

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

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## Dickens and Margolyes in America

**Abstract.** In 1842 Charles Dickens published *American Notes*, a record of his impressions made on his first journey to America in the same year. In 2005, Lion Television, in cooperation with the BBC, released a ten-episode documentary series *Dickens in America*. The host of the series is British actress Miriam Margolyes, who retraces the writer's 1842 route and compares his impressions upon particular sights with her own opinions formed while traveling across the United States and Canada on the threshold of the third millennium. The aim of the article is to examine selected fragments of Dickens's *American Notes*, and juxtapose them with the visual material presented in the *Dickens in America* series.

**Key words.** Dickens, *American Notes*, Margolyes, *Dickens in America*

### 1. Introduction

In the 1842 introduction to *American Notes* (1842), unpublished at that time, Dickens (1812-1870) summarizes what his travelogue on his first journey to the United States touches upon:

[It is] a record of the impressions I received from day to day, during my hasty travels in America, and sometimes (but not always) of the conclusions to which they, and after-reflection on them, have led me.  
("Introductory" 2004, 275-276)

Acutely aware that the publication would not win critical acclaim due to his hostile comments on the New World, the British writer appears to deliberately refer to his freedom of speech, always cherished by Americans since the Bill of Rights of 1791, and admits he has always been a seeker after truth, no matter if at home or abroad ("Introductory" 2004, 277). In 2005,

the Lion Television production company, in cooperation with BBC Four and Two, released a ten-episode documentary series *Dickens in America*. The host of the series is British actress Miriam Margolyes (born in 1941), the winner of a BAFTA award (the British Academy of Film and Television Arts) for her role in the 1993 screen adaptation of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* (1920). In the 2005 series, a lifelong enthusiast for Dickens's prose, Margolyes retraces the 1842 route of her favorite literary companion. Reaching the majority of the places visited and described by the author of *American Notes*, she evokes Dickens's impressions upon particular sights and American public life of the 1840s, and compares them with her own opinions formed while traveling across the United States and Canada on the threshold of the third millennium. The aim of the article is to examine selected fragments of Dickens's *American Notes* (hereafter cited as AN), and juxtapose them with the visual material presented in the *Dickens in America* series.

## **2. Perkins School for the Blind**

As John Sears notes (1998, 89), guidebooks published in the third, fourth, and fifth decades of the nineteenth century promoted penitentiaries and institutions for the mentally and physically disabled as tourist attractions, and encouraged would-be sightseers to include them in their itineraries. Following the traveling custom of the times, Dickens and his spouse paid a visit to the Perkins Institution and Massachusetts Asylum for the Blind at Boston. Founded in 1829, largely thanks to the efforts of Dr. John Fisher, Perkins School for the Blind, as it is now called, left a long-lasting impression on the visitors due to its appropriate regulations, cleanliness, and humanizing environment, noteworthy features in the 1840s, in a county not older than seventy years. As if he were a man of our times, Dickens began his thought-provoking description of the institution with one paragraph on admission and payment requirements. Impressed by the efficiency of the asylum, the British writer was affected by

hearing from one of its board members that, after some time, despite impairment, the inmates were under an obligation to make a living while being on the premises of the school in order not “to convert the establishment into an almshouse, or to retain any but working bees in the hive” (qtd. in AN, 38).

In the part dedicated to the Perkins institution, the author of *American Notes* quotes extensive passages from Dr. Samuel Howe’s pamphlet reporting on the case history of Laura Bridgman (1829-1889). Deaf, blind, and dumb, with no sense of smell, and nearly destitute of the sense of taste, Bridgman is considered to be one of the first disabled students successfully educated, who later on, in her adulthood, worked at Perkins as a needlework teacher (Ingham 2004, 287). By means of a manual alphabet, Howe taught her English, and when she was able to fingerspell, she studied history, geography, algebra, arithmetic, philosophy, and physiology (McGinnity *et al.* 2004).

