Dickens's Reality Show: Chromophobia in *American Notes*

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This article is a contribution to the debate on "Dickens and Colour" http://www.connotations.de/dickens-and-colour/. If you feel inspired to write a response, please send it to editors@connotations.de.

Abstract
This article originates from the Dickens Seminar, traditionally a feature of the biennial ESSE—European Society for the Study of English—Conference, which was held in 2022 at the Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz, Germany. The Dickens Seminar, jointly chaired by Matthias Bauer, Angelika Zirker (both Tübingen University), and Nathalie Vanfasse (Aix-Marseille University) focused on "Dickens and / in Colour." Hence the notion of chromophobia deployed in this article, a notion applied to a Dickensian text in which colour and its uses play a paramount role of remarkable importance. The text is *American Notes: For General Circulation* (1842), generally considered a travelogue, an account of Charles Dickens's experiences when travelling across the United States. As a travelogue, *American Notes* should obey the laws of descriptive realism, but a close analysis of the text suggests that Dickens places a special emphasis on the use of colour which tends to create descriptive effects that bypass the accuracy of realistic description. Colours in the United States are either heightened to a maximum degree of saturation, or diluted to a wholly discoloured state. The transition between colour and non-colour is best described by David Batchelor in his study of chromophobia, a notion which illuminates the discursive meanings embedded in the Dickensian text, helping unveil his strategy of conveying disappointment and disgust for things American.

In his study of chromophobia, David Batchelor maintains that in our Western culture colour has been the object of a long-standing and persistent prejudice, inasmuch as generations of artists, philosophers, art historians,

and cultural theorists have systematically denied its importance and ignored its role and complexity. The loathing of colour, he argues, is the expression of a fear of contamination, of corruption, that leads to a purging of colour—from statues for instance, but also in literary discourse—a discolouration that is usually accomplished in two ways.

> In the first, colour is made out to be the property of some 'foreign' body—usually the feminine, the oriental, the primitive, the infantile, the vulgar, the queer or the pathological. In the second, colour is relegated to the realm of the superficial, the supplementary, the inessential or the cosmetic. More specifically: in one, colour is regarded as alien and therefore dangerous; in the other, it is perceived merely as a secondary quality of experience, and thus unworthy of serious consideration. Colour is dangerous, or it is trivial, or it is both. (Batchelor 22-23)

In what follows, I should like to suggest that there exists a connexion between the element of chromophobia and the work of Charles Dickens, and, specifically, with his *American Notes: For General Circulation* (1842). The case of *American Notes*, as a travelogue, as a report on the condition of the United States in the 1840s, as well as the record of Dickens's personal reaction to what he saw along his journey, indicates an attitude, a syndrome, and finally a possible diagnosis of the writer's discursive choices as far as colour representation is concerned. In particular, we may wonder if Dickens's sceptical and critical attitude to the colours he witnessed is a straightforward example of the chromophobia described by Batchelor or is indicative of a more nuanced stance.

American Notes is a text that Dickens composed, *a posteriori*, and on his return to England, using the letters he had been sending to John Forster and a few other friends during his 1842 visit to the United States. In those letters, mainly descriptive of his encounters with intellectuals, authors, and many eminent Americans, and dwelling on his campaign to obtain International Copyright, the writer's disappointment with the country—initially the democracy of his imagination—seemed to simmer and increase daily. Dickens resented the personal slanders from the major newspapers that, while pirating his works, strongly opposed his plea for International Copyright. Such feelings would no doubt impress their mark on the com-

position of the travel book, whose very title resentfully alludes to the unchartered freedom of circulation that not only notes—banknotes—but also literary texts usually underwent in the United States.[1]

After examining the letters from Boston, Worcester, New York, as contained in the 1842-1843 volume of the Pilgrim Edition of *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, I found no references to the colours mentioned in the travel book; notwithstanding the fact that Dickens's "letters to John Forster still remain the fullest record—intended, as they were, to be used as the basis for *American Notes*," and, in addition to this, that, "when Forster came to write the *Life*, he quoted from them extensively, but saying he had made it his rule not to repeat passages that had already appeared in *American Notes*" (*Letters* 3: "Preface" vii). Having ascertained that neither the published *Letters*, nor the text of Forster's *Life*, contain any reference or hint to the colours of the American scene present in *American Notes*, one wonders about the difference and would like to consult the original manuscript letters, but the editors of the *Letters* remind us:

> It was probably after using them for the *Life* that John Forster had the letters bound, with a lock fitted to the binding. The volume, with title, "Letters from America" in gilt lettering, is in the Forster Collection at the Victorian & Albert Museum, but the letters are missing—presumably cut out and destroyed by Forster's executors. (*Letters* 3: viiin2)

We do not know then if Dickens's suggestive references to colours were part of the impressions conveyed in his letters or were added in the process of composing *American Notes: For General Circulation.* In any case, Dickens's use and expert handling of colours gives evidence to his careful deliberation.

