The Illustrators of *Pictures from Italy* and

*A Child’s History of England*

SAMUEL PALMER

FRANCIS W. TOPHAM
Chapter 14

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When plans to have Clarkson Stanfield illustrate _Pictures from Italy_ for its publication as a volume in the spring of 1846 collapsed at the last minute, Dickens lost no time seeking a new artist. As he informed the publishers, Bradbury and Evans: "I have thought it best to go to Colnaghi's [art gallery], and ask if they could find me any clever young artist who has been in Italy, and has brought home a portfolio of such sketches as I want. I did so on Saturday and he assures me that he has little doubt of sending some such gentleman to me tomorrow." The name of Samuel Palmer must have quickly come to Colnaghi's mind. The shy, intense landscape artist had spent two years in Italy and often visited the gallery to study the works displayed there as well as to sell his own (see fig. 174). Palmer exactly met Dickens's criteria and presented none of the problems raised by Stanfield; indeed his past life and work suggested that he might be an improvement in certain respects.

Stanfield, soon to become a Catholic convert, felt unwilling to illustrate a travel book containing a relentless attack on the Roman clergy. Palmer, though equally devout and deeply moved by Catholic ritual and architecture, was a Protestant whose allegiance to the Church of England was only strengthened by his stay in Italy from 1837 to 1839. From an artistic as well as a spiritual viewpoint, the illustrations for the "Travelling Letters" could not have been placed in better hands. Unlike Stanfield, who was known mainly for his English scenes, Palmer attracted wider notice for his representations of Italian views than for his pastoral native landscapes, now so highly regarded. Ruskin, maintaining that he had never seen a pine nor a cypress properly drawn by anyone except Palmer, would accord him "the very highest place among faithful followers of nature" and Dante Gabriel Rossetti always remained awed by his "landscape power." Whereas Stanfield specialized in large seascapes, Palmer preferred small-scale land-
"bookworm," in whose austere life literature and art were the chief pleasures, would be especially pleased by this commission, which Stanfield had doubtless accepted merely to please his friend. For Dickens's novels were apparently among the few fictional works that the younger artist read aloud to his own family; indeed, his son recalls that he could become so engrossed by the narratives that visitors might be kept waiting until he finished an episode.

Yet Dickens and Palmer had differed radically in their reactions to Italy. At first, the artist, like the author, was homesick; if Dickens longed for London sights and sounds, Palmer missed the quiet English countryside. But the artist soon became fascinated by the clear light, spacious vistas, and picturesque ruins of Italy, whereas the author became obsessed with its indolence, decadence, and clerical corruption. Palmer, interested primarily in his work, could separate his aesthetic and moral judgments; Dickens, with his overriding interest in people and their institutions, could not. The author left the country with relief, though with new religious and ethnic perspectives that would manifest themselves in *The Life of Our Lord*, his subsequent re-creation of the New Testament for his children, as well as in the Mr. Baptist and Italian portions of *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) a decade later. The artist departed more reluctantly and found his return to cold, colorless England depressing; he could neither recapture his earlier, simpler Shoreham visions nor readily assimilate all the recent lessons of antiquity and the Renaissance. Dickens, aware only that Palmer knew Italy and was capable of portraying nature accurately, no doubt knew nothing of these difficulties. But if he had been aware of the artist's earlier visionary attempts to portray landscape as an expression of the Creator's mind, he would have appreciated the implicit spirituality Palmer's illustrations might add to the *Pictures from Italy*.

Dickens contacted Palmer immediately and set up a meeting. The artist, though eager to secure this commission, was inexperienced in the ways of the publishing world. He frantically appealed to John Linnell, his father-in-law as well as artistic mentor:

> Mr. Dickens has applied to me to draw on wood vignettes of Italian subjects for a work he is about to publish (which it will be better not to mention until he advertises it as he may not wish it known)—As the time is very pressing he will (should he decide on seeing my sketches this afternoon) send the publishers to me to settle terms etc.—If they ask me what I charge I shall not know what to ask—Mr. Dickens says that besides doing the drawings I shall have to oversee the blocks in their progress—They will be about this size [small sketches of a building by a lake and a boat with two figures inside, ca. 2" x 3"] and like those in Rogers' *Italy*—

I should wish to do them cheaply, but have not a notion about price—if you could give me a gauge by return of post I shall feel obliged & I will come over and speak to you about it as soon as possible but at present cannot leave—expecting Mr. Dickens at 4 o'clock & the publishers in the course of the day or tomorrow—the time when he will call is uncertain—

When Dickens arrived at what proved to be their sole meeting, he tried to clarify aesthetic matters. He gave Palmer a memorandum book containing the "Travelling Letters," which had been published in the *Daily News* and which, with revisions and five added chapters, were to comprise the text of *Pictures from Italy*. He also gave the artist a copy of Samuel Rogers's *Italy* with its elegant Bewickian vignettes engraved from landscapes by Stothard, Turner, and others; the illustrations to this volume of poetry, which had launched a fashion after their publication in 1822, were in the style Dickens wanted for his own book—small, delicate, and scenic. The author left all contractual details to the publishers, whom Palmer expected momentarily. When days passed without a word from Bradbury and Evans, the needy artist despaired; but finally a note arrived from the firm, apologizing for the delay and setting a meeting date. "There seems to have been no hitch—in the illustration business" after all, Palmer hastily informed Linnell; this news had quite "cheered" the artist and "revived" his wife. Though the publishers apparently reduced the number of illustrations from twelve to less than a half dozen, the twenty guineas for the designs Palmer was to provide for Dickens's book must have been welcome to his struggling household.

