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The Swiss Alps and Character Framing in *No Thoroughfare*

Samia Ounoughi (LERMA EA 853)

When he wrote *No Thoroughfare* with Wilkie Collins, Dickens insisted that the climax of the novel took place in the Simplon Pass, in other words, in one of the most dangerous No Thoroughfares in Europe. By 1867, when the novel was published, Dickens had witnessed and experienced major changes in Britain. A new economic order was defining new rules in society and progress in rail transportation massively spread travelling. From then on, not only would people travel to settle somewhere else for good or at least for a long period of time, the growing number of businessmen rendered travelling Europe and the world part of their daily life. Considering these major evolutions, character framing in fiction writing was also to change. This is precisely what Dickens does in *No Thoroughfare*. As in many of his works, the main characters of this novel are orphans, people with a blurred story. They are the perfect illustration that one's identity does not depend so much on their history as on their environment. Moreover, with *No Thoroughfare*, Dickens adds new criteria to character framing. He brings forward the idea that characters are not only determined by their direct environment. He shows that the constant interactions between the characters and their environment lead to a constant mutual definition and redefinition of both characters and the continent. In this article I will show that travelling has become necessary in the character framing process, for Dickens here pictures any individual's life in itself as a No Thoroughfare. Using element of geopoetics, I will eventually explore the Simplon Pass as the No Thoroughfare which epitomizes the network of No Thoroughfares that permeate the novel.

1. The text in its context

Many geographers highlight the aesthetic interest the Alps began to raise in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century and how much the new look cast upon this mountain chain has since influenced its representation. Among these geographers, Bätzing and Rougier, for instance, point to the infrastructure development brought about by the British Industrial Revolution. Henceforth the Alpine Arch gradually ceased to be considered only a hostile environment and began to attract artists of the Romantic period who found it awe inspiring. They insist on the major part played by the British poets and painters who visited the Alps in the gradual switch from a vision of "the horrible mounts" to "the sublime mounts". British artists now saw the Alpine Arch as a challenging environment that they needed to dominate and which was to impress them in terms of contemplation rather than peril.

As he often stated it in his correspondence Dickens travelled a lot because he needed to see the world to take some distance from his daily life and have an ever renewed vision of himself as a writer and of his literary creation. In his introduction to *Pictures of Italy* he wrote about the crucial role of the mountains in this respect:

I have likened these Pictures to shadows in the water, and would fain hope that I have, nowhere, stirred the water so roughly, as to mar the shadows. I could never desire to be on better terms with all my friends than now, when distant mountains rise, once more, in my path. For I need not hesitate to avow, that, bent on correcting a brief mistake I made, not long ago, in disturbing the old relations between myself and my readers, and departing for a moment from my old pursuits, I am about to resume them, joyfully, in Switzerland; where during another year of absence, I can at once work out the themes I have now in my mind, without interruption: and while I keep my English audience within speaking distance, extend my knowledge of a noble country, inexpressibly attractive to me.¹

The crossing of the Alps and their challenging nature nourished Dickens's work and added degree to it. In writing beautiful pages about the Alps he contributed in recreating them. Yet, the Alps were rarely his final destination. He crossed them on his journey back from Italy in 1844. In 1851, he stopped in Switzerland (Lausanne) when he travelled to Italy with Collins his co-author (Ackroyd 360-2). Ackroyd says that the Alps "haunted Charles Dickens's imagination" (521). Yet, they are only represented twice in his works of fiction. The Great Saint Bernard Pass is the setting of chapter 1 Book 2 in *Little Dorrit* (1857). The major occurrence of the Alps in his works is that of The Simplon Pass, the setting of the climax of *No Thoroughfare* (1867) which is the object of my article.

¹ Dickens, Charles. *Pictures From Italy*. OUP, 1966 (260-261). This is a passage from Dickens's introduction of the book.

Charles Dickens came up with this story in the summer of 1867 as he was staying in his typical Swiss chalet at Gad's Hill Place. In August he read the first part to Wilkie Collins whom he invited to participate in the writing of it. Collins wrote part of Acts 1 and 4. As in many of Dickens's (and Collins's) works the main characters of *No Thoroughfare* are orphans. Yet, unlike *Oliver Twist* or *Pip*; they are adults and in good case. What is here at stake is the endurance of the characters in the narrative, and above all this endurance reposing on their capacity to shape a solid identity as the plot unfolds. In other words, only those whose characterization process reaches a sufficient state of completion can stay on while the others are cleared out of the plot. By choosing to stage orphans Dickens gets rid of lineage and legacy as character-framing factors and thus emphasizes character/environment interactions as the only possible character framing experience. This is exactly what the setting of Act 3 in the Swiss Alps is meant to epitomize. Charles Dickens' insistence that the story must reach its climax in the Swiss Alps reveals this part of Europe as a spectacular metonymy of all the No Thoroughfares that permeate his narrative. Here is what he wrote to Collins:

My Dear Wilkie,

I have done the overture, but I don't write to make that *feeble* report.