The first passage to be taken into consideration is Dickens's description of Boston:

> When I got into the streets upon this Sunday morning, the air was so clear, the houses were so bright and gay; the signboards were painted in such gaudy colours; the gilded letters were so very golden; the bricks so very red, the stone was so very white, the blinds and area railings were so very green, the knobs and plates upon the street doors so marvellously bright and twinkling; and all so slight and

> unsubstantial in appearance—that every thoroughfare in the city looked exactly like a scene in a pantomime. (*AN* 76)

This is indeed a rich palette, teeming with the bright primary colours that Dickens decided to use for the description of Boston: no subtle hues, no half tones, everything is there to strike the eye of the reader. The effect is made even more forceful by the impressive sequence of repetitions and parallel constructions ("so very […] so very"), hammering a uniform rhythm so that the reader is repeatedly alerted to the unusual colours of the things perceived. In the passage on Boston, colours are artfully applied so as to make every aspect of the city, including the very air, look pure, untainted, pristine, brand new, and exceedingly beautiful. At the same time, however, one feels that the attitude of the writer contains a degree of incredulity and disbelief, in that the colours look too vivid, too perfect, too saturated, to be real. Eventually, the effect of these vivid colours will be jeopardized by a creeping notion of theatricality, instigated by their very unnatural saturation, and by the reference to the scene of a pantomime. This hint, placed by the writer at the end of his description, turns the travelogue account, a genre that should conventionally obey the laws of realism, into the script of a staged theatrical. The words chosen by Dickens, "unsubstantial" and "pantomime," are not without weight:

> As I walked along […] I never turned a corner suddenly without looking for a clown and pantaloons, who, I had no doubt, were hiding in a doorway or behind some pillar close at hand. As to Harlequin and Columbine, I discovered immediately that they lodged (they are always looking after lodgings in a pantomime) at a very small clockmaker's one story's high, near the hotel […]. (*AN* 76)

Featuring clowns and pantaloons, Harlequin and Columbine,[2] pantomime was a great favourite with the Victorian public of all social classes. As a mixture of harlequinade and extravaganza, in which words, music, action, and spectacle were combined, it enjoyed, as it enjoys today, a distinct popularity, especially at Christmas time (see Richards; Worrall).

Since Menander, since Plautus, and the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, the genre of the pantomime has staged the most stereotyped and comical con-

struction of character: Pantaloon is the old miser; Harlequin the artful servant, full of tricks and wit; Columbine, the young maid, is prone to flirting. Its nature is essentially subversive, carnivalesque, full of double meanings, allusions, and social satire. Dickens knew the genre well, having edited in 1838, under his *nom-de-plume* "Boz," the *Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi*, the celebrated clown whose comical impersonations had marked the apogee of the pantomime. To mention the pantomime in the context of a travelogue turns the cityscape of Boston into a stage. The strategy is reiterated when Dickens visits the suburbs outside Boston. Here the effect of a colourful but artificial, "slight and insubstantial" appearance is made even more evident, eerie, almost uncanny, by the writer's alluding to a lack of realistic proportions:

> The suburbs are, if possible, even more unsubstantial-looking than the city. The white wooden houses (so white that it makes one wink to look at them), with their green jalousie blinds, are so sprinkled and dropped about in all directions, without seeming to have any root at all in the ground; and the small churches and chapels are so prim, and bright, and highly varnished; that I almost believed the whole affair could be taken up piecemeal like a child's toy, and crammed into a little box. (*AN* 76)

