From 1842 Charles Dickens was a keen traveller overseas, first to North America and then in 1844–45, to France, Switzerland and Italy. The Italian leg of this trip is frequently mentioned in his correspondence of this period and formed the basis of his travelogue *Pictures from Italy*, serialised in 1846. Following a second Italian tour in 1853, Dickens featured Venice, Florence and Rome as the backdrop for the newly-enriched Dorrits, fresh out of debtors’ prison, in his 1857 novel *Little Dorrit*. Over a thirteen-year period then, Dickens engaged with Italy in personal communication, in memoir and in fiction; and, in each case, he notes emphatically the division between Italy’s present and past, particularly with reference to Rome. Although he did travel further south to the Bay of Naples, this article will concentrate on depictions of Rome in Dickens and contemporary travel writing. This is in line with Dickens’ own emphasis—Pompeii, Herculaneum and Paestum do feature in *Pictures from Italy*, but in the deliberately cursory section entitled ‘A Rapid Diorama’. Rome itself appears in two sections: ‘To Rome by Pisa and Siena’ and ‘Rome’. Thus, the city is anticipated as is no other region of Italy in this work, and our first view of the city mirrors Dickens’ own—it is not the experience of being in Rome but the approach to and first sight of the city, and it is wholly disappointing:

> When we were fairly going off again, we began, in a perfect fever, to strain our eyes for Rome; and when, after another mile or two, the Eternal City appeared, at length, in the distance; it looked like - I am half afraid to write the word - like LONDON!!!

Where Dickens expects to find difference, he found only the familiarity of home. In part, Dickens is reacting to the weather—he happens to have entered Rome on an overcast day—but it soon becomes clear that the missing element is antiquity. Approaching from the north, and entering Rome on the Via Flaminia, he sees none of the remains of ancient Rome, and he is swept off to his lodgings before he sees the Rome he expected, the Rome of his imagination:

There were no great ruins, no solemn tokens of antiquity, to be seen; —they all lie on the other side of the city. There seemed to be long streets of commonplace shops and houses, such as are to be found in any European town; there were busy people, equipages, ordinary walkers to and fro; a multitude of chattering strangers. It was no more my Rome: the Rome of anybody’s fancy, man or boy; degraded and fallen and lying asleep in the sun among a heap of ruins: than the Place de la Concorde in Paris is. A cloudy sky, a dull cold rain, and muddy streets, I was prepared for, but not for this: and I confess to having gone to bed, that night, in a very indifferent humour, and with a very considerably quenched enthusiasm.²

As was the case for so many, Dickens had come to Rome with a preconceived idea of the city he would find. William Hazlitt, whose books were in Dickens’ personal library,³ also records his disappointment, claiming that ‘[n]o one from being in it would know he was in the place that had been twice mistress of the world…you are lost, for the most part, in a mass of tawdry, fulsome common-places’.⁴ Hazlitt also objects to post-antique Rome as unexpected and vulgar: ‘What has a green-grocer’s stall…a putrid trattoria…to do with ancient Rome? No! this is not the wall that Romulus leaped over: this is not the Capitol where Julius Caesar fell’,⁵ he exclaims, confusing both the Capitol with the Theatre of Pompey, and Romulus with Remus!

It is only when he encounters the Colosseum that Dickens feels that he is experiencing authentic Rome. Having expressed his disappointment with St. Peter’s (‘I


⁴ William Hazlitt, *Note of a Journey through France and Italy*, (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1826), 279.

⁵ ibid., 279.
have been infinitely more affected in many English cathedrals when the organ has been playing, and in many English country churches when the congregation have been singing.'), he gives the order: ‘“[g]o to the Coliseum’,”6 and is overawed by its solitude and crumbling state: ‘[h]ere was Rome indeed at last’.7 However, the amphitheatre’s iconic status ironically springs not from its magnitude or longevity but in its perpetual decay ‘[t]o see it crumbling there, an inch a year … is to see the ghost of old Rome’. Although Dickens dramatises the monument, and briefly envisages that any visitor might imagine its ancient context, with thousands of spectators gazing down at the arena’s butchery,8 it is the Colosseum as ruin which impresses Dickens. This, he also claims, is how it strikes any modern viewer:

