Dickensian Dreamscapes

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Dreaming and oneirism were popular subjects with the Victorians. Dream theory was then, it seems, divided between two main trends: a spiritualist trend (holding that dreams are a means to communicate either with God or with the dead) and a scientific trend (Bernard, 197), itself fragmented into disparate theories, mostly listing external stimuli and physiological condition—imperfect sleep, dyspepsia, or even insanity—as the main factors to influence dream-formation. The dreamer's morality was also considered by some as a major influence on dreaming. Whereas the focus increasingly shifted towards a scientific approach, some elements derived from centuries of superstition and faith in the preternatural continued to influence the Victorian mind, mostly in the form of manuals on dream-interpretation.[1]

Like many of his contemporaries, Dickens seems to have been inordinately intrigued by the processes underlying mental phenomena: his personal and public writings reveal his deep fascination with, and quasi-scientific attitude to, dream and oneiric phenomena—a topic which, surprisingly enough, was comparatively neglected until fairly recently.[2] Because he gathered an impressive amount of

[1] Bernard 1981, Bodenheimer 2007 and Glance 2001 offer a panoramic survey of the evolution of Victorian dream theory as well as valuable information about the Victorians' varied approaches to dreaming, oneirism and dreamwork.

[2] Pioneering essays such as Wilson 1942, Winters 1948, and Stoehr 1965, did point out the oneiric and psychological sides of Dickens. However, Stoehr 1965 appears to regard the use of dream in Dickens as something independent from his will, unchanged in time and almost akin to unconscious writing—a point which this paper endeavours to refute. For recent material, see notably De Stasio 2000, Paganoni 2000, Glance 2001, Vescovi 2002, Phillips 2007, Vescovi 2008, Baumgarten 2009, Orestano 2009 and Hollington 2010. Although Bodenheimer 2007 does not focus on Dickensian oneirism, it has proved vital in the present research, following as it does the evolution of what Dickens did and did not know on several subjects, including consciousness and the works of the mind.

information from both scientific and popular sources, reading medical studies as well as listening to people's dream-related experiences (Bernard, 202–203),[3] Dickens came to have a considerable expertise on contemporary dream theory.[4] Remarkably, he rejected most of it, forming instead his own outlook on oneirism—a set of groundbreaking intuitions—and using it in both his fictional and non-fictional writing to circulate the results of his studies.[5] Notably, Dickens concluded that the origin of dreams lies not only in external circumstances or in the dreamer's morality, but also and most of all in a far deeper stratum of the human psyche, where the mind has retained material at an unconscious level, and whence such material is released through oneiric activity. He also believed in the universality of oneiric experiences, and thought that dreamers were aware of being in "critical dialogue with dreams as they are occurring" (Bodenheimer, 14). He revised the practice of dream interpretation, discarding traditional superstition by insisting that dreams must be the result of mental processes independent from the will of the dreamer, which summon to the mind seemingly forgotten memories, fears, wishes and events that left a strong impression on the dreamer's memory. Dreams, Dickens suggests, carry a hidden meaning; to decipher this meaning means understanding the mental processes that created the dream-setting by associating seemingly distant and diverse elements.

If the associational nature of dreams was one of Dickens's most innovative intuitions on the topic, another relevant intuition of his was that the mind is capable of reaching a deeper layer of the psyche during oneiric activity. In his 1851 letter to Dr. Stone, he thus associated this immersion into what may be called the unconscious to the retrospective nature of some dreams: since dreaming often features fragments of past events—stored in the dreamer's memory and released during oneiric activity—Dickens concluded that oneirism and mnemonic processes must be closely connected. Consequently, he created dream narrations (*David Copperfield* being a prime example) infused with fragments of recollections triggered by contingent events (Bernard, 204–205).

The only notable exception to Dickens's rejection of contemporary beliefs on dreaming is perhaps Robert Macnish's *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1830), which, as

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[3] This essay builds on previous attempts to catalogue Dickens's readings and to map the sources of his knowledge. Here, I refer mainly to Bernard 1981, Bodenheimer 2007 and Glance 2001, all listing possible sources for Dickens's studies as well as references to relevant volumes present in his personal library at Gad's Hill.

[4] See for example Dickens's letter to Dr. Stone (2 Feb. 1851) and the resulting article "Dreams" (*Household Words* 1851).

[5] Throughout his career, Dickens would use dream in many different ways (see Litvack 2007).

shown by David McAllister, probably had some influence on his writing.[6] From Macnish, Dickens seems to have derived the idea of the occurrence of different degrees of consciousness in sleep, resulting in different kinds of dreams (McAllister, 10). In his fictional and non-fictional works, Dickens deploys several, if not all, of these declensions of dreaming. Macnish also defines sleep as an intermediate state between life and death, in which imagination plays an important role in shaping the images in the sleeper's mind (McAllister, 4).

Dickens was also especially interested in mental states that mingle dream and waking reality, in which the subject experiences features usually pertaining to oneiric activity, without actually being asleep. He even seems to have regarded this kind of twilight-zone of consciousness as the ideal condition to reach seemingly forgotten memories and emotions. Whereas in dreaming the subject has little or no power over the dreamwork, in such suspended states it is possible to explore, decode and finally resolve the oneiric riddle. This also accounts for Dickens's choice of the dreamscape—regarded here as the setting of both dreams and in-between experiences—as the place where the revelation and exploration of inner realities is possible.