Since the Renaissance, and the implementation of the mathematical rules of perspective, the discourse of proportion had been the staple of realistic description: here the relative size of the suburban buildings undergoes a dramatic shrinking to a toy box dimension—building bricks, in clay or wood, being a popular toy for children during the Victorian age (see Hewitt). The houses look as if weightless, and their bright "prim" aspect does not dispel the shades of suspicion contained in the adjective "varnished"—"varnishing" being the action of surface coating with varnish something often unpleasant, so as to achieve cosmetic improvement; and "varnished" being a keyword in Dickens, especially when we consider the office of Mrs General who, in *Little Dorrit*, has to coat every statement of her young pupils with appropriate varnishing.[3]

Proceeding in his journey, and describing the towns and cities of New England, Dickens resorts to the same rhetoric and a similar handling of the intensity of colours:

> [In Worcester] every house is the whitest of the white; every Venetian blind the greenest of the green; every fine day's sky the bluest of the blue. […] There was the usual aspect of newness on every object, of course. All the buildings looked as if they had been built and painted that morning, and could be taken down on Monday with very little trouble. In the keen evening air, every sharp outline looked a hundred times sharper than ever. The clean cardboard colonnades had no more perspective than a Chinese bridge on a tea-cup, and appeared equally well calculated for use. (*AN* 119-20)

Here the hint to a staged show, which could easily vanish in thin air, is made more explicit by comparing the houses to painted screens that might readily be taken down any moment. The comparison with a Chinese teacup not only implicitly takes up the blue colour of the sky but also, by singling out its tiny painted bridge, serves to emphasize that the scene, lacking perspective, lacks the substantial quality of reality.[4]

Dickens used Chinese references whenever he wanted to build an unfavourable comparison with England, England being all substance, and China a flimsy useless exotic dream (see Orestano "The Chinaman in London"; Orestano, "East is East"); he did so, and with a heavy unsparing hand, on the occasion of the Opium Wars, and again in 1851, in an article written for the Great Exhibition, in which he discussed in very depreciative terms the items on show at the Chinese pavilion (see Dickens and Horne). Further on in *American Notes*, the same effect of suggesting a lack of substance is obtained by comparing the walls and colonnades of a big hotel to a house made of cards (see *AN* 114).

One could well maintain that this descriptive strategy of colour heightening has its reason in the representation of the American scene of the 1840s: in the New World, everything, when compared with the Old World, had to look prim, free of decay, coated in the pristine colours that were the visible consequence of the extreme newness of whatever was there to be seen. Such was an almost commonplace and conventional attitude, one that often occurred in travelogues written by early-nineteenth-century English commentators on all things American (see Orestano, "Charles Dickens"). Yet, there is more to it, inasmuch as the newly-built features emphasized by many descriptions in the first chapters of *American Notes* are also connected to the idea of varnishing, to the feeling of visiting a stage, where everything can disappear in a wink—where everything looks deceitfully

polished and new. In order to support the notion of the deceptive reality encountered by the writer, and emphasized with the discursive strategy of colour heightening, one should not just look backward, to the genre of the pantomime, but also to a recent movie that operates along similar lines. *The Truman Show*, a 1998 American satirical science-fiction psychological dramedy film, directed by Peter Weir, is a satire on reality shows in which the protagonist, at first pathetically credulous, then incredulous, has been brought up since his birth and early infancy in the perfect happy world devised for the television show he lives in. Painted with saturated colours, this fictional world is pristine, new, immaculately kept under the panoptical surveillance of the director of Truman's life show, until the suspension of disbelief he has been trained to entertain fails to brighten his days. Eventually Truman plans his escape from the perfectly coloured, realistically contrived television set he has been living in. In a dramatic final sequence, the protagonist succeeds in gaining his freedom. Once more, looking backwards from this recent perspective, one may argue that *American Notes* invites us to question a reality that, while apparently innocent and comedic, is illusionary, even alien and potentially dangerous.

After the first positive accents Dickens adopts for his description of New England, the following chapters reveal a dissolution of colours, indeed a discolouration that ends up in the grey, brown, and black hues of decomposition. In contrast with the first vivid notes of saturated colours, the natural scenery Dickens sees from the train has no colours, except the tints of what is rotten and mouldering away: "each pool of stagnant water has its crust of vegetable rottenness; on every side there are the boughs, and trunks, and stumps of trees, in every possible stage of decomposition and neglect" (*AN* 113). The writer is implementing a trajectory of discolouration, his drab palette only briefly interrupted by the fleeting glimpse of a distant town with its "clean white houses"—a vision quickly cancelled by the speed of the train that re-establishes "the same dark screen: the stunted trees, the stumps, the logs, the stagnant water—all so like the last that you seem to have been transported back again by magic" (*AN* 113). In Dickens's agenda, to mention magic suggests an eerie condition, a possible nightmarish encounter with frightening ghosts or goblins.