Never, in its bloodiest prime, can the sight of the gigantic Coliseum, full and running over with the lustiest life, have moved one’s heart, as it must move all who look upon it now, a ruin. GOD be thanked: a ruin!9

This monument alone remains impressive to Dickens when he visited Rome again in 1853. In the eight-year gap, his memory has reconstructed Rome’s ruins and has exaggerated their magnificence; however, the Colosseum – ‘my old place’ – remains ‘as grand as ever’.10

In his correspondence Dickens’ first view of the arena is less dramatic, but he similarly compares the basilica with the amphitheatre and stresses the immediate impact of the latter: ‘I have been to St. Peter’s, and to the Coliseum. The former struck me of course, immensely. But the latter is the great sensation. And I never can forget it’.11 He told his friend and biographer, John Forster, that he had never been moved

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6 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 117. Nineteenth-century texts consistently spell Colosseum as ‘Coliseum’. I preserve this only in direct quotation and opt for the now more common ‘Colosseum’.

7 ibid., 118.

8 In fact, this is a rare example in the *Pictures from Italy*: there is far less imaginative, historical reconstruction and concomitant moralising about the Colosseum and other Roman monuments in Dickens than is regularly found in similar nineteenth-century texts; compare Charlotte Eaton, *Rome in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1860 [first published 1822]), 84: ‘that wide arena, so deep in blood … Well may we call this the amphitheatre the School of Cruelty!’ See also Louis Simond, *A Tour in Italy and Sicily*. (London: Longman, 1828), 171, and compare John Eustace’s focus on the durability, rather than ruined state, of the Colosseum, John C. Eustace, *A Classical Tour through Italy*, (London: J. Mawman, 1813), 374–76.

9 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 118.


11 ibid., 4.258.
by the sight of anything more than the Colosseum ‘except perhaps the first contemplation of the Falls of Niagara’. Here, Dickens places himself in the tradition of many nineteenth-century writers—unsurprisingly, expressions of awe at the first sight of the Colosseum were nothing new, and Byron’s enthusiastic raptures on the monument were faithfully reported by the most popular guidebook to Italy of the day, John Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy.* However, for Dickens, who was unimpressed with so much of Rome, and indeed of Italy, the Colosseum becomes his touchstone; he feels compelled to visit it every day during a four week visit, and he relieves his boredom with Rome’s churches by making return trips to it.

Commentators frequently claim that Dickens was more focused on modernity, progress and Italy’s future than its classical antiquity. Sally Ledger, for example, warns against a nostalgic reading of Dickens’ Roman ruins, and Burgan makes clear that Dickens disapproved of those who saw only the picturesque in Italian landscapes, ignoring the sordid reality of its grinding poverty and stagnation. It is also the case