In *American Notes*, Dickens describes the twelve-year-old Laura as an agreeable girl of “delicate frame,” imprisoned “in a marble cell, impervious to any ray of light, or particle of sound,” but still cheerful, sincere, and thankful (AN, 40). With a green ribbon over her eyes, the visible sign of her blindness, worn meaningfully by her doll, too, Laura is busy writing her diary, or engrossed “in an animated communication,” conversing silently with her instructress (AN, 40). In addition to her dedication to a given task, Dickens pays heed to her spontaneous reactions, how her face beams with sheer merriment and evident pleasure whenever she meets her favorite teacher or playmate (AN, 50). In Dr. Howe’s report that Dickens quotes extensively, there is a detailed account describing the process of language acquisition by the blind patient, which is itself interesting from a linguistic point of view. However, what remains imprinted on the reader’s memory is the moment when Laura discovers she is able to bypass the limitations of her mind, and communicate her own thoughts to the surrounding world:

(...) her intellect began to work: she perceived that here was a way by which she could herself make up a sign of any thing that was in her own mind, and show it to another mind; and at once her countenance lighted up with a human expression: it was no longer a dog, or parrot: it was an immortal spirit, eagerly seizing upon a new link of union with other spirits! (Howe qtd. in AN, 43-44)

Thanks to Howe's report cited by Dickens, we can also acquaint ourselves with the case history of Oliver Caswell, a blind, deaf, and dumb child with an appetite for knowledge. When he became speech disabled as a result of scarlet fever, he used to touch people's lips and his mouth in order to check if his lips were in the right place (AN, 51). What also strikes the reader of the cited Howe report is the scene when the blind Laura takes a keen interest in the blind Oliver's education, accompanying him in the process of acquiring the finger language:

Laura was by, interested even to agitation; and the two presented a singular sight: her face was flushed and anxious, and her fingers twined in among ours so closely as to follow every motion, but so lightly as not to embarrass them; while Oliver stood attentive. . . there was an expression of anxiety as he tried to imitate the motions; then a smile came stealing out as he thought he could do so, and spread into a joyous laugh the moment he succeeded, and felt me pat his head, and Laura clap him heartily upon the back, and jump up and down in her joy. (Howe qtd. in AN, 52)

The other fragments in which Dickens speaks to us directly about his own impressions the Perkins patients made on him doubtless offer superior accounts, serving simultaneously as a powerful reminder of how important it is to appreciate the gifts of life we routinely take for granted. While scrutinizing the countenances of the disabled pupils, Dickens observes, accentuating their honesty:

It is strange to watch the faces of the blind, and see how free they are from all concealment of what is passing in their thoughts; observing which, a man with eyes may blush to contemplate the mask he wears. (AN, 39)

And at the end of the author's deliberations over the Perkins institution, the reader finds another meaningful passage emphasizing in a masterly way the difference between people with disabilities and those who are able to hear, speak, and see:

Ye who have eyes and see not, and have ears and hear not; ye who are as the hypocrites of sad countenances, and disfigure your faces that ye may seem unto men to fast; learn healthy cheerfulness, and mild contentment, from the deaf, and dumb, and blind! Self-elected saints with gloomy brows, this sightless, earless, voiceless child may teach you lessons you will do well to follow. (AN, 53)

In the second episode of the series *Dickens in America*, while retracing the writer's footsteps at Perkins School for the Blind, Margolyes conducts an interview with Steven Rothstein, its ninth president, who gives the viewer a brief historical background on the institution's beginning, as the first school for the visually disabled in the United States. He recalls how Dr. Howe, the first school president (and the husband of Julia Ward Howe), challenged the notion that blind or deaf people were not able to think, not to mention their abilities to gain knowledge. Pointing out Laura Bridgman's achievements, Rothstein confirms that in the 1830s a visit to the school was included in a Boston itinerary, and presents Laura as a celebrity of those days ("Boston" 2005), which strikingly contrasts with the twenty-first-century picture of fame created by various media.

In the "Boston" episode, Nathaniel Parker, Dickens's voice of the series, reads both aforementioned citations referring to the differences between the disabled and those "who have eyes and see not," to cite the writer again. The meaning of these fragments is significantly reinforced by the scenes in which young students of Perkins learn about the surrounding world by feeling flower petals and plant leaves as well as everyday objects. Together with other Dickensian descriptions, the audible excerpts of *American Notes* are also supplemented with black-and-white drawings of that era, e.g., the circa 1841 picture of the blindfolded Laura teaching another pupil to read ("Boston" 2005). The student in the picture

turns out to be Oliver Caswell, whose case history, although briefly quoted by Dickens in his 1842 work, is not mentioned in the televised travelogue. From the series episode on Boston, nevertheless, the viewer can learn about Helen Keller (1880-1968), another extraordinary student at the Perkins institution, whose mother, in turn, found the information about the school while reading *American Notes*. The cum laude graduate of Radcliff College (now within Harvard University), Keller is the author of such books as, e.g., *The Story of My Life* (1903), *The World I Live In* (1908), *My Religion* (1927), and *The Open Door* (1957). According to John Sykes (2007, 90-91), Walker Percy (1916-1990), throughout his writing career, frequently adverted to one passage in Keller's autobiography *The Story of My Life*, in which she depicts the birth of her linguistic consciousness, the moment when she realized there was a link between surrounding reality and the signs her lifelong teacher, Anne Mansfield Sullivan, fingerspelled into her hands:

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Some one was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away. (Keller 2000)

To return to the "Boston" episode, during her visitation of the institution, Margolyes also holds a stimulating conversation with Jaimi Lard, an official spokesperson for Perkins School for the Blind. Blind, deaf, and dumb since birth, Lard, communicating through tactile sign language, answers Margolyes's questions enthusiastically, and admits that Keller has been a source of inspiration to her. Pointing out the things she has in common with the author of *The Story of My Life*, Lard speaks to Margolyes about her everyday life, how she travels and

attends meetings with different people and at various places. Like Bridgman and Keller in the past, she is a living example that, despite many physical disabilities, people are able to remove communication limitations, and accomplish Perkins's goal as listed on their website, i.e., "all we see is possibility" (Perkins 2013).

### **3. Lowell, Massachusetts**

Journeying across New England, Dickens spent one February afternoon of 1842 in Lowell, at that time, a fast-developing industrial town in the state of Massachusetts (and later Jack Kerouac's birthplace). In his depiction of Lowell in *American Notes*, the author, first of all, indicates its young age (it was founded in 1822), and stresses, among other things, the unusual architectural style of a new church and the fragility of its building constructions. In fact, the British writer states that "nothing in the whole town looked old to me, except the mud, which in some parts was almost knee-deep, and might have been deposited there, on the subsiding of the waters after the Deluge" (AN, 75). Despite these scathing introductory remarks, Dickens, nevertheless, was genuinely impressed with the workings of the Lowell textile mills, the actual purpose of his visit.

What Dickens emphasizes in his account of the woolen, carpet, and cotton factories is not their manufacturing output, but the impact the working girls of Lowell made on him. Clean, "healthy in appearance," the mill girls were "well-dressed. . . and had the manners and deportment of young women: not of degraded brutes of burden" (AN, 76-77). In addition, the weave rooms where they worked were characteristic of cleanliness as well as orderliness, and their working space was feminized with some greenery (Louttit 2007, 33-34). Dickens also indicates three aspects he views as unexpected to the readers of the Old World, due to the mill girls' social position which, for many at that time, eliminated them from active participation in cultural life. Firstly, the writer points out there was a piano in many of their dormitories;

secondly, the working girls were readers of circulating libraries, and what is more, they edited a periodical *The Lowell Offering*, in which they published readable, according to Dickens, short stories and articles mainly on the factories and nature (AN, 78-79).

Literary critics are unanimous in attaching importance to Dickens's visit to the town of Lowell. In "Dickens and Industry," Natalie McKnight claims that Boz's excursion to the mills "inspired him and helped to shape his own efforts as a writer," and that "after Lowell, Dickens began creating more interesting, active, and independent female characters than he had before" (qtd. in Louttit 2007, 27). By contrast, Jerome Meckier draws the conclusion that "his afternoon in the mills survived as a pleasant memory but shrank in significance to an isolated experience, with which he could do little creatively except award it a chapter of its own," finding the Lowell fragments "un-Dickensian in style and spirit" (qtd. in Louttit 2007, 27-28). To a certain extent, Louttit (2007, 28) agrees with both opinions, however, he raises an objection to the examples of the Dickensian female characters McKnight provides. As far as Meckier's comment is concerned, Louttit explains the "un-Dickensian" style in the passages with the genre *American Notes* exemplifies, namely reportage that embraces "economical, discursive" writing (2007, 34).