Dickens's second travel work, however, like his first one on America, paid little attention to nature for its own sake. The intermittent passages that describe the landscape are as saturated with historical and moral implications as the ones describing prisons and religious festivals (306, 355, 415, for example). And although Palmer's illustrations are capable of standing alone aesthetically as pleasing Italian scenes, taken in conjunction with the text, they dramatize inadvertently Dickens's perception of the country as a land of physical and moral decay, unlikely to be regenerated by its political or religious leaders. Though the artist's representations of "The Street of the Tombs: Pompeii" (438) and "The Colosseum of Rome" (438) appear separate from the text, not integrated with it like the other two designs, they nevertheless reinforce the author's association of past ruins with the desolation of the present rather than the grandeur of antiquity. Similarly, the cypresses linking the avenue lead toward "The Villa d'Este at Tivoli, from the Cypress Avenue" evoke their traditional associations with death as well as beauty (436). Only the concluding "Vineyard
Scene' (436), a suitable visual accompaniment to Dickens's closing hope that a more noble race might rise from these ruins (434), is wholeheartedly optimistic with its explicit associations of rebirth and renewal.

The published engravings may not reveal to the common reader the difficulties Palmer had with them. Eager for the commission, he did not tell Dickens that he had had little experience working with wood and probably none whatever with commercial engravers; indeed, his designs for Pictures from Italy were apparently the first book illustrations Palmer had ever done on a wood block. His progress on his first design, that for 'The Villa d'Este,' which Dickens wanted to head his opening chapter, was plagued by the problems of his inexperience. The artist evidently wanted to structure his composition, which had to allow the text to be dropped in, around the highly decorative letter S. Dickens, however, complained: "I am afraid I cannot comfortably manage an S. What do you say to the word 'On'? Could you possibly do that?" Palmer tentatively made a sketch using an O, but ultimately discarded it (fig. 175). Yet another preliminary portrayal of the villa proved useless because he forgot to reverse the design on the block, as he had to do for it to appear as originally drawn, and he could not adapt it to accommodate the text. The graceful scene that finally appeared with the unadorned I of Dickens's first word If, subtly reinforced by the soaring cypresses and the slender façade of the villa (436) (fig. 176), betrays no hint of these false starts.

The Reader's Passport.

If the readers of this volume will be so kind as to take their credentials for the different places which are the subject of its author's reminiscences, from the Author himself, perhaps they may visit them, in fancy, the more agreeably, and with a better understanding of what they are to expect.

Many books have been written upon Italy, affording many means of studying the history of that interesting country, and the innumerable associations entwined
Palmer’s troubles with his illustrations, however, did not end when he designed them, since he was responsible for supervising their engraving. Though he worried that many of his subtle touches would prove untranslatable, he refused to simplify his strokes. Instead he plied the engraver with marginal notes, first on the original drawing and then on the proofs: “I wish the thin cypress to be very much as it appears on the block—not lighter” began a lengthy admonition about the ‘Villa d’Este’; and “the top of the cypress is very indistinct, which greatly injures the design” headed a list of thirteen criticisms about the proofs. Perhaps it was because of this perfectionism that Palmer’s design for the ‘View in the Campagna,’ no doubt intended to illustrate Dickens’s climactic account of Rome and its environs (398–99), was never published though it bears his characteristic annotations for the engraver (fig. 177). The artist’s meticulous instructions here as elsewhere reveal his naive optimism. Even an extraordinary engraver—the identity of Palmer’s is unknown—would probably not have been able to translate so many minute details with the desired fidelity. As they turned out, Palmer’s illustrations for *Pictures from Italy* are not as inspired as his representations of the same and similar subjects in media that were not dependent on another’s hand.\(^1\)

If Palmer was not satisfied, however, Dickens seemed to be, though he was unusually casual about the illustrations with which the artist had taken such pains. Winding up affairs in England, before setting out again for the Continent on June 1, the preoccupied author admitted he had not seen the final designs, but recalling the artist’s sketches from their first meeting, he had no doubt “that they are very good.”\(^2\) Perhaps this nearly total lack of communication with Dickens had prompted Palmer, despite his regrets about the engraving of his designs, to inquire whether his contributions to the *Pictures* would be publicly acknowledged. The author hastened to reassure him not only that he would “on no account dream of allowing the book to go to press without the insertion of your name in the title-page” but that he himself had placed it there, two days before Palmer’s inquiry.\(^2\)

The poor critical reception accorded *Pictures from Italy*, even by Dickens’s admirers,\(^3\) unfortunately extended to his illustrator as well. Many readers, offended by Dickens’s criticism of the clergy and mistaking it for his attitude toward Catholicism as a whole, inevitably, if unfairly, attacked Palmer too. The *Dublin Review*, co-founded by the future Cardinal Wiseman, understandably called Dickens’s text outrageous, but pettily termed the presence of the artist’s name on the title page a “miserable catch-penny”; Palmer’s contribution, explained the *Review*, was billed as “vignette illustrations on wood” but proved to be only four “paltry” woodcuts, three at the beginning of the book and one at the end.\(^4\) Other critics simply ignored Palmer’s scenes, just as the public remained indifferent to his art in his lifetime. The artist’s brief and impersonal association with his favorite novelist proved yet another disappointment in a long life full of them. Nevertheless, the works of Dickens, which Palmer increasingly alluded to and quoted from,\(^5\) continued to be one source of pleasure in the remaining years of this then unappreciated genius.

![Fig. 177. Samuel Palmer, Unpublished Drawing of 'View in the Campagna.' Graphite. 3\(\frac{1}{4}\)" × 4\(\frac{3}{8}\)" (7.8 × 11.8 cm). By permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library.](image-url)