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13 John Murray, *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy* (London: John Murray, 1843), 296. Although Dickens was hostile to guidebooks, preferring personal and spontaneous responses when he travelled, it is clear that he was dependent upon handbooks such as Murray’s for his itineraries and background to sites when in Europe: Elenor McNees, ‘Reluctant Source: Murray’s handbooks and *Pictures from Italy*’, *Dickens Quarterly* 24.4 (2007): 213; Ruth Livesey, ‘Europe’ in *Charles Dickens in Context*, eds. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 206. Indeed there was a copy of Murray’s *Handbook for Travellers in France* (1843) in Dickens’ library (Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the library of Charles Dickens*, 84), and it is likely that he used the guides to Northern and Central Italy on his visit in 1844–45: Nicholas Bentley, Michael Slater and Nina Burgis, *The Dickens Index*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 173; see also the book order to John Murray of 5 March 1844 (*Letters*, 4.63). On the Murray guides’ repeated quotation of Byron and the literary associations of place, see Barbara Schaff, ‘John Murray’s *Handbooks to Italy: Making Tourism Literary,*’ in *Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture*, ed. Nicola J. Watson (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2006), 106–18.
14 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 161.
15 ibid., 129.
16 Sally Ledger, ‘“GOD Be Thanked: A Ruin!” The Embrace of Italian Modernity in *Pictures from Italy* and the *Daily News*,’ in *Dickens and Italy: Little Dorrit and Pictures from Italy*, eds. Michael Hollington and Francesca Orestano, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 91.
17 William Burgan, ‘Little Dorrit in Italy’, *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 29.4 (1975): 395-6. Burgan adds that Dickens was ‘reluctant ... to concede any superiority to past times’ (‘Little Dorrit’, 406), but, as argued here, ancient Rome is often an exception. However, Dickens was a keen supporter of Italian modernisation and national independence (Michael Hollington, ‘The European Context’ in *Charles Dickens in Context*, eds. Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 43) and his visits to Italy were made in the two tumultuous decades which preceded the coun-
that Dickens did not receive a strong Classical education—he seems to have had a limited understanding of Latin, and while his library contained many standard works by classical authors, such as Homer, Cicero, Virgil and Livy, all are in English translation. But it is obvious from his response to the Colosseum that his view of the ancient past was not straightforwardly negative. The Colosseum often elicits both wonder and horror in the nineteenth century, given its unquestioned, but probably erroneous, association with Christian persecution. For Dickens, it does bring to mind the savagery of Roman spectacle—hence his response: ‘GOD be thanked: a ruin!’ But Dickens’ view of the Colosseum and its association with ancient barbarity is seemingly illogical: the idea that we should be grateful for the monument’s ruined state situates Roman cruelty very specifically in the past. In spite of this, Dickens does not restrict the brutality of the arena to the pre-Christian era, claiming that ‘its ancient influences outlive all other remnants of the old mythology and old butchery of Rome, in the nature of the fierce and cruel Roman people. The Italian face changes as the visitor approaches the city; its beauty becomes devilish’. This thought is later reinforced as the author is present at the execution of a murderer in the city. After the man is beheaded before a large crowd, Dickens comments, ‘Nobody cared, or was at all affected … It was an ugly, filthy, careless, sickening spectacle; meaning nothing but butchery beyond the momentary interest, to the one wretched actor’. Although he does not, here, make the connection with the violence of the arena, Dickens has already juxtaposed ancient and modern responses to its bloodshed, claiming that nineteenth-century Romans, on the basis of their harsh expressions,
And, in fact, unlike the guidebooks of this period, Dickens never associates Roman barbarity with Christian persecution. On the contrary, his anti-Catholicism frequently results in a strong preference for antiquity, and the fault line often falls along the perceived falseness of the Catholic church, which he contrasts with the authenticity of the ancients.\textsuperscript{23} To Dickens, Catholic churches are gaudy theatre spaces. St. Peter’s interior is full of stage images, as the area behind the altar is compared to opera boxes, and Bernini’s Chair of St. Peter (which Dickens calls ‘the Pope’s chair’) is said to be located in a ‘kind of theatre’\textsuperscript{24}. In keeping with this, Catholic ritual is staged, an empty show, ‘the performance of Mass’\textsuperscript{25}, and when the Pope is borne around the basilica in his chair, Dickens thinks (ironically) of the fifth of November and the stuffed effigy of Guy Fawkes.\textsuperscript{26} Holy week (Easter) is dismissed as ‘these shows’ and drives Dickens to ‘the Ruins again’,\textsuperscript{27} while the papal ritual of the refiguring of the Last Supper is described as though it were a play being performed.\textsuperscript{28} This in turn is compared with the ‘reality’ of Pagan Rome, as Dickens escapes the mêlée of Easter Sunday at St. Peter’s by turning to the Pantheon, which he describes as ‘majestic … all seemed and furrowed like an old face’.\textsuperscript{29} Antiquity as authentic is a theme which continues to occupy Dickens, and on his second visit in 1853, he still writes of ‘the ruined part of Rome—the real original Rome’.\textsuperscript{30}

The language of performance and artificiality is thrown into relief by Dickens’ arrival in Rome in late January 1845, in the midst of Carnival. Just as Mass puts Italians on show, so does the Carnival, and Dickens characterises the Roman participants as another spectacle for the viewer, detailing their clothes (including instances of cross