Together with the host of the series dedicated to Dickens's first journey to the United States and Canada, we visit the textile mills the writer was fascinated to see, which now constitute part of Lowell National Historical Park, and record one of the stories on the Industrial Revolution in the USA ("New England" 2005). Following Margolyes, we have an opportunity to widen our mental picture of Lowell not only when the historical Boott Cotton Mills weave room and the inside of the boarding houses occupied by the working women in the past are on camera. In the third episode of the series, the travelogue host talks to Natalie McKnight, Boston University professor, co-editor of *Dickens Studies Annual*, and the author of the above-cited article about Dickens's references to Lowell. According to McKnight's

televised commentary, the British writer enjoyed his visit to the town tremendously, which comes as a surprise, if we take into consideration that it was, then, a highly industrialized place, the main manufacturing center in the USA. However, McKnight claims that Lowell exemplified to the author of *American Notes* the winning combination of industry and art, something he wished he had observed in English factories, as well. Moreover, in the record of his 1842 journey, the author presented the mills in a very favorable light, so among many hostile reviews his travelogue received, the comment passed by Lowell authors was one of few positive critiques of the publication (McKnight in “New England” 2005). In her summary of Dickens’s visit to the mills, given in the “New England” episode, Margolyes mentions that the writer was, in fact, mistaken when thinking that the majority of the working women at Lowell had pianos, or were the avid readers of circulating libraries. That shows that Dickens had rather a romanticized image of the mill girls, but perhaps it could be explained with the fact that the British writer was not indifferent to female charm (Margolyes in “New England” 2005), which is noticeable in some excerpts of *American Notes* (AN, 83, 103, 107, 117).

#### **4. Cairo, Illinois**

Traveling from Louisville, Kentucky, to St. Louis (on the border of the states of Missouri and Illinois) on a steamboat, the Dickensses reached the port of Cairo, Illinois. Located at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, the place turned out to be one of the most desolate and derelict New World sites, described in *American Notes* in extremely strong terms. “A dismal swamp, on which the half-built houses rot away: cleared here and there for the space of a few yards; and teeming, then, with rank unwholesome vegetation. . . a hotbed of disease, an ugly sepulchre, a grave uncheered by any gleam of promise: a place without one single quality, in earth or air or water, to commend it: such is this dismal Cairo” to the author of *American Notes* (AN, 190). Of great importance is also the fact that Dickens notices

the substantial discrepancy between the stark reality that presents itself to him and the picture of the great Cairo promoted in the United Kingdom, among the unaware clients who were lured into purchasing the bonds of Darius Holbrook's Cairo City and Canal Company, sold in England through John Wright and Company (Hubach 1998, 94; Ingham 2004, 304). In fact, scholars used to assert that Dickens had also bought some of the Cairo bonds, but in the televised commentary, Jerome Meckier, the earlier quoted professor of English at the University of Kentucky, states that there appears to be no tangible proof to support this claim ("The Midwest" 2005).

The fact is that the early settlement in Cairo and its surroundings made upon Dickens such an unfavorable and lasting impression that he decided to use the place as a model for the town of Eden in his 1843-1844 novel, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Ingham 2004, 304). In this partially fictionalized version of Dickens's trip to America, the closer the steamboat is to Eden, which was to be a flourishing American town, the more dispirited Martin becomes, looking overboard at the bleak landscape:

A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; . . . where even the blessed sun, shining down on festering elements of corruption and disease, became a horror; this was the realm of Hope through which they moved. At last they stopped. At Eden too. The waters of the Deluge might have left it but a week before: so choked with slime and matted growth was the hideous swamp which bore that name. (Dickens 1982, 442)

"De good ole Cairo," which to the "trembly and feverish" Jim, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), signifies the gateway to freedom (Twain 1994, 91-92), is a place that Margolyes would like to leave as soon as possible. And although she was given notice of its run-down state, the present-day conditions of the town turn out to be far poorer than those she was prepared to see. In the episode entitled "The Midwest and Saint Louis," after the focus on the faded sign "Welcome to historical Cairo, gateway to the South," the camera

shows us one of the most disadvantaged areas of the United States, in fact, a ghost town, abandoned and forgotten a long time ago. The streets of the city represent the picture of shabbiness and dilapidation, replete with crumbling buildings with old neon signs and paint peeling off the front walls. The filmed misery hovering over the once-thriving Cairo is reinforced with the information, given by Margolyes, that it is possible to rent a store there for one dollar a year, which indisputably confirms the impoverishment of local residents, as well (“The Midwest” 2005). Against this highly deprived background, the host of the series also comments upon the dark part of American history, namely segregation. During the conversation with historian Preston Ewing Jr., it is revealed that Cairo did not exemplify a completely segregated community with a clear-cut line of demarcation between blacks and whites. There were racially integrated town sections, and in one of such blocks, Ewing grew up and played with white peers, although they attended different schools due to skin color discrimination. Interviewed about his growing up in such a society, Ewing also mentions that when he learned to swim in the Ohio river, white teenagers acquired the skill in the Cairo swimming pool (“The Midwest” 2005).