1. The Dickensian Dreamscape

The Dickensian fictional dreamscape serves two main purposes. Firstly, it functions as a conventional narrative tool, used either to convey information without weighing on the main storyline or to introduce the preternatural without affecting an otherwise realistic narration. This more frequently happens in Dickens's earlier production, where it responds to a structural rather than a content-related need, and follows the traditional use of dream in fiction (Bernard, 207).

Secondly, and more interestingly, the Dickensian dreamscape adds a new dimension to the main narrative by opening a window on the character's—and at times the author's—inner world. It thus makes possible the exploration of a layer of existence ruled by psychic processes of removal and recollection, introspection and projection of feelings on the outer reality, incidentally becoming the ideal setting for the projection and subsequent observation of Dickens's insights on oneirism. Dickens

[6] In his 2007 article, McAllister compares passages from *Oliver Twist* and *The Philosophy of Sleep*, this convincingly demonstrating Macnish's influence on the novel.

resorts increasingly to this device in the later part of his career—especially from *Pictures from Italy* onwards—, in conjunction with stylistic evolution.

The shift from one (more conventional) use of dreamscape to the other (more experimental) was not sudden and never final: "several parts of Dickens's writings are infused with an oneiric quality that confers a sense of estrangement to what could otherwise be considered rational and objective if regarded in a different light" (Paganoni: 2000, 9). Thus, in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens devises dreams and dreamscapes both as traditional allegorical devices—to justify the preternatural within a realistic narrative—and, more subtly, as a means to show Scrooge's progress through the hidden recesses of his Self to obtain psychical healing, eventually.

The Dickensian dreamscape presents several recurring features, all referable to subjective perception, such as the subversion of temporal and spatial layers, distorted and ambiguous perspectives, and the sudden appearance and disappearance of objects and characters. Notably, Dickens's celebrated experimental use of point of view enhances the individual quality of perception and further complicates the localisation of the pivot around which the fictional oneiric diorama revolves. This pivot may be identified with the subject's inner reality, itself in constant evolution and dialogue with both inner and outer realities.

The Dickensian oneiric experience is usually set in a marginal space on the verge of consciousness. Its roots lie both in the external tangible reality and in the innermost self, and merge in a liminal zone. Here, the character's psyche re-shapes and projects an admixture of sensuous stimuli and psychic material onto the surrounding space, thus creating an ambiguous environment in constant metamorphosis—the dreamscape. Images pertaining to the worlds of memory and fancy are thus evoked by tangible elements that function as catalysts and open channels of communication between inner and external realities. In such instances, the emotional charge is so powerful that the distinction between the two is often problematic—a difficulty that Dickens symbolises with impeding elements such as fog, mist, darkness and other objects that cloud the senses. In the first chapter of *A Christmas Carol*, for example, Scrooge walks home through fog and darkness so thick that even his home and yard seem unfamiliar and bewildering to him: the very next scene introduces the fantastic events which form the core of the story, with the appearance of Marley's face in place of the door knocker (20).

Dickens also uses symbols to indicate those transitional zones where the confines between the oneiric and the perceptual are thinnest—boundary-marking elements such as, among others, bridges, doors, windows and water function simultaneously as connectors and separators between the dream and waking realities. The inside of the opium den in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, filled with the visions of beauty and greatness of a “[...] man whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together” (1), is separated from, and opposed to, the sensible, tangible, yet poor reality of the outer world, which creeps into the dreamer’s delusion of grand Eastern sceneries: “through the ragged window curtain, the light of early days steals in from a miserable court” (1).

The Dickensian dreamer is often depicted as oscillating between the inner and outer reality, trapped between oneiric introspection and waking alertness, and unable to cross the line that separates them definitely. The return to an empirically shared reality, following the exploration of the most profound inscape, symbolises the final location of one’s place in the human community, associated to a higher self-awareness and at times to the healing of a psychic wound.[7]

Dreamscapes in Dickens are often conjured up when a character is experiencing marginal states of mind induced by psychical or physical alteration, when the subject is liable to feel mentally confused or materially detached from the empirical reality. This kind of *trance* is often induced by repetitive sounds or movements, such as the dripping of water, the rumbling of carriages or a walker’s rhythmic steps, which have a hypnotic effect on the subject (Hollington, 35). A typical example is “Shy Neighbourhoods” (the tenth chapter of *The Uncommercial Traveller*), where the narrator depicts his fall into a peculiar doze: “The road was so lonely in the night, that I fell asleep to the monotonous sound of my own feet, doing their regular four miles an hour. Mile after mile I walked, without the slightest sense of exertion, dozing heavily and dreaming constantly” (77). When he is subject to this state of trance, the Traveller often composes verses and speaks an otherwise unknown language: “Of both these phenomena I have such frequent experience in the state between sleeping and waking, that I sometimes argue with myself that I cannot be awake, for, if I were, I should not be half so ready” (77).