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} ibid., 118. Kate Flint, introduction to Pictures from Italy by Charles Dickens (London: Penguin Books, 1998 [first published 1846]), xxvii, writes of the ‘simultaneity of present and past’.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Note that Dickens visiting Italy at time of mounting hostility to Catholic Church among Italian intellectuals and radicals: Christopher Duggan, A Concise History of Italy, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 102–3.
\item \textsuperscript{24} Dickens, Pictures from Italy, 119.
\item \textsuperscript{25} ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{26} ibid., 121.
\item \textsuperscript{27} ibid., 151.
\item \textsuperscript{28} ibid., 154–56.
\item \textsuperscript{29} ibid., 159.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Dickens, Letters, 7.199.
\end{itemize}
dressing) in a flurry of description which mirrors the chaos of the occasion. Yet this is a spectacle which contrasts strongly with the St. Peter’s High Mass in a number of ways, as its performance is spontaneous, democratic and honest. Moreover, Dickens invokes the theory that Carnival, and particularly its ‘closing ceremony’, the snuffing out of candles or Moccoletti, may be ‘a remnant of the ancient Saturnalia’, suggesting, again, a preference for ancient over modern practices in Italy. Perhaps to reinforce this link, in referring to the Moccoletti, he also uses the same expression of excitement which he had for the Colosseum: ‘I shall never forget its innocent vivacity’. Dickens’ first visit to Rome is framed by performance: as he arrives during Carnival, so he leaves during the fireworks to celebrate Easter Sunday in St. Peter’s Square, an exuberant display which entrances Dickens far more than the rituals of Benediction he has just left, and the only time he expresses any wonder at the basilica. But at the last, it is ‘the old ruined Rome’ to which he returns, with a checklist of ancient monuments filling his final moments in the city, and predictably, the Colosseum is singled out and has to be personally farewelled.

Another aspect of the travelogue’s anti-Catholicism concerns the Vatican’s inability to discriminate and to appreciate the artistic worth of antiquities. In the Vatican Galleries ‘there is a considerable amount of rubbish’; the reason being that ‘any old piece of sculpture, dug out of the ground, finds a place in a gallery because it is old, and without any reference to its intrinsic merits’. In this passage Dickens considers both Classical and post-Classical artworks, but he is particularly impressed by ancient and neo-Classical sculpture (‘The exquisite grace and beauty of Canova’s statues; the wonderful gravity and repose of many of the ancient works in sculpture’), and he admires them far more than the ‘most detestable class of productions’ which populate Rome’s churches, by which he means Bernini and other baroque sculptors. Thus Dickens’ personal aesthetics are framed by his violent antipathy towards Catholicism and his concomitant favour for pagan antiquity and its revival.

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31 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 124–28. See Flint, introduction to *Pictures from Italy*, xxii-xxiii, on the liberating effects of the Carnival.
32 ibid., 128.
33 ibid., 128.
34 ibid., my italics; compare Dickens, *Letters* 4.258 quoted above.
35 ibid., 159–60.
36 ibid., 161.
37 ibid., 144.
38 ibid., 146.
However, Dickens warns against romanticising Italy, and recommends ‘a new picturesque’,\(^3^9\) which will not whitewash the poverty and squalor in which many Italians of the 1840s were forced to survive.\(^4^0\) But there is no doubt that Dickens does romanticise antiquity, for although ancient Italy doubtless comprised its share of squalor, its poor are long dead, unlike those who, a horrified Dickens notes, live out miserable lives in nineteenth-century Naples.\(^4^1\) In addition, he depicts antiquity, or at least its remains, as more akin to an unaffected and natural state. Not only does ancient ritual lack the artificiality of the Church, but even the monuments and locations of antiquity resemble nature. So the Colosseum affects him as powerfully as that great force of nature in the New World, the Niagara Falls.\(^4^2\) Even the secondary structures created from the stone ripped out of the Colosseum create ‘ponderous buildings’ which ‘[shut] out the moon, like mountains’, and the spoliation of the monument is a paradoxically natural process, as the new buildings are ‘reared from’ the ancient one.\(^4^3\) Dickens understandably reads Rome as a hybrid city, comprising, as it does, spoils from many cultures, as well as ancient structures which have been adopted and adapted by subsequent civilisation. For example, he is aware that statues of Saints Peter and Paul have been substituted for the lost originals on the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius.\(^4^4\) However, the Christianisation of ancient Rome is not always a happy one, and he also writes of the ‘[m]onstrous union’ of pagan and Christian where ancient buildings have been ‘blended into some modern structure’.\(^4^5\) The correlation of pagan/ancient with nature and Christian/modern with artificiality stands behind such comments, as it is the later addition which perverts the organic purity of the original Roman monument. On the whole, for Dickens, antiquity should be left to decay into the natural world.