Despite the common playground where black and white children could talk, the process of desegregation resulting from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was excruciatingly painful and slow in Cairo. What Ewing alludes to, but remains unexplained in the episode “The Midwest and Saint Louis” (2005), is that, in 1964, the town authorities preferred closing the local swimming pool to integrating black and white citizens, as it is noted in an online report *The Cairo Project* (2007). What we learn about in the eighth episode is the 1967 death of a black soldier, Robert Hunt Jr. (*The Cairo* 2007), who allegedly committed suicide by hanging himself in a local police cell. Never fully investigated, the incident triggered off severe race riots, followed by the boycott of the companies run by white Cairo citizens. For his participation in a protest march without a required permit, Ewing, then president of the local

branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was arrested and put in the same police cell where Hunt had been found hanged before (“The Midwest” 2005).

## **5. Niagara Falls**

*American Notes* does not abound with a great number of descriptions bringing nature into focus. In the account of his first six-month journey across the United States and Canada, Dickens concentrates mainly on urban landscapes of the visited places, including not only architectural features, but also guide-like information on shopping facilities in such cities as Boston, where stores are “extremely good, and the public buildings handsome” (AN, 53), and Toronto, whose “streets are well paved, and lighted with gas; the houses are large and good; the shops excellent,” too (AN, 226). However, among the author’s city panoramas, we obviously find fragments dedicated to the beauty of nature, and the ones depicting the sublimity of Niagara Falls are certainly worthwhile to quote here, not only because they emphasize the process of the writer’s appreciation of the landscape. At the foot of the American Fall, Dickens is overpowered by the limitless magnitude of this natural wonder:

I could see an immense torrent of water tearing headlong down from some great height, but had no idea of shape, or situation, or anything but vague immensity. (AN, 220)

While crossing the river in a boat before the great cascades of water, he takes a first step toward recognizing the grandeur of Niagara Falls: “I began to feel what it was: but I was in a manner stunned, and unable to comprehend the vastness of the scene” (AN, 220). And finally, on the top of the cliff overlooking Niagara, Dickens appears to be able to grasp the immensity that seemed “vague” before, which is additionally stressed by letter capitalization:

It was not until I came on Table Rock, and looked – Great Heaven, on what a fall of bright-green water! – that it came upon me in its full might and majesty. Then, when I felt how near to my Creator I was standing, the first effect, and the enduring one – instant and lasting – of the tremendous spectacle, was Peace. Peace of

Mind: Tranquillity: Calm recollections of the Dead: Great Thoughts of Eternal Rest and Happiness: nothing of Gloom or Terror. Niagara was at once stamped upon my heart, an Image of Beauty; to remain there, changeless and indelible, until its pulses cease to beat, for ever. (AN, 220)

In her article on Dickens's and other British writers' reactions to Niagara Falls, McKnight (2009, 69) suggests that, in a letter the author of *American Notes* wrote to John Forster on 26 April of 1842, the description of the famous cascades on the US-Canadian border is more admirable than the one published in his travel book. In the letter, we read:

There was a bright rainbow at my feet; and from that I looked up to – great Heaven! To *what* a fall of bright green water! The broad, deep, mighty stream seems to die in the act of falling; and, from its unfathomable grave arises that tremendous ghost of spray and mist which is never laid, and has been haunting this place with the same dread solemnity – perhaps from the creation of the world. (Dickens qtd. in McKnight 2009, 69)

It is a matter of taste which passages we prefer, for different reasons, nonetheless, McKnight draws attention to the writer's allusions to mortality in the fragments, interwoven with Dickens's rapture over the falls, and claims that the sight made him think of Mary Hogarth, his beloved sister-in-law, who had passed away a few years before (2009, 72). (According to Slater (2009, 186), Dickens brought back the memory of Mary already in Boston). In the ninth episode of the series, Margolyes makes a reference to the author's beloved sister-in-law, too, and emphasizes the power of the falls, but, while admiring the natural wonder with the series host, the viewer may feel slightly disappointed at the pictures of the famous cascades, as the shooting was carried out on a cloudy day and not in the season that would fully uncover the sublime in nature ("Canada" 2005).