[7] Thus, the Baltimore psychiatrist Stephen E. Warres introduced *A Christmas Carol* as the depiction of a realistic psychoanalytical path towards psychic health during his lecture “The Case of Ebenezer S.” at the specialised periodic lecture “Grand Rounds” in 2001.

Such suspended conditions, by weakening mental defences, may allow psychic material to surface in the subject's consciousness, unhindered by moral restraint. These states include half-sleep, intoxication, stupor, hypnosis, illness, alienation, loss of one's way and other sources of mental confusion or detachment from rational reality. A self-contained description of such conditions is to be found, for example, in the celebrated passage from *Oliver Twist* where Oliver wakes up in Fagin's den after having fallen asleep under the effect of gin.

> There is a drowsy, heavy state, between sleeping and waking, when you dream more in five minutes with your eyes half open, and yourself half conscious of everything that is passing around you, than you would in five nights with your eyes fast closed, and your senses wrapt in perfect unconsciousness. At such times, a mortal knows just enough of what his mind is doing, to form some glimmering conception of its mighty powers, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the restraint of its corporeal associate. (72–73)[8]

Urban spaces embody the ideal Dickensian dreamscape. Dickens's need to be immersed in the essence of London—or, more generally, of the city—in order to be able to create reveals a symbiotic relation with the metropolitan reality that plausibly led to the representation of the psychic texture as an urban labyrinth. Indeed, as Dickens wrote to Forster from Lausanne, "[...] a day in London sets me up and starts me again. But the toil and labour of writing, day after day, without that magic lantern, is IMMENSE!!! […] My figures seem disposed to stagnate without crowd about them" (August 1846; Hartley, 171). One month later, still in Lausanne, Dickens would confess that,

> The absence of any accessible streets continues to worry me, now that I have so much to do, in a most singular manner. It is quite a little mental phenomenon. I should not walk in them in the day time, if they were here, I dare say: but at night I want them beyond description. I don't seem to be able to get rid of my spectres unless I can lose them in crowds. (Hartley, 173)

The metropolitan variety of animate and inanimate specimens, the intricate tangle of streets and buildings, and the sense of non-belonging that often befalls the city wanderer are apt to engender alienation and foster semi-hallucinatory experiences—referred to as "distraction" and a kind of "bombardment of the senses" due to the kaleidoscopic reality of the metropolis (Mee, 45). Indeed, the urban setting is

[8] Dickens would use similar mental conditions as fictional expedients throughout his writing career: a last example being Jasper's opium dreams.

depicted as an ever-changing and subjective space, described through the experimental use of literary dissolve and superimposition of images (Orestano, 56). Labyrinths, confusion, animated objects and blurred visions fill the pages to give life to the intricate architecture of Dickens's inner world. Cityscape and dreamscape converge to create the ideal setting for the exploration of the self, adding an ephemeral and fluid layer to the metropolis of Dickens's imagery and creating an alternative geographical space to move through. Due to its psychic nature, the dreamscape is also a shape-shifting maze, a subjective tangle of streets and buildings, constantly rearranging its structure in tune with the observer's progress.

The Dickensian urban dreamscape is portrayed in different ways with different purposes. Presented as a daily scene, it is often pervaded by a confusing multitude of people whose faces are not distinguishable and whose compact motion is an overwhelming stream. The day-time dreamscape may be regarded as a symbolic setting for the characters' quest for their rightful place in a dangerous or rejecting society, where falsity and pretension have become desirable qualities. To forget one's true self in order to mingle with the crowd equals the loss of identity into an assimilating composite power. At the same time, to be absorbed into the streaming crowd means becoming invisible, which does not necessarily entail a negative ending.[9]

Conversely, descriptions of a nocturnal dreamscape conjure up characters' confrontation with—and exploration of—their own self. The dark, silent, empty space of the dream-like city may still be recognisable as existing in empirical reality, yet it becomes the reflection of the constantly metamorphosing psychic texture. Wishes, fears, memories and other psychic material are projected onto this oneiric stage as externalisations of hidden sides of the self. Some of the most revealing Dickensian narrations feature this latter kind of dreamscape.

2. Evolution of the Dickensian Dreamscape

As Dickens's style turned increasingly experimental, some of his fictional dreamscapes changed into oneiric spaces increasingly detached from empirical perception and rooted within the psyche, for two main reasons. To begin with, innovative stylistic techniques became necessary to register the increasingly symbolical meanings and psychological implications Dickens infused in his fiction. At

[9] See for example the ending of *Little Dorrit*, where Amy and Arthur disappear into the crowd.

the same time, the subjectivity of (semi-)oneiric descriptions could only be rendered through a new style—derived from contemporary optical devices such as magic lanterns and dioramas—which included shifting perspective and scenery.