I have a general idea which I hope will supply the kind of interest we want. Let us arrange to culminate in a wintry flight and pursuit across the Alps. Let us be obliged to go over—say the Simplon Pass—under lonely circumstances, and against warnings. Let us get into the horrors and dangers of such an adventure under the most terrific circumstances, either escaping from, or trying to overtake (the latter, the better, I think) some one, on escaping from, or overtaking, whom, the love, prosperity and Nemesis of the story depends. There we can get Ghostly interest, picturesque interest, breathless interest of time and circumstance, and force the design up to any powerful climax we please. If you will keep this in your mind as I will in mine—urging the story towards it as we go along— we shall get a very Avalanche of power out of it, and thunder it down on the readers' heads. Ever affecy. CD.²

The sensational effect sought in the displacement of the plot in the Alps can be explained by Bätzing and Rougier's analysis that: "*the urban lifestyle somehow acts as a standard and the fear of nature, so widely spread in town, is projected on the whole of the Alpine Arch*"³. Still, there is more to it than a quest for the sensational. Dickens mentions "*a wintry flight and pursuit across the Alps*" not to a final destination. He needed a No Thoroughfare, the definition of which as a dead end, a problem without a solution or a passage reserved to a few deserving ones⁴ depends on who crosses it.

The double definition of "No Thoroughfare" shows space and the management of space as intimately related to the construction of the text which itself has a double nature. It was written as a novel that was to be adaptable to the stage, hence its main subdivisions in Acts and then in chapters that bear no number. The double mapping of the text reveals an interminglement between two literary genres and two possible economies and geographies of the narrative.

2. Travelling across Europe an essential character framing element

The crucial part played by space in the characterization process is first due to the failure of history, and therefore time to shape the characters' identity. The idea that space prevails against time in literature was developed by Bertrand Westphal, and is a pillar idea of *geopoetics*⁵. I think that *No Thoroughfare* is in its own way, a literary illustration of this major scope, for it stages the victory of geography over history. Indeed, just as Dickens himself who traveled the world, the character who makes his way through the narrative in *No Thoroughfare* is a traveller. Dickens highlights this criteria by setting a contrast between two foundlings, both

² Dickens wrote this letter to Collins at Gad's Hill Place on August 23rd 1867.

³ « Le genre de vie urbain agit en quelque sorte comme un étalon et la peur de la nature, si répandue à la ville, est projetée sur tout l'arc alpin. » (Bätzing, Rougier, 8)

⁴ "A way, lane, etc., from which there is no exit at one end; a cul-de-sac. The notice No Thoroughfare is frequently put up at the entrance to such places; also in streets temporarily closed, or ways not open to the public." "no public way through or right of way here." (*OED*).

⁵ See Westphal, 2007.

originally named Walter Wilding one of whom will die a no one while the other, renamed Vendale, will endure in the narrative and won't be struck dead by the breaking news of his origins.

When he wrote this novel, Dickens had travelled much, especially through Europe. But that required a journey which the novelist disliked profoundly. Yet, it was the price to pay to achieve himself as a writer. *No Thoroughfare* illustrates these travel experiences over 30 years not only as an essential, but as a vital part in the framing of the self. Indeed in *No Thoroughfare*, travelling through Europe and facing the dangers of the sublime Alps becomes a matter of life and death. Both in terms of narrative construction and character framing, the crossing of the Simplon makes the difference between a fully achieved character and a mere name with a void story on paper.

The novel starts with the counter example of Walter Wilding who is characterized by sheer immobility. Only has he been removed from one No Thoroughfare (the Hospital for foundling children) to be placed in another (Cripple Corner). He leads a life that was depicted for him:

“For seven happy years, Mr. Bintrey,” pursued Wilding, still with the same innocent catching in his breath, and the same unabashed tears, “did my excellent mother article me to my predecessors in this business, Pebbleson Nephew. Her affectionate forethought likewise apprenticed me to the Vintners’ Company, and made me in time a free Vintner, and—and—everything else that the best of mothers could desire. When I came of age, she bestowed her inherited share in this business upon me; it was her money that afterwards bought out Pebbleson Nephew, and painted in Wilding and Co.; it was she who left me everything she possessed, but the mourning ring you wear. (10)

He contributes in no way to his own construction. The story of his life is full of ellipses, the longest lasting 12 years. These narrative gaps leave the reader with a few fragments called *tempuscules* in geopoetics (Westphal, 2007, 37). Wilding’s mother arranged them into a story he keeps repeating. Thus does reported speech play a major part in Act 1, as Wilding tells his old story to the unmoved Bintrey who has heard it time and again. He indifferently drinks on and says “*I know the story*” (9).