## 6. West Point

One of the last points of Dickens's itinerary on his journey to the New World was the United States Military Academy in New York state, established in 1802 by Congress. The engineer-in-charge instrumental in laying out the fortifications of the future West Point, as the academy is known, was Thaddeus Kosciuszko, whose statue commemorating his efforts has formed part of the school premises since the early decades of the twentieth century (Pula 2013, 145). To return to Dickens, although the writer does not spare many words on this institution of higher education, its location in the Hudson Highlands, on the western bank of the Hudson, definitely receives his special attention. The author of the *American Notes* writes about the United States Military Academy: "It could not stand on more appropriate ground, and any ground more beautiful can hardly be" (AN, 239). With reference to its rigid curriculum and the exercise of discipline, Dickens also notes that approximately half of the students enrolled in the courses are able to finally graduate from the academy.

The last episode of the *Dickens in America* series certainly confirms that the United States Military Academy is located in an exquisite situation, and it is a spectacular and unforgettable sight, especially when bathing in autumn sunlight ("The Journey" 2005). Among the rolling hills with colorful foliage, its fortifications look like a magnificent castle, however, if one bears in mind the curriculum content at the academy, and what orders may await its students after graduation, it adds a touch of irony to the breathtaking view of the institution. While watching the episode, the viewers are also informed that the proportion of women at West Point levels at sixteen percent. Intrigued by their position in the predominantly male community, the series host interviews Elizabeth Schubert, a young West Point cadet, about her stance on the issue. Schubert admits that she has not observed any discrimination by sex on the school premises, and adds that she feels there like a girl in the company of many "older brothers" ready to help her out. Her admittance to West Point definitely made a difference to Schubert, as she became acutely aware that the world's political situation could have serious

and far-reaching consequences in her private life, which she had not thought of before while watching current affairs programs on television. Still, the viewer feels another touch of irony, when Schubert reveals that the initial training is given to West Point cadets with a view to “breaking you down,” which, with other things mentioned, is regarded by the interviewer as well as the interviewee as “character-building” (“The Journey” 2005).

Before the final conclusions, it appears necessary to stress that although *American Notes* (1842) and *Dickens in America* (2005) represent means of expression communicating primarily Dickens’s thoughts on the United States, they further different aims. Dickens, first of all, left a record of his disillusionment with, then, the new republic, which did not offer him any solutions to most of the social problems worrying him. As a result, his travel account, despite his praising words about the country, presents a report on American social gaffes and absurdities as observed in the nineteenth century, which sometimes exemplify the writer’s overgeneralized statements (Slater 2009, 176). There may also be a question as to whether Dickens should feel entitled to treat America in a patronizing way and demand good manners from Americans when he is far from being polite in some excerpts. However, in his view, he had a right to form his own harsh opinion. In his unpublished introduction of 1842, Dickens states what a journey account should reveal, which, apparently, can be regarded as the writer’s definition of a travelogue with which it is hard to disagree:

Very many works having just the same scope and range, have been already published, but I think that these two volumes stand in need of no apology on that account. The interest of such productions, if they have any, lies in the varying impressions made by the same novel things on different minds; and not in new discoveries or extraordinary adventures. (“Introductory” 2004, 276).

Polite or impolite, Dickensian in style or not in some parts, Dickens left a very valuable chronicle of the nineteenth-century United States, depicting the country we will never have a chance to see in reality. Yet, thanks to his flowery pen, we can always recreate it in our

imagination. Moreover, by rereading, for example, the Niagara Falls fragments as many times as we wish, we can always envision the view with accompanying emotion, and cherish it, word by word, on its own merits. And by returning to the Perkins quotes, we can appreciate life itself, but also the fact that we can read the words.

## **7. Conclusions**

Far from being a critical academic analysis of Dickens's narrative of his 1842 journey, the *Dickens in America* series was made to bring the viewer closer to the life and work of the nineteenth-century British author in an entertaining way. In addition to comparing the America of the 1840s and the contemporary United States, each episode produces an irresistible impression that Margolyes's intention is also to instill her fascination for Dickens's writing into the audience without enclosing the author in academic circles. One of the advantages of the series is certainly the juxtaposition of visual material and audible word. While listening to meaningful passages derived from *American Notes*, we can connect Dickens's descriptions with historical illustrations of the people and places the author touches upon. Following the camera, we also have an opportunity to partially visit some American museums and exhibitions we have not seen yet, although the episodes do not offer tours of an entire place. The recorded interviews with numerous professors commenting upon Dickens's literary output are definitely a valuable asset to the series, even if it is possible to find the information provided by them in different articles. Last but not least, Margolyes performs the role of a host excellently by just being herself, although sometimes we may not agree with her subjective opinions presented in the series.