Similarly, the view of the Roman countryside from the Appian Way is compared

\(^{39}\) ibid., 167.
\(^{41}\) Dickens, Pictures from Italy, 166–67.
\(^{42}\) Forster, The Life of Charles Dickens, 369, quoted p.4 above.
\(^{43}\) Dickens, Pictures from Italy, 150.
\(^{44}\) ibid.
\(^{45}\) ibid., 151.
with the American prairie in a neat paradox, since the point of comparison is the vast, sprawling desolation of both places; yet the similarity only throws into relief, the immense difference between America and Italy, a difference which grounds Italian culture in the dead past and America in a world of emptiness, where no culture has ever existed:

[the aspect of the desolate Campagna in one direction, where it was most level, reminded me of an American prairie; but what is the solitude of a region where men have never dwelt, to that of a Desert, where a mighty race have left their foot-prints in the earth from which they have vanished; where the resting-places of their Dead, have fallen like their Dead; and the broken hourglass of Time is but a heap of idle dust!]

Dickens visited the Looking-Glass Prairie in Illinois in 1842 and was, characteristically, unimpressed by its ‘barren monotony’, adding ‘the effect on me was disappointment’. In contrast with his comment on the Colosseum (‘I never can forget it’), the Prairie is memorable in a distinctly lukewarm fashion: ‘It is not a scene to be forgotten, but it is scarcely one, I think…to remember with much pleasure’. In a sense, Dickens’ use of imagery taken from natural landscape serves only to highlight the existence of artificial structures in ancient Italy; and the knowledge that an ancient civilization once occupied this space is enough to transform the landscape for Dickens and to invest it with meaning. The Roman Campagna is a ‘ruined world’, its significance derives from the tragedy of its lost past.

In contrast, Dickens’ view of contemporary Italy was generally negative, and this was mainly due to his impression of the country as unproductive and lazy, a place of inertia and torpor. He supported Mazzini’s Young Italy movement, which fought for democracy and unification in the 1830s and 1840s, and, in line with this, Dickens saw local rulers and the church as responsible for Italian stagnation. He also uses Italy, and other European settings, as a mirror for Britain, showing that the tyranni-

46 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 149.
48 Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 150.
49 Kennedy, ‘Dream or Reality?’, 96–98.
50 Ledger, “‘GOD Be Thanked: A Ruin!’”, 88.
51 For example, Dickens, *Pictures from Italy*, 68.
cal abuse of power can lead to discontentment, uprising and chaos.\textsuperscript{52} He is pleased with the small degree of progress which has been made by his second visit to Italy in 1853, including the installation of the telegraph line, which is tellingly juxtaposed with antiquity in dramatic fashion:

\begin{quote}
[\textit{t}he Coliseum, in its magnificent old decay, is as grand as ever; and with the electric telegraph darting through one of its ruined arches like a sunbeam and piercing direct through its cruel old heart, is even grander.\textsuperscript{53}
\end{quote}

However, in \textit{Little Dorrit}, written after this second visit, Rome’s ruins take on a meaning quite specific to the novel. To the eponymous heroine, Amy, Italy is dreamlike and unreal from the moment that her family crosses the Alps.\textsuperscript{54} Having been born in the Marshalsea debtors’ gaol, in which her father has been imprisoned for two decades, Amy has spent her entire life calling the prison home. When the Dorrits are miraculously found to be wealthy, the second half of the novel throws them into aristocratic circles and enables them to travel on the continent, where Mr. Dorrit is keen to bury his disgraceful past by having his family learn the conventions of gentility quickly—a process which Amy finds artificial and near-impossible. Thus she retreats into longing for her humble past and contemplation of Italian scenery, but, just as she cannot come to terms with her new social position, so the landscape itself does not seem real to her.\textsuperscript{55} However, when the Dorrits reach Rome, Dickens fixes on the ancient monuments to explore Amy’s consciousness and to make her sense of loss concrete. She goes out, alone, to visit