This progression is easily traced by comparing short pieces, deprived of novelistic complexity and narrative accidents, written at different times in Dickens's career, such as "Early Coaches" (1836, collected in *Sketches by Boz*), "An Italian Dream" (1846, part of the travelogue *Pictures from Italy*) and "Night Walks" (published in 1860 in *The Uncommercial Traveller*). Even though these literary constructs share several descriptive features typical of the Dickensian dreamscape, they differ in style and authorial attitude towards oneirism and insights on dreams as related to the deeper strata of the psyche. Indeed, while "Early Coaches" makes fairly conventional use of dream, reflective of Victorian theories on the subject, "Night Walks" offers an oneiric description of an eerie nocturnal London. The shift of narrative persona, from the direct yet impersonal "you" of "Early Coaches" to the universal "I" of "Night Walks," shows how the identification between the author, the narrator and the reader becomes progressively complete, as the matter treated in the text widens to touch universal themes. As for "An Italian Dream," it is the ideal example of Dickens's awakening to a new oneiric narrative, clearly showing as it does the stylistic and thematic changes that would become staple features in Dickens's later writings. Being still somehow immature, here Dickens's new expedients and images best reveal his intuitions and intentions for the future oneiric and psychological narratives. Shortly after the composition of *Pictures from Italy*, Dickens would write *David Copperfield*, which shows features already visible in the travelogue (including a first-person narrative and frequent references to dreams, memory, states of drowsiness and altered perception).[10]

Even though their plots and dreamscapes unfold in remarkably different ways, the three pieces selected here all feature a traveller's point of view; they open with considerations on the protagonist's sleeplessness; and the three oneiric settings are introduced through the reference to a repetitive sound or movement—respectively,

[10] An important stylistic mark of this novel is the subversion of spatial and temporal notions achieved through a highly subjective narration based on the protagonist's mingling of facts, memories, and fancy–as well as on the author's fusion of narrative invention and personal recollection. The story, although presented from an apparently unreliable perspective, is made plausible by Dickens's awareness of the subjective distortion of facts to be found in autobiographical narratives, which he reproduces in David's fictional life-narration. A sequential reading of these two works provides self-standing evidence of their shared compositional features, but it also helps trace the evolution of Dickens's style.

travel by coach, the progress of a boat on water and the rhythmic beating of steps on the street.

3. "Early Coaches"

"Early Coaches," conceived as a humorous sketch aimed at comicality rather than at psychological insight, does not introduce a proper Dickensian dreamscape, intended here as an oneiric space where the boundaries between empirical reality and its psychological perception are unclear. However, the piece anticipates a number of recurring features of Dickens's later oneiric settings—subverted spatiality and temporality, chains of thought based on associational principles, subjective perception as opposed to objective reality.

As in the other *Sketches by Boz*, the plot offers a short and simple portrayal of an everyday situation: the protagonist spends a night at an inn, falling into an uneasy sleep in which he experiences a series of oneiric visions, until he wakes up to realize he has been dreaming and resumes his journey. The oneiric experience is here modelled on contemporary Victorian theories on dreams: imperfect sleep, contingent worries, unconscious association of thoughts and external stimuli all feature as the main causes of the dream events (Glance, 2001). The dream world is described as neatly separated from wakeful reality: although the general atmosphere is one of altered spatial and temporal perception, this alteration is clearly limited to the dream experience and does not extend to the protagonist's waking consciousness. While Dickens's later dreamscapes are set in a shadow zone where the line between dream and waking is blurred in the subject's confused perception, "the [dream] vision is at once dispelled" (134) when the traveller in the *Sketch* is woken up by someone knocking at the door. Also, the final explanation rationally accounts for all the oddities of the dream, according to Victorian dream theories.

Nonetheless, the use of the second person in the narration allows for the expression of the universality of certain oneiric experiences (Glance, 2001), hinting at a concept that might remind us of Jung's *collective unconscious*, a set of structures which are present in the subconscious of all human beings, thus becoming immediately recognisable at a psychic level, even when no verbal or conscious contact has been established. Dickens's work is constellated with such universal elements, which he seems to have isolated and used with a certain awareness to reach his audience at a more empathic level. More importantly, Dickens appears to

have also intuited a deeper layer of sleep, resembling the R.E.M. (Rapid Eye Movement) phase, which he describes as “a state of complete oblivion, from which you are aroused, as if into a new layer of existence, by a singular illusion” (134). In this dreaming phase, the protagonist experiences a mingling of recollection and vision which may be seen as parallel to Dickens’s insertion of his own memories into fictional writing. In his dream, for example, the traveller re-enacts his childhood job, which may be a reminiscence of Dickens’s own experience at Warren’s: soon after falling into deeper sleep the narrator wakes up to “a new state of existence” (134): “you are apprenticed to a trunk-maker; how, or why, or when, or wherefore, you don’t take the trouble to inquire; but there you are, pasting the lining in the lid of a portmanteau” (134). Thus, the fictional dream expresses the author’s own hidden memories, which find a way to surface in his literary creation—a process that became increasingly conspicuous as Dickens’s style and themes matured.

The last scene in the sketch contains important elements of Dickens’s later oneiric narratives: it takes place in waking reality, yet the setting retains some of the elements that would often be associated with dreams and semi-oneiric experiences in his later works. Reflected light pervades the nightly street outside the inn: gaslight is refracted by the wet pavement, reminding of the reversed world of dream. Water is “coming in” (135) everywhere, because pipes “have burst” (135), an image possibly suggestive of the overwhelming force of unconscious psychic material suddenly released by oneiric activity. Marginal images of comfort, warmth and human company also already contrast with the hostile and mysterious night setting: “the booking office, […] with the gas-lights and blazing fire, looks quite comfortable by contrast” (135).