Between the first chapters with their initial colourful strategy, and the final palette of decay and blackness, the writer adds a turning point, welding the description of New York to what he has said about Boston:

> The beautiful metropolis of America is by no means so clean a city as Boston, but many of its streets have the same characteristics; except that the houses are not quite so-fresh coloured, the signboards are not quite so gaudy, the gilded letters not quite so golden, the bricks not quite so red, the stone not quite so white, the blinds and area railings not quite so green, the knobs and plates upon the street doors not quite so bright and twinkling. (AN 127)

The author adopts the same turn of phrase, punctuated with repetitions, but in order to suggest a radical difference between Boston and New York, while recalling the previous statements. This stylistic trick alerts Dickens's readers to the writer's manipulation of colours, and, with it, to the meaning that such strategy has to confer to the travelogue.

Dickens's colour strategy in *American Notes*, the heightened colour palette which represents a lack of substance, followed by a kind of uniform discolouration, suggests that the geographical and chronological representation of the American journey contains a hidden authorial plot that, although not explicitly visible, transcends the conventional realistic agenda of the travelogue. His first impressions are offered in seemingly unbiased fashion, and thus he avoids the charge of being prejudiced from the start against the country he is describing. But, at the same time, he manages to instil suspicion and disbelief: the quality of the American scene, its valuable assets, may after all be a matter of mere varnish. To add another more recent perspective, it may be a Disneyland, with primary colours that are never seen in reality.

The descent into a colourless reality is even more striking when contrasted with the colourful aspects of New England. During the journey to Pittsburgh, rotten trunks in the water have a blackened and charred aspect (see *AN* 199); on the way to Cincinnati, the trees that have fallen in the river look like "grizzly skeletons" with threatening "bleached arms" (*AN* 205). The hateful Mississippi has the colour of "liquid mud" (*AN* 216); its filthy waters roll like "black masses" (*AN* 230), and the enchantment of sunset, recorded as gorgeous, colouring the firmament with gold and red, is just a

quick passing scene: everything soon looks drearier than before, as darkness falls (*AN* 217). On the way to the prairie, around the track all is "stagnant, slimy, rotten, filthy water" (*AN* 222): the prairie itself is disappointing, lonely, wild, colourless, if not for the sky above (*AN* 225-26).

As remarked by John S. Whitley and Arnold Goldman: "Though Dickens begins *American Notes* with a eupeptic and common-sense cheerfulness, there are signs of his apprehensions even from the start. The comedy is exorcism" (28). Although not focussing specifically on the element of chromophobia, the editors of *American Notes* agree upon the lingering sense of deception that marks the inception of the travelogue.

Another aspect that supports the analysis of the peculiar colour strategy adopted in *American Notes* is the emphasis on colour that characterizes Dickens's perception of the Italian landscape—a perception soon to be formalized in the openly subjective *Pictures from Italy* (1846). In his selection of Dickens's letters from Italy, David Paroissien (6) points to a letter to Daniel Maclise, of 22 July 1844, where the intensity of colour impressions is paramount:

> But such green—green—green as flutters in the vineyard down below the window, that I never saw; nor yet such lilac and such purple as float between me, and the distant hills; […] such awful, solemn, impenetrable blue, as in that same Sea. It has such an absorbing, silent, deep, profound effect; that I can't help thinking it suggested the idea of Styx. It looks as if a draught of it—Only so much as you could scoop up, on the beach, in the hollow of your hand—would wash out everything else, and make a great blue blank of your intellect. (*Letters* 4: 159

Dickens, as one realizes, was neither chromophobic nor colour blind, but when writing about the American scene his strategic use of colour, obtained by way of replenishment and excess, at first, and then by the uniform palette of discolouration and decay, is entirely staged and intentional. Dickens's colour choices in *American Notes* are also indicative of the psychological nuances that affect his would-be realistic representations.