In this novel, making it through No Thoroughfares, becomes a series of crucial experiences as the characters’ awareness is raised on their story being but a tale. Obenreizer raises Vendale’s awareness on that:

“I told you once, I doubt the marriage of those two,” he [Obenreizer] replied, throwing up his hands again, as if he were throwing the unprofitable subject away. “But here I am in Creation. I come of no fine family. What does it matter?”

“At least you are Swiss,” said Vendale, after following him with his eyes to and fro.

“How do I know?” he retorted abruptly, and stopping to look back over his shoulder. “I say to you, at least you are English. How do you know?”

“By what I have been told from infancy.”

“Ah! I know of myself that way.”

“And,” added Vendale, pursuing the thought that he could not drive back, “by my earliest recollections.”

“I also. I know of myself that way—if that way satisfies.” (86)

Vendale has also asked himself these questions but they were never the cornerstone of his character. He has always made his own experience without only relying on what he was once told. Besides, as opposed to Obenreizer who wants to become someone else (an Englishman) and as opposed to Wilding who wants to remain unborn, Vendale is the only one who moves on while remaining himself, someone that is gradually transformed by his travel experiences.

Until Wilding acknowledges his story was wrong, the structure of the narrative appears as a closed world. Walter Wilding gains absolutely nothing in terms of characterization hence his story being itself is a No Thoroughfare, a dead end. Wilding's rapid eviction from the narrative emphasizes the lacks of his character, especially in terms of solid geographical rooting. Dickens's plan to displace the plot in a spectacular environment and to focus it on the journey to Italy is a correction that he brought along the writing of the book to compensate for Wilding's lack of character density which could only have led to a literary failure.

On the contrary, Vendale's life experience expands all over Eastern Europe, way beyond a couple of No Thoroughfares in the city of London. This started in the earliest days of his life when he was taken from the orphanage to Switzerland. His coming back to England with a new name reveals the bound between travels and the identity framing process. Through his voyages, Vendale has been confronted with nature, sailing on Swiss Lakes and mountaineering as well. The tale of his life is therefore more complete and gives his character more substance. He has been to France, to Germany, Switzerland and is capable of endeavouring a trip across the Simplon to Italy within a minute. He has hence shaped his identity independently from this tale by travelling, meeting people and facing his environment, by acquiring experience and going beyond his limits. By extending the length of the No Thoroughfares to European dimensions, Dickens intensifies the connection between character shaping and geography exploring. Moreover, Vendale's ordeal is also symbolical of literature's look upon its own stake, for he has to convey a text to the other side of the mountain relying on no post service or messenger of any sort to access the truth of the document.

Although the story is fragmented over different parts of Europe there appears a network of No Thoroughfares with common characteristics. As geographic spaces, they involve people and places together. They involve all Material and immaterial relationships between people, peoples, places and even symbolic places, representations, landscapes; as well as the organization of all these elements, the relations existing between them, the networks of which they partake⁶. The orphanage is located in a No Thoroughfare in London. Cripple Corner, where Wilding and Co is located is a No Thoroughfare. Vendale's journey through Britain, France, Germany and Switzerland is the longest No Thoroughfare. Finally, the Simplon Pass will be the spectacular metonymy of them all. All the No Thoroughfares Wilding comes across will become dead ends while, Vendale makes his way through them. Europe, is a metonymy of the world in the characters' mind. They travel through Europe or mention countries of Europe only, but while doing so they refer to the world as a whole. They come to the world by completing these rites of passage, otherwise they are left out of the plot to remain in their dead end.

3. Mapping the world / mapping the self

Wilding and Vendale's very different perception of space says something about their will to come to the world. For Wilding it is as a place way to large and Cripple Corner is the end of his small world. Meanwhile for Obenreizer "*So very little is the world, that one cannot get rid of a person*" (31). Only Vendale lives on and adjusts his perception of it to his evolution as a subject: "*He [Obenreizer] was saying [...] that the world is so small a place, that people cannot escape one another. I have found it much too large for me since I saw you last.*" (35). Wilding never crosses the sea which lies beyond Cripple Corner where his mother settled him. For Bachelard (131), the corner is a reassuring refuge where the one remains motionless. This position stimulates the imagination of whoever dwells there and imagines their environment rather than explore it. The only occasion when he travels is to the wrong end. Instead of trying to find out who he is, his quest is after someone that once bore his name as if naming and being meant the same.