“Early Coaches” thus presents many seminal elements that Dickens was to develop more and more consciously in later writings. Shortly after writing this sketch, Dickens read Macnish’s *The Philosophy of Sleep,* in which he appears to have found the seminal ideas for his own insights on dream and sleep. Although the precise time when Dickens read Macnish’s book is still unclear, David McAllister locates it in 1837, in the aftermath of Mary Hogarth’s death, convincingly arguing that Dickens might have turned to the then well-known study on sleep in order to find an explanation to his own recurrent dreams about the deceased Mary (10). This date also tallies with the renewed approach to sleep and oneirism which is to be noticed in the subsequent instalments of both *Oliver Twist* and *Pickwick Papers* (McAllister, 10).

4. "An Italian Dream"

McAllister's insights find confirmation in the evident change that took place in Dickens's choice of both form and content between his use and description of dream in "Early Coaches" and "An Italian Dream." Being part of the travelogue *Pictures from Italy*, which Forster considered the turning point of Dickens's career (73), "An Italian Dream," which can be seen as a collection of oneiric images and proper dreamscapes, is also an important step forward in the development of Dickensian oneirism. The whole collection is indeed marked by an experimental vein aimed at creating something new in the form of an emotional rather than empirical travelling account: a travelogue "described in terms of watery fluidity and instability" (Orestano, 51).

"An Italian Dream," the chapter dedicated to Venice, stands out by its sharp difference from the rest of the work. Whereas the other Italian cities described in the travelogue are clearly identified by name and often depicted factually, Dickens tried here something entirely new on the basis that, as he wrote to Forster, Venice was so astounding that it could not possibly be described as a real city. In his fictional portrayal, Dickens renames the city "Dream" and endeavours to evoke the essence of Venice through the description of an abstract combination of perception and intuition, vision and feeling (Baumgarten, 249).

In writing "An Italian Dream," Dickens had not yet entered the deeper level of psychological investigation that would become central to his later production, yet he seems to have felt the need to turn to a deeper layer of the self in order to deal with narrative creation. Several features that had appeared at an embryonic stage in "Early Coaches" are here developed to render a more suspended and dreamy atmosphere. The narrator's experience is not an actual dream, intended as a passive physiological phenomenon. It has turned instead into a semi-oneiric episode taking place in a liminal zone where the boundaries between wakeful reality and dream are blurred, and where Venice turns into a subjectively perceived space. References to margins and liminality run through the whole piece. Doors, windows, bridges and rivers mark important passages in the text. Reflections, water and an atmosphere of suspension accompany these elements and concur to create the picture of a city emerging from that same water that, in Dickens's imagery, carries the secrets of memory, death and afterlife.

Dickens's purpose in creating a new style based on evocative rather than objective descriptions appears in his effort to avoid the conventional travelogue reference to Eastern wonders or to the imagery of the *Arabian Nights.* He clearly endeavoured to stimulate a universal visionary experience engendered by the suggestions of a dream-like city and by the implied references to a collective imagery. Admittedly, Dickens was no innovator—clearly, he was inspired by Anna Jameson's dream vision of Venice (Flint, viii)—yet he chose to draw inspiration from a fairly unconventional form of narrative description.

Nonetheless, Dickens's oneiric prose is still somehow immature, as shows his use of traditional British travelogue expressions and references—"grandeur," "fairy hands," "fancies of the East" (58). The continuous shift from historical recapitulation to visionary depictions and vice-versa feels unnatural and at times strained, revealing Dickens's difficulty to fulfil his aims. The word "dream" is mentioned several times, thus somehow voiding the intended pure suggestion of an immaterial and magical figment of the imagination.

The superimposition of the narrator's and the reader's selves—a stylistic tool successfully developed in the later "Night Walks" (*UC* 103–109)—is here hindered by the use of a first-person narrator still too connoted with Dickens's own personality. The descriptive information is filtered through a univocal perspective, so that the dreamscape recalls a sequence of slides projected by an optical device rather than a universally shared experience. Too often, Dickens resorts to specific discourse markers such as "I thought," "I dreamed," "I fancied," "this dream of mine," "my dream." As a result, Venice appears not as a collective vision but as a very personal blend of empirical and emotional experiences. Although the oneirism of the piece successfully fuses the writer's and the character's viewpoints, Dickens's fictional persona does not merge into the oneiric essence of the city, but remains instead a separate entity, in independent dialogue with the objective reality.

The temporal layer is confused, even though it does not appear as subjective as it would in later Dickensian dreamscapes. The different episodes in the text do not refer to any specific temporal frame and present several "chronological accelerations and decelerations" (Orestano, 56). The main narrative, however, alternates night and day according to the natural passing of time. Similarly, although the dream city presents an unclear geography, the buildings and places are still recognisable and the passages from one to the other are blurred yet plausible moves. However, the

dreamscape has here clearly evolved from the oneiric setting of “Early Coaches” to become a geographical space where the narrator can loiter, flâneur-like. Specifically, it has taken the form of an urban space, an environment significantly mirroring Dickens’s personality.