In his article on "'The prismatic hues of memory' (*DC* 769): Visual Story-Telling and Chromatic Showmanship in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*," Georges Letissier tackles the element of colour from the perspective of visual memory, focussing on the colour red and on the agency of colours

within the verbal text. I agree with Letissier's statement that, in *David Copperfield*, "[t]o all intents and purposes, this chromatic verbal display sticks in the narrator's mind thereafter and affords an opportunity for literary showmanship" (Letissier 20). The performative role of colour is so relevant that Letissier suggests the coinage of the term "chromotope," a concept that, while putting colour on the foreground of signification, also indicates that colours in Dickens "do not work mimetically as indexes of what the Victorian or pre-Victorian world looked like colourwise" (34).

According to the two strategies indicated by Batchelor, the chromophobic impulse identifies colour either with the superficial, the inessential, the cosmetic, or with the alien, and dangerous—or both. Indeed, both conditions apply to what the writer encounters in the United States, eventually experienced as an alien, dangerous country, where words (one is tempted to say politically correct words) varnish the most unpleasant aspects of society. Dickens's critique of the overly colourful shares the chromophobic rejection of what is perceived as insubstantial, with the additional complication that the lack of colour does not offer a genuine alternative, as the reality it reveals is marked by a state of corruption. Such attitude will be given greater emphasis in *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-1844), a novel in which the American episodes expose the self-promoting braggadocio of many Americana citizens, as well as the deceitful, fraudulent plans of the so-called Eden Project—a scam for credulous buyers whose final destination is ague-ridden Eden (the Cairo of *American Notes*). Colour, once again, either suggests the trivial, or the dangerous, or both.

In conclusion, Dickens's strategic juxtaposition of the colourful and the colourless in *American Notes* may be said to deliberately leave behind the realism expected of the travelogue genre. It will be appropriate therefore to evoke yet another more recent point of reference. Eileen Williams-Wanquet, in "Towards Defining 'Postrealism' in British Literature," sets her critical focus on the blurring of the boundaries between postmodern experiment and realism, adding that such manipulation of old forms actually establishes postrealism as a new genre which, according to Malcolm Bradbury, appears as "a familiar feature of quite a lot of our writing, seeking its new relation both with the fracturing spirit of modernism and with the

ways of nineteenth-century vraisemblance" (quoted by Williams-Wanquet 389).

Out of the already-established tradition of nineteenth-century realism, postrealism alludes to the intricacies of representation, interrogates the role of the perceiving subject, questions the truth of representation: while obeying a chronologico-geographical agenda, sanctioned by the traveller's authority, it suggests that there are byways out of the avenue of the real which operate in subtle contrast against the conventionally established rules of the realistic account.

Colours, in this context, become an important tool, never used by Dickens as fixed signifiers but always evoked with a surplus of intention and effect, which suggests that the author is intentionally bypassing realism, to use description within a different strategy of signification. *American Notes*, as far as the colour strategy is considered, could well be likened to a reality show: to the exploration of simulated reality, a genre-blending of comedy and satire, a take on metafiction, and, in sum, yet another Dickensian text that poses more than a challenge to contemporary readers.

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NOTES

[1]On *American Notes* and the circulation of money, see Vanfasse, "Dickens's *American Notes*," and Vanfasse, *La plume et la route*.

[2]See e.g. https://www.alamy.com/front-cover-for-the-history-and-mystery-of-the-pantomime-with-some-curiosities-and-droll-anecdotes-concerning-clown-and-pantaloon-harlequin-and-columbine-1863-image401808484.html

[3]See e.g. the end of chapter II.2: "Mrs General was not to be told of anything shocking. Accidents, miseries, and offences, were never to be mentioned before her. Passion was to go to sleep in the presence of Mrs General, and blood was to change to milk and water. The little that was left in the world, when all these deductions were made, it was Mrs General's province to varnish. In that formation process of hers, she dipped the smallest of brushes into the largest of pots, and varnished the surface of every object that came under consideration. The more cracked it was, the more Mrs General varnished it. There was varnish in Mrs General's voice, varnish in Mrs General's touch, an atmosphere of varnish round Mrs General's figure. Mrs General's dreams ought to have been varnished—if she had any—lying asleep in the arms of the good Saint Bernard, with the feathery snow falling on his house-top."

[4]See e.g. this Royal Staffordshire Willow Pattern Tea Cup, https://de.pinterest.com/pin/pair-of-meakin-royal-staffordshire-willow-pattern-tea-cups-with-saucers--177399672791994103/

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