phrases, High Frequency Connectives
Punctuation	Multiple Semicolons, Multiple Exl, Multiple Colons, Multiple Commas, High Frequency Punctuation Marks
Morphology	Preference For Nouns Adjectives

In the summer of 1844, Charles Dickens decided to take a break from writing novels and set out on an extended trip through Italy with his family. Impressed by the stunning landscapes and the swift succession of monuments and new sights, he recorded his observations and experiences in his travelogue *Pictures from Italy*, first published in 1846. In the Introduction, titled “The Reader’s Passport”, Dickens states that “This book is a series of faint reflections – mere shadows in the water – of places to which the imagination of most people are attracted in a greater or less degree” (259). His ‘pictures’ or sketches can be defined “impressionistic, subjective rather than objective, filtered through his own consciousness, his own focalization as traveller-narrator” (Wales 22). Indeed, his cultural background, sociopolitical view, and aesthetic sensitivity shaped his travelogue, leading Joseph Phelan to coin the term “new picturesque” to define Dickens’s “humanitarian impulse” (120) and ineradicable feeling of moral and social obligation to the objects of the picturesque gaze.

The XI chapter, titled “A Rapid Diorama” begins with a journey through ‘the Campagna’, the Pontine Marshes, and Neapolitan towns, until Naples itself and Mount Vesuvius – with its “cone and summit withened with snow” (411) – come into view. First, Dickens describes the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii in vivid detail, creating a sense of intimacy with the historical past, which is preserved in art, inscriptions, petrified human remnants and everyday objects; in the second part of the chapter, he narrates a night excursion on Vesuvius on the night of 21st February 1845.

On the way towards Vesuvius and Sorrento, Dickens notes that “over doors and archways, there are countless little images of San Gennaro, with his Canute’s hand stretched out, to check the fury of the Burning Mountain” (414). Dickens recalls the celebrated miracle of the saint’s blood, said to liquefy three times a year, and describes the image of San Gennaro stretching out his hand – like King Canute during a violent tempest – to restrain the nature’s fury. The comparison is pointedly ironic: just as Canute could not halt the tide, San Gennaro cannot stop a volcanic eruption. The miracle, for Dickens, is less a proof of divine power than a vivid expression of local belief, which he treats with a mixture of fascination and satire. The saint’s presence thus becomes emblematic of Naples itself: a city of beauty and danger, piety and superstition, always living in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius.

By defining the present Pompeii as a "new City of the Dead" (415), an epithet also used by Sir Walter Scott and Edward Bulwer-Lytton (Harrison 82), Dickens suggests that the city's identity will always be shaped by its ruins. Moreover, he maintains that Vesuvius is "more awful and impressive […] viewed from the ghostly ruins of Herculaneum and Pompei" (415), unveiling how heritage sites – and historical memory – influence the perception and of natural entities and their impression in the individual and collective imagination.

The following passage deserves consideration, since it involves the reader both visually and emotionally:

Stand at the bottom of the great market-place of Pompeii, and look up the silent streets through the ruined temples of Isis and Jupiter, over the broken houses […] away to Mount Vesuvius, bright and snowy in the peaceful distance; and lose all count of time […] in the strange and melancholy sensation of seeing the Destroyer and the Destroyed make this quite picture in the sun. (416)

This long, complex sentence is addressed to a compliant reader-traveler who is willing to let himself be guided by Dickens's knowledge and expertise in the (real or imaginary) exploration of the Vesuvian landscape. The guide-narrator offers suggestions to feel the *genius loci* and fully immerse in a timeless atmosphere where the sense of past, present and future is shaped by the relationship between the mighty volcanic mountain and the 'tiny' human beings. By using imperatives and **prepositional phrases** to direct the observer's gaze, Dickens engages the reader in a virtual tour of the area surrounding the volcano. The metaphorical pair "the Destroyed and the Destroyer" refers to the social destruction caused by Vesuvius and its devastating force, adding philosophical depth to the scene.

The image of the mountain, "bright and snowy in the peaceful distance" echoes Bulwer-Lytton's early description of Vesuvius, "dark and tranquil in the distance" in his 1834 novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Vol. I, 97). Even though Dickens and Bulwer-Lytton's portrayals of Vesuvius are clashing in terms of brightness and colour – due to Vesuvius's different appearance in winter and summer –, both authors consider the 'distance' between the volcano and the observer a fundamental element to enjoy its picturesque beauty. Other elements in Dickens's "A Rapid Diorama" seem to draw on *The Last Days of Pompeii*: for example, his detailed portrayals of art, household items, and tools uncovered in the ruins create a strong connection to the historical past, echoing Bulwer-Lytton's descriptions of the 'City of the Dead' in his introduction to the novel.

The impact of the eruption on Herculaneum is described as a deadly lava flood that turned the city into a mass of stone and ash. The narrator addresses the reader through an imperative sentence, and uses a simile to represent the astonishing transformation of the urban landscape flooded with lava: "Imagine a deluge of water turned to marble, at its height–and that is what is called 'the lava' here" (Dickens, "A Rapid Diorama" 417).

In the spectators' eyes, when they visit the ruins of the ancient theater, the "walls of monstruous thickness […] obtruding their shapeless forms in absurd places" create an impression of a "disordered dream" and an "indescribable" sense of "horror and oppression" (417). The phrases "monstrous walls" and "shapeless forms" are rich with implications, rooted in the semantic field of monstrosity, and serve to highlight not only the destructive forces of the natural world, but also its 'creative power': the lava has not only scorched the city, but it has transformed it into a sort of nightmare or grotesque spectacle, with the ancient architectures turned into unrecognizable, almost alien elements that elicit horror.

By personifying the ever-present Vesuvius as "the genius of the scene" (418), namely a *genius loci* that shapes the surrounding area, Dickens points out how the volcano, with a constant "smoke […] rising up into the sky" looms as a reminder of the nothingness and fleetness of civilisation compared to nature's grandeur and deep time. The narrator characterizes Vesuvius through the epithet "the doom and destiny of all this beautiful country" (418) to underscore the inherent danger of living in the shadow of such a powerful and unpredictable entity. Juxtaposed with "doom", which implies death and destruction, the word "destiny" suggests that this dreadful fate is preordained, as though it were part of a natural and inescapable course that will end with the downfall of all the Vesuvian civilisations following one another in the course of history. The frequent repetition of the words "ruin"

and “ruined” reinforces the idea of an inherent vulnerability of past and present civilisations, as if the ruins of the past were a visual warning for impeding future catastrophes. Furthermore, the symmetrical structure of the passage “It is beyond us, as we thread the ruined streets: above us, as we stand upon the ruined walls” (418), which refers to the persistent smoke rising from the cone, emphasizes a feeling of helplessness and inescapability in the face of nature’s overwhelming forces.

The recurring adjective “beautiful”, referred first to the lush vineyards and then to the green country around the volcano, contrasts with the adjectives “monstruous” and “ruined” used to characterise the unburied cities of Herculaneum and Pompeii. Therefore, alternating attributes and images pertaining to the *topoi* of the *locus amoenus* and *the locus horridus*, Dickens captures the tragic irony that, while the country may appear beautiful, luxuriant, and safe, it is constantly at risk of being scorched or obliterated by the volcano’s fury.

In the second part of his account, Dickens describes his night ascent of Vesuvius to reach the top at moonrise. The narrator focuses on the impressions evoked by the journey and the sensations experienced during the excursion. After going up stony lanes surrounded by vineyards, he and other excursionists emerge upon “a bleak bare region where the lava lies confusedly, in enormous rusty masses: as if the earth had been ploughed up by thunderbolts” (419). In this passage, the narrator domesticates the foreignness of Vesuvius’ geological reality through the familiar image of the cultivated land; however, through a personification of the volcano as a gigantic farmer working the land by hurling thuderbolts, he hints again at the divine and quasi-artistic power of Nature to reshape itself over deep geological times. In his novels and short stories, Dickens usually focused on “that nature which man had created for himself and called cathedral and city”, and was not interested in describing natural entities like prairies, trees and “unspeaking rocks” (Lansbury 42). By contrast, in *Pictures from Italy*, he seemed to align with the spirit of his age, which “believed passionately that nature was the visible aspect of the divine” (Lansbury 37), and with John Ruskin’s view of the natural world, depicting the volcanic activity of Vesuvius as an example of “God in nature mocking the works of man” (42).

When, after sunset, the group of excursionists arrives at the foot of the new cone, they contemplate the extinguished crater covered with snow, which seems “the summit of an antediluvian Twelfth-cake” (Dickens 419). In this passage, the narrator domesticates the Vesuvian landscape by evoking a familiar image, that of an English Christmas cake, to represent a fairy-tale-like setting where a group of heroic figures flirt with danger to see a unique show. On a symbolic level, the excursionists approach the mountain in a nearly predatory way: like a procession of ants ‘devouring’ a cake, they intend to fully enjoy its beauty.

However, this enchanting place is soon replaced by the images of a *locus horridus*:

the platform on the mountain-top –the region of Fire– an exhausted crater formed by great masses of gigantic cinders, like block of stone from some tremendous waterfall, burnt up; from every chink and crevice […] “sulphureous smoke is pouring out: while, from another conical-shaped ill, the present crater […] great sheets of fire are streaming forth, reddening the night with flame, blackening it with smoke, and spotting it with red-hot stones and cinders that fly up into the air like feathers, and fall down like lead. (420).

In this passage, Vesuvius is personified: its fiery display has an artistic quality, as if the volcano itself were an artist painting the night sky with its violent eruptions, casting an overwhelming sense of both destruction and beauty. The phrase “the gloom and grandeur of this scene” (420), expresses the sublime essence of Vesuvius’s fury and the creative agency of nature.

Dickens employs a sensational and vivid style to describe the astonishing spectacle offered by the erupting Vesuvius. Even though the volcanic activity is represented in a realistic way, the narrator’s considerations remain quite impressionistic and subjective; for example, when he asserts that the present crater appears to be “full a hundred feet higher […] than it was six weeks [before]” (421), he does not provide further information about the source of such a previous measurement. What he wants to share with the reader is not the result of a scientific observation, but a series of visual and emotional impressions generated by the unpredictable changes of Nature’s patterns and transfigured by his fervid imagination.

The personification of Vesuvius as a roaring, hungry beast suggests that the volcano, which is believed to be dormant only by the naive, is far from asleep. In the area around the crater, "the hoarse roaring of the mountain" and "the yawning ground" (420) of its crevices make everybody reel, since Vesuvius seems to get ready to swallow up the incautious hikers that step foot in its realm. Despite the danger, Dickens and other few brave excursionists led by an Englishman of the name of Le Gros decide to "climb the brim of the flaming crater" (421): "There is something in the fire and roar, that generates an irresistible desire to get nearer to it" (421) he writes, evoking the paradoxical sublime attraction of a force so destructive yet so fascinating, so terrifying yet so mesmerizing.

Dickens describes a place of which his fellow countrymen already had metal images. In the 1820s and 1830s, Vesuvius was "a pervasive and insistent cultural theme" (Pettit 148) appearing in newspapers and magazines' articles, Vauxhall Gardens' representations of volcanic eruptions, magic lantern shows, John Martin's paintings of the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, Giovanni Pacini's 1825 opera *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* – which was exhibited at the King's Theatre in 1831 accompanied by a final eruption scene –, and "miniature cork models of what Dickens called 'the Destoryer and the Destroyed', complete with simulated lava flows and manufactured odours like burning sulphur" (Bridges 93).

Dickens frames the volcano with theatrical imagery, casting it almost as a performer whose eruptions and smoke displays dazzle the traveler. Scarth notes that guidebooks and travelogues of the period often amplified these qualities, turning natural hazard into public entertainment, and Dickens leans heavily into this sensational register.

The experience of getting nearer to the active crater is a sensory overload. In crafting this scene, Dickens frequently uses short, rapid sentences and independent clauses to create a sense of urgency and immediacy. The frequent use of coordinating conjunctions like "and", "but" and semicolons fuels a sense of frantic movement and intense action. The swift flow of sensory details and events mirrors the uncontrollable nature of the volcano itself, amplifying the sense of danger and awe that pervades the entire journey. The hikers encounter "a shower of red-hot ashes that is raining down" (421) while the choking smoke and sulphur make them feel "giddy and irrational, like drunken men" (421). Despite such sensations, they reach the crater's summit and look down "into the Hell of boiling fire below" (421). Dickens invokes here the classic *topos* of Hell, a realm of chaos and destruction. However, he uses irony to temper – and perhaps to exorcise – the sense of terror created by his sensationalistic account: after leaning over the rim, each hiker emerges "blackened and singed, and scorched, and hot, and giddy: and each with his dress alight in half-a-dozen places" (421). The very danger they sought out has left them ridiculously marked and only superficially touched by the volcano's wrath. In his letter to his friend Thomas Mitton, dated 22nd February, Dickens underlined that he had never seen "anything so awful and terrible" (Dickens, *Letters* 139)

In "A Rapid Diorama", Dickens suggests that Mount Vesuvius is not a mere geological feature of the Neapolitan landscape, but an enduring, almost sacred presence that still shapes the spirit of the places and communities nearby: it is a force woven into the Neapolitan towns' beliefs, rituals, fears, and identities, and a living emblem of the coexistence of life and death, hazard and resilience, terror and beauty. Vesuvius is also a 'stage' on which natural powers and the writer's imagination collide. While acknowledging the overwhelming, dreadful force of the erupting volcano, Dickens combines descriptions of its sublime beauty with sensational and comic elements that ease the tension between nature's grandeur and human nothingness.

Regarding Dickens's writing style, "A rapid Diorama" features several passages in which images accumulate in quick succession; the piling-up of clauses connected through semicolons mirrors the way a traveller is bombarded by sensory cues, as in the following excerpt: "The broken ground; the smoke; the sense of suffocation from the sulphur […]; the horse roaring of the mountain" (420). Dickens often uses colons to introduce similes like "as the doom and destiny of all this beautiful country" (418) and "as if the earth had been ploughed up by burning thunderbolts" (419), dramatizing the volcano's presence. Exclamation marks serve a rhetorical function, expressing awe, wonder, and horror, and, pulling the reader into the heightened emotional state of the narrator, as in the sentence "What words can paint the gloom and grandeur of this scene!" (420). Connectives such as "and", "also", and "too" pile detail upon detail, creating a cumulative rhythm, whereas adversatives like "but" or "yet" dramatize the sharp contrasts between gaiety and ruin, beauty and terror, life and death.

Dickens's use of exaggeration and humour underline the theatricality of the scenes depicted in his account, which exemplifies the Victorian tendency to aestheticize volcanic risk and turn it into a show for readers and spectators looking for vivid sensations. In "A Rapid Diorama", Vesuvius is like a performer in the urban drama of Naples and the Neapolitan towns, acting on a stage on which natural spectacle, religious ritual, and social life converge. The *genius loci* evoked in this chapter is paradoxical in its nature: the city's gaiety and excess exist in the shadow of an impending catastrophe, and it is precisely this tension – between splendour and ruin, vitality and menace – that defines Naples' unique atmosphere in *Pictures from Italy*.

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