Wilding and Vendale's very different perception of space also says something about their capacity to plan things on. Vendale intends to move on while Wilding intends to move back. At his mother's death, Wilding gathers people who will run his business for him. He only acts personally as a staff manager to look for someone who will nurse him. Symbolically, he hires a second mother in Sally, his former nurse at the orphanage. He dreams to live with his employees as a harmonious family that will all sing in a choir as he used to do as a child. All in all, Walter Wilding has romanticized the No Thoroughfare where he was abandoned and expects everyone around him to people this fantasized universe that he depicts as a womb he wants to get back to forever. His management of Wilding and Co as a space mirrors his being stuck at the stage of the imaginary with no relation with the other that involves the other as such. Thus does making it through the No Thoroughfares means coming to the world by accessing to the stage of the Symbolic.

⁶ For the whole article see « espace géographique », in Brunet, 2004.

By contrast, this adds degree to Vendale's character, who is a trader and as such, he only relies on himself to travel Europe. Besides, while Wilding seems only to love his mother, Vendale loves Marguerite and will do anything to meet Obenreizer's conditions to marry her. Getting the stolen money back gives a crucial motive to his travels since his future plans depend on his success.

The description of the challenging nature Vendale faces is not so thorough as that of London in Dickens' better known works. Yet, the tale of his travels highlights the permanent evolution of his character as he is gradually transformed by his environment. For instance, he used to despise trade, but his first travel experiences taught him to see traders in spatial terms. He now wants to be a trade partner, someone who removes obstacles: "*Let me begin our partnership by being a serviceable partner, and setting right whatever is wrong.*"(27). Vendale redefines himself and his world unlike Wilding who has left his living place unchanged apart from hanging an old picture of his mother on a wall. As for Vendale, he calls himself a pioneer. When even no local would cross the Simplon under extreme weather conditions, he believes his journey will open the road to others after him: "*Perhaps our example will open the Pass on this side.*" (95). Under such conditions, the Alps could not but be sublimed, for the strangers' eyes reveal the place more than the locals': "*foregrounding specific local features requires alienage to the context. The tourist, the geographer and the ethnographer see salient features since they are not immersed in a space that determines their look.*"⁷. Thus Vendale probably sees things with a sharper look than Obenreizer. Character framing involves the character's capacity to observe their environment and to adapt it to themselves instead of only adapting to it.

Language in this respect is a seminal element of space mapping as a character-framing factor. In fact character/space identification can be compared with signifier/signified relations. This shows in the absurdity with which Ladle, the cellar master ties bounds between place names and luck:

"More changes, you see! But don't change the name of the Firm again. Don't do it, Young Master Wilding. It was bad luck enough to make it Yourself and Co. Better by far have left it Pebbleson Nephew that good luck always stuck to. You should never change luck when it's good, sir." (14)

Yet Ladle evolves and realizes that the link between signifier and signified is not a given bound but a bridge one has to build. Wilding did not get the lesson, hence his end.

These aspects of the character shaping process are epitomized by the representation of the Swiss Alps. As the summit and hub of Europe, the Alps are a cradle of European civilization and also a place of harsh nature. They are often referred to in nineteenth century literature as the place where the truth is unveiled. Such is the case in M. Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the story of the creature's early days is revealed where, isolated from the rest of the world, confronted to nature and to their own nature the characters discover and/or reveal who they are.

In *No Thoroughfare* however, Vendale only discovers the story of his origins once he's made it through the Simplon, this journey being the climax of the novel. What matters is not so much his past name and birth but the way he manages his being in the place to build his future. His journey magnifies the qualities he was already endowed with and that characterize him whatever his name may be. Vendale's journey through the Simplon is a trip into his very nature and will reveal his essence, for mountains and characters are mutually revealed as one nature facing another. Even words are brought back to their very primitive nature as sound utterances, and if one utters a sound too much, it can trigger an avalanche, words can become a death causing weapon:

Obenreizer clapped his hand on Vendale's mouth and pointed to the track behind them. Its aspect had been wholly changed in a moment. An avalanche had swept over it, and plunged into the torrent at the bottom of the gulf below. (97).

⁷ « Une mise en relief de traits locaux spécifiques relève d'une extranéité au contexte. Le touriste, le géographe et l'ethnologue, voient des traits saillants dans la mesure où ils ne sont pas immergés dans un espace qui détermine leur regard. » (Baron, 5).

Dickens shows us that even in the century of the anyhow, there is still something essential and basic in each of us that define us and define our environment. In the mountains, time does not dominate, space does. This appears clearly in the sudden change in the narrative pace. Wilding's story being mostly void, the narrative first dashes through twenty