the ruins of old Rome. The ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old tombs, besides being what they were to her, were ruins of the old Marshalsea—ruins of her own old life—ruins of the faces and forms that of old peopled it—ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys. Two ruined spheres of action and suffering were before the solitary girl often sitting on some broken fragment; and in the lonely places, under the blue sky, she saw them both together.\textsuperscript{56}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Most notably France in \textit{A Tale of Two Cities}; see Livesey, ‘Europe’, 209.
\item[53] Dickens, \textit{Letters}, 7.200.
\item[55] Dickens, \textit{Little Dorrit}, 491.
\item[56] ibid., 639.
\end{footnotes}
She empathises with the ruins, and they become one with her ruined past—it is only when she sees antiquity that Italy becomes real to Amy, although in a way which forever connects the country to desolation and the past, rather than to progress and the future. Like the terrible poverty of Amy’s life in the prison, the ancient past was far from perfect, but the loss of both is bemoaned, and it is clear that what has replaced it is inferior in spirit.

It is appropriately on his return to Rome that the two realities of his rich new life and his past in the Marshalsea merge for the self-deluded Mr. Dorrit, and, shortly before the collapse which leads to his death, he hallucinates that he is still in the gaol while he is actually at an elaborate dinner party.\(^57\) The other Dorrits try to bury the past, but it is Amy’s willingness to remember the Marshalsea through Rome’s monuments that makes her the stronger character: she alone will survive and flourish by the novel’s end.

In contrast with Mr. Dorrit’s refusal to face the past and Amy’s embrace of it, a Mrs General, the woman employed to ‘educate’ Amy in correct behavior, gives us another version of how to respond to antiquity, and it is clearly the wrong way. While Amy is out communing directly with Rome’s monuments, Mrs General relies on guidebooks, specifically *A Classical Tour through Italy* by John Eustace. Dickens possessed the 1841 edition of the three volume work in his library,\(^58\) but he wrote that he bought it just to see how appalling it was (‘that I might lay my hand upon an instance or two of his worthlessness’).\(^59\) So, while Amy forms a spontaneous and heartfelt bond with Rome, Mrs General is described as ‘scratching up the dryest little bones of antiquity … like a Ghoule in gloves’\(^60\)

Amy has been left alone with Mrs General, as the rest of the family has left Rome after her sister Fanny’s outrageously extravagant wedding to an aristocrat, which ensures that the Dorrits have definitively ‘arrived’ socially. Here, another quite different and more lighthearted use of Roman antiquity features. The gaudy excess of

\(^{57}\) ibid, 676–77.
\(^{58}\) Stonehouse, *Catalogue of the library of Charles Dickens*, 43.
the wedding invokes an inversion of spectacle, as Rome’s monuments now become the amazed onlookers:

The day came, and the She-Wolf in the Capitol might have snarled with envy to see how the Island Savages contrived these things now-a-days. The murderous-headed statues of the wicked Emperors of the Soldiery, whom sculptors had not been able to flatter out of their villainous hideousness, might have come off their pedestals to run away with the Bride. The choked old fountain, where erst the Gladiators washed, might have leaped into life again to honor the ceremony. The Temple of Vesta might have sprung up anew from its ruins, expressly to lend its countenance to the occasion.61

The tale is apparently one of progress—just as modern Britons evolved from the ‘savages’ enslaved by ancient Romans, so the Dorrits have left behind their oppressive poverty. But their new position is a mirage, as Mr. Dorrit sees when he slips back into his old reality just before his death. By the end of the novel, all of the newfound wealth is lost by the lauded, but fraudulent, stepfather of Fanny’s new husband. So it is appropriate that Dickens disrupts his analogy as his characters’ return to the ‘ruin-soaked land’ of Italy: ‘with their coach-load of luxuries from the two great capitals of Europe, they were (like the Goths reversed) beating at the gates of Rome’.62 The Dorrits conflate past and present time, and even rewrite history; and Rome’s own narrative is useful to Dickens in conveying their confused status as wealthy, yet outsiders.

For Dickens, Italy was a place of extremes, and the remains of ancient Rome encompass these contrasts in solid form: they represent a compelling, but derelict past, which has given way to a stagnant present, held back by Catholic superstition. Antiquity is useful in this critique, as it provides an alternative world, against which the present can be judged. In both Pictures from Italy and Little Dorrit, the ancient past needs to be embraced, so that the present can be understood and future improvement made possible.

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61 Dickens, Little Dorrit, 636.  
62 ibid., 667.