Venice as a dream city is one of Dickens’s first urban dreamscapes. The setting is that of a ghostly metropolis whose inconsistency is enhanced by such descriptive details as an “insubstantial ground” (58), the unintelligible language of the recurrent inscriptions and “unusual shadows” (61) projected onto the pavement. In Dickens’s intention, the oneiric Venice is undecipherable and, as such, unnamable. To recreate its kaleidoscopic nature, he resorts to new stylistic expedients derived from contemporary optical devices—magic lanterns, dioramas and the like—such as dissolves and superimpositions of images (Orestano, 59), or “fade-out” effects (De Stasio, 8). Streams and rivers evoke the watery Dickensian London, while the sight of the harbour full of sails and workers digs further into Dickens’s memories, summoning the blurred image of dockyards in Chatham and Rochester.

Venice thus lies beyond a sea to cross, symbolical threshold to the world of the inner self. Reflections on water abound, so as to suggest the image of a reversed city emerging from the water. The boat that carries the narrator passes swiftly under many bridges that are said to “perplex the Dream [city]” (57). The Venetian bridges, functioning as connectors between otherwise separated parts of the city, disrupt and bewilder Dickens’s perception of the urban geography, linking together distant points according to an alternative and seemingly illogical architecture which is comparable to that of dreams. In *American Notes*, Dickens had already used a similar phrasing in describing his crossing of the river Susquehanna:

> [The bridge] was profoundly dark; perplexed, with great beams, crossing and recrossing it at every possible angle. […] I really could not at first persuade myself […] but that I was in a painful dream; for I have often dreamed of toiling through such places, and as often argued, even at the time, *this cannot be reality* (159; my emphasis).

Whereas city streets are usually of solid material such as earth or stone, Venice is streaked with streams of water, symbolising both the metamorphic nature of the oneiric metropolis and the narrator’s state of suspension between life and death, waking and sleep, present and past. A “gloomy archway” (57) is hinted at as a threshold between the wakeful life within a palace and the nocturnal stillness of the external space.

The core of the city, defined as “the heart of the strange place” (*57)*, is also the heart of the narrator’s—and the author’s—psychic texture, a fluid matter described as “water all about us where never water was elsewhere” (57). The elements that compose the city emerge in a disordered heap from this liquidity. Everything is enshrouded in a complete silence that fosters and enhances a sense of isolation and introspection. The city is perceived as a “ghostly,” “black” and “massive” (57) form floating over the dark water, a reminder of death and oblivion. Prisons and other symbols for seclusion and confinement—increasingly recurrent elements in Dickens’s fiction—dot the dreamy description, thus staining the ideal image of a wondrous city. Other details reveal an invisible corruption that is wearing away the very structure of the dreamscape: as the narrator revels in the marvels of the city, he cannot help thinking that, under the water, the foundations of Dream are silently rotting, eroded by secret and unfathomable currents. The creeping water is likened to a winding serpent coiling around the city—possibly to suggest that unpleasant recollections, hidden within the deepest Self, are consuming the character’s and the author’s psyche, surfacing in dream.

5. “Night Walks”

Chapter 13 of the *Uncommercial Traveller* is the first-person narration of a series of nocturnal strolls through London, undertaken as a remedy to chronic insomnia by the eponymous Traveller. Even though the piece is presented as a realistic account, meant to introduce the reader to the oddities of nightly London, it may be regarded as one of the fullest expressions of Dickens’s oneiric narrative. It features elements already exploited in “Early Coaches” and “An Italian Dream,” here developed so that the whole piece becomes infused with a finally genuine atmosphere of suspension and liminality.

The separation between waking and sleep, narrator and setting, is here successfully overcome. A fusion between dreamer and dreamscape takes place as the narrator exercises an emotional agency denied to the protagonist of “An Italian Dream.” His fictional persona is no more real than the surrounding environment, becoming at times a phantasmal figure shaped out of the eerie matter of nocturnal London and haunting the world of the living.

The London setting locates the narrative straight at the heart of the area of Dickens’s most self-related explorations. The events are said to take place in March,

itself an ambiguous month in Dickens's imagery.[11] Lights and shadows also alternate during the Traveller's progress through the subjectively perceived space of nocturnal London, signalling the contact points of external and inner realities. As in "An Italian Dream," other symbols of liminality are mentioned, marking the spots where the empirical and perceptual realities are closest, and possible passages between them are created. Doors, windows and above all bridges recur throughout the piece, functioning as connectors and allowing the narrator to catch glimpses alternatively of waking and oneiric realities.

The dreamscape is here more structured and sounder than in Dickens's previous narratives. The temporal layer is more blurred, so that the narrator is confined outside the natural timeline, in a perpetual twilight zone between dusk and dawn, not allowed to stretch beyond these boundaries. The narrative is introduced as the description of a series of nocturnal walks that took place on different nights: "a temporary inability to sleep […] caused me to walk about the streets all night, for a series of several nights" (103). The reader is immediately projected, however, into a seemingly single episode in which the separate walks are mingled and confused. Temporal linearity becomes a spiral that merges different nights into one oneiric experience, thus taking the form of a recurrent dream rather than that of a series of distinct occurrences. "In one of my night walks" (105): when the Traveller thus introduces an episode that took place on a different night, the analogies between the events that happened before and after are so strong that the reader hardly notices the temporal and spatial distance. Mental association, as in dreams, becomes the prevalent narrative mechanism, thus taking over the narration.

Geographical space is dotted with references to recognisable buildings and areas, yet their location remains uncertain. The city space appears to be organised according to an emotional rather than geographical pattern: the Traveller seems to move from one place to the other through a kind of cinematic dissolve rather than by actually walking. London becomes a labyrinthine space whose geography it is impossible to map. Its streets and buildings seem to come into focus as the narrator's perspective shifts from one sight to the other, as if lit by his gaze upon the nocturnal scape. Free association, as in dreaming, is the process that brings together distant places and assembles images and episodes in the narrative (Vescovi: 2008, 71), so

[11] In *Great Expectations*, it is described as a time when "the sun shines hot and the wind blows cold: when it is summer in the light, and winter in the shade" (396).

that it simply takes "a short breathing space" (107) or a thought engendered by some unconscious association to reach the next site.

The narrator recreates a personal order out of the nocturnal urban maze, thus shaping an alternative London, constellated with lights reflected in water—here, as before, a symbol for inner reality. Like the city of Dream, the Traveller's London is a reversed space so close to empirical reality that the two are joined where water and earth touch. This specular London is an oneiric metropolis projected inwards and recreated through the joint action of sensuous perception and unconscious work of the mind. It can only be perceived imperfectly, like a reflection on water, blurred by the processes of psychic censorship at work to hinder the surfacing of unpleasant revelations from the deepest self. Its truth lies in the unfathomable depths of the subject's inner reality, inscrutable by the observer yet intuitable through its projection onto external objects.

As in "An Italian Dream," Dickens's intention appears to be the recreation of a collective dream rather than a personal experience. However, the individualised narrative persona of the previous piece is here melted into a universal entity where each and every human being has converged by virtue of his or her belonging to the same underlying sensitivity.

In order to achieve complete impersonality, Dickens denies the narrator individual features. The Traveller has no name nor is he—or she—described in any way. The only existing definition is given through a negation of belonging: from being a Traveller, the narrator becomes Houselessness, a vagrant entity deprived of origin and destination. The idea of universality and non-belonging is strongly marked by the intensive use of the adjective "houseless," occurring no less than nine times in the first six paragraphs. The Traveller thus escapes the typical Dickensian "analogy between dwellings and their owners" (Paganoni: 2000, 22), which results in an even more insubstantial entity. The Traveller, deprived of a definable identity, appears to be haunting nocturnal London. He mingles with the atmosphere to the point that it becomes difficult to distinguish the observer from the observed and the dreamer from the dream.

London itself becomes part of this universal entity. Indeed, the cityscape is endowed with a psychical depth of its own, thus possibly incarnating the Traveller's tortuous psyche. The city mimics human behaviour, alternating, like the narrator, between wake and sleep, motion and stillness, consciousness and the unconscious.

The identification between the insomniac Traveller and the city is stated at the very beginning of the piece. The metropolis is also identified with its inhabitants: the Londoners, the city and the narrator all share troublesome sleep and restlessness, becoming parts of the same encompassing entity.

The shift from factual to oneiric London is marked by allusions to water: the city is said to "sink to rest" (104), as if it were, like Venice, floating on water. The place of rest is where mental impulses are released to surface freely to consciousness: London has become immersed in water, thus metamorphosing into its blurred and phantasmal counterpart. The river in which the city is reflected has "an awful look," the buildings are "muffled in black shrouds" and "the reflected lights seem to originate in water as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down" (104). Water is recognised as an element of connection but also of fearful disorientation, whose power is liable to drag away the unfortunate wanderer. To yield to this mysterious force would mean losing oneself within the depths of the unconscious processes of the mind, thus possibly yielding to madness: the moon and the clouds are "wild and restless" (104).

Waterloo Bridge, offering a last glance of wakeful reality in the person of the toll-keeper and in the comfort of "his brisk wakefulness" (104), is the first passage into the unknown world of oneiric London. The shift to the individual's inner world is fearful, though, and there is "need for encouragement on the threshold of the bridge, for the bridge [is] dreary" (104). The Traveller is approaching the darkest and most remote area of his psyche, the dangerous and dreadful core of the London tangle.

Dickens's deeply rooted passion for the theatre finds narrative expression in the reaching of the narrator's innermost self, symbolised by the exploration of a theatre at night. Without explaining how he enters the building, the Traveller begins to wander around in a kind of daze. The theatre within the theatrical reality of nocturnal London becomes a dream within the dream, thus engendering a sequence of narrative frames similar to a set of Chinese boxes. Each frame negates the previous one, thus alternating oneiric and factual realities in a bewildering sequence that results in blurred perception. The reader is by now lost in the same bedazzlement that turns the Traveller into an utterly unreliable narrator, disoriented within his own narration.

His gaze into the dark void beyond the stage, described as "a dismal cavern of an immense aspect where nothing [was] visible through mist and fog and space" (105), may be regarded as the expression of the mythological descent into a remote cave,

an apt symbol for the confrontation with one's deepest weakness and fears. To overcome the most fearful aspect of one's self means to re-emerge to life as a complete being. By entering the dark area behind the stage, the Traveller has reached the deepest layer of his psyche, facing death. In this dark, deep space, the Traveller's sight is impaired, losing "itself in a gloomy vault, showing faint indications in it of a shipwreck of canvas and cordage" (105). His vision seems then to be disturbed by fragments of memory and psychic material which are superimposed upon tangible objects, giving them life and shape-shifting qualities:

> the ground at my feet where, when last there, I had seen the peasantry of Naples dancing among the vines, reckless of the burning mountain which threatened to overwhelm them, was now in possession of a strong serpent of engine-hose, watchfully lying in wait for the serpent Fire, and ready to fly at it if it showed its forked tongue. (105)

Distorted vision and impaired perception, mingled and confused by psychic material, look forward to the identification of the subconscious with water: significantly, the Traveller feels "much as a diver might, at the bottom of the sea" (105). At the bottom of the sea lie those truths and recollections that the censorious forces of the psyche have tried to bury and forget. Memory is where the dead and the living can reunite, in encounters at once desired and feared.[12]

Seen from the depths of inner reality, the external elements appear dim and distant: the theatre is inhabited by "a ghost of a watchman, carrying a faint corpse candle, [who] haunted the distant upper gallery and flitted away" (105). The watchman, himself little more than a shadow, silently glides away in the semi-darkness, resembling a reflection of the Traveller—often referred to as a phantasmal figure—rather than a tangible human being. The same kaleidoscopic effect is created in the multiple projection of the narrator's Self:

> splitting is a powerful, expressionistic way of dramatising psychic processes and handling metamorphosis by externalising the inner conflicts that take place within the self. Intrapsychic activity […] is transposed theatrically outside and projected onto separate characters, sometimes with the dreamlike effects that derive from the contemporaneous coexistence of the approved and the forbidden self. (Paganoni: 2000, 17)

[12] Dickens had already associated recollection with water, describing memories as emerging from a deep sea or ocean where they are stored, seemingly forgotten. In *David Copperfield*, a peculiarly striking recollection is associated to a rock surfacing in the ocean: decades later, Freud would liken the structure of the Unconscious to an iceberg floating on water.

The Traveller, himself a fictional embodiment of the author, encounters several figures that may be regarded as projections of his—as well as of Dickens's—own self. Three of these figures are interesting also in relation to Dickens's personality. The first, Horace Kinch, suffers from a disease called the Dry Rot, which causes him to lurk and wander idly in the night. His behaviour recalls that of the Traveller, but also Dickens's own flâneur-like attitude. The consequences of his habits are decay and alcohol abuse caused by monetary trouble. The second figure is that of a ragged youth, almost invisible in the darkest hour, who makes himself heard with a "cry of loneliness and houselessness" (107). The figure is summoned by association with the toll of the church bells, a sound that fills the Traveller with a feeling of loneliness. The two characters stare at each other for some time, mutually fascinated and scared, until the narrator touches the youth's shoulder. The youth vanishes in sudden agitation, leaving behind his rags, much like a reflection in water dispelled by touching the liquid surface. The narrator remains alone, staring at the rags in his hand, puzzled by the eerie encounter as by the sudden materialisation of his fear of loneliness and non-belonging. An incarnation of Homelessness, like the narrator, the youth may represent Dickens's fascination for vagrancy as something "bound up with his sense of the self" (Phillips, 79). The third figure, a red-faced man looking as if he had just woken up but were ready to go back to sleep, pulls out "a meat pudding so large that it [is] a very tight fit" (108) from the inside of his hat. He then stabs and scatters it, before eating it in a ferocious manner. The Traveller defines the man as "the most spectral person my houselessness encountered" (108), and the food as "an unwholesome pudding" (109). It may be suggestive to compare something too big to fit under a hat with an overworked mind, filled with incessant thoughts and unable to rest. Eating it might then be the same as destroying it in order to gain some rest from strenuous mental activity—such as insomniac raving in the case of the Traveller or literary creation in the case of Dickens.

The final declaration in the piece is essential as regards the true nature of the nocturnal walk: the Traveller knows how and where to find company and even "Vice" to remedy insomniac loneliness. Yet, he chooses to metamorphose into the homeless, almost immaterial wanderer who has "many miles upon miles of streets in which [he] could, and did, have [his] own solitary way" (109). The exploration may then be considered a willing journey through the remote regions of the self, where the wanderer is alone and ready to face his own inner world.

Conclusion

As many other themes and motifs that engaged Dickens's interest, oneirism found ample and multifaceted expression in his writings. By reading these writings chronologically, it is possible to trace the constant and progressive development of his own insights and theories on dream and dreamwork as he studied these phenomena in real life, an evolution reflected in that of the Dickensian literary dreamscape. One can trace an evolution from the early representation of dream as a conventional narrative device—still influenced by contemporary theories and fiction—to a personal and innovative use of dream and dreamscape that explores oneirism in its multiple declensions. Shape-shifting as oneiric matter, Dickens's dream narrative was constantly enriched by new intuitions and stylistic experimentation, becoming more and more complex throughout the whole of his career, to result in Jasper's opium visions in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Much more is yet to be brought to light as regards Dickens, oneirism, and marginal states.

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