The juxtaposition of selected *American Notes* fragments and the slices of modern-day life in the United States filmed in the series pose a few life paradoxes curious to notice by the reader-viewer. While staying in New York City, Dickens, under police escort, entered the

historic Five Points, the notorious slum neighborhood of the nineteenth-century Lower Manhattan, synonymous, not only for the author of *American Notes*, with filth, “poverty, wretchedness, and vice” (AN, 99). Nowadays, at the site that used to constitute one part of the Five Points, where child prostitution was not uncommon, there is a playground with slides, rung ladders, and platforms replete with children, including a sports court where teenagers can play basketball (“New York” 2005). During his walk in the infamous district, Dickens also inspected the Manhattan House of Detention for Men, the imposing edifice erected in 1838 with the intention of imitating an Egyptian architectural style (Ingham 2004, 293). In the prison, nicknamed “the Tombs,” Dickens discovered more appalling conditions than those of English penitentiaries back at home, emphasizing that inmates in American penal institutions had no possibility of walking in the yard, or taking exercise (AN, 94-95). Together with Margolyes, the viewer enters the current Manhattan Detention Complex, constructed in the second half of the twentieth century, but still referred to as the Tombs, where cells are shabby with two horizontal slits in the wall instead of a window, although they are air-conditioned. While following the camera, we additionally visit the jail exercise yard located on the top of the building, which, through the grilles, gives one of the most spectacular, almost three-hundred-sixty-degree views of Manhattan (“New York” 2005). That seems to be a psychological torture to all inmates of this New York detention complex (Margolyes in “New York” 2005), significantly reinforcing punishment in the same manner as the panorama of San Francisco to the prisoners of Alcatraz in the past.

In the course of his 1842 journey across the nineteenth-century United States, the author of *The Pickwick Papers* paid a visit to several other operating prisons, which, as stated before, were widely regarded as regular tourist attractions. In the city of Philadelphia, which in Greek means “brotherly love,” Dickens examined the Eastern State Penitentiary, where the system of discipline incorporating the principle of solitary punishment appeared to be exceptionally

cruel. He writes about his visit to the jail: “I went from cell to cell that day; and every face I saw, or word I heard, or incident I noted, is present to my mind in all its painfulness” (AN, 117). In the fifth episode of *Dickens in America*, the series host retraces the writer’s steps to see for herself what it was like to be an inmate at the Eastern State Penitentiary. Hooded, as was the practice with former prisoners entering the jail, Margolyes is guided up the seedy staircase in one of the squalid blocks of the prison, which, left in a state of ruin on purpose, has served as a tourist attraction on a daily basis since 1994 (“Philadelphia” 2005; Eastern 2013). In Boston, in the House of Reformation for Juvenile Offenders, whose many inmates were “boys of colour,” Dickens found it strange to hear the young delinquents sing a song “in praise of Liberty,” while they were, in fact, the prisoners of the institution (AN, 59). What is thought-provoking for the viewer of the last episode of the series is the scene in which West Point students, in the springtime of life, blithely enjoy breakfast in the mess hall, whereas, over their heads, there is a flag bearing the inscription “Liberty or Death” (“The Journey” 2005).

*American Notes* and *Dickens in America* are undeniably achievements in themselves. Still, whereas Dickens’s record of his 1842 journey can stand alone, we cannot necessarily say the same about the 2005 series. Obviously, it is possible to watch exclusively the entertaining episodes, but they are just a prelude to what Dickens’s writing can offer, and if we just watch, not read, we reach for the limited version of Dickens’s America. Therefore, it is first worthwhile to appreciate both means of expression on their own merits. Then, after taking delight in the book and the series individually, we may allow them to merge in order to perceive the paradoxes that bring life into sharp focus. Last but not least, the comparison of the social landscapes as presented in *American Notes* and *Dickens in America* can certainly help us realize to what extent the United States has changed, or, perhaps more interestingly, that certain things have not changed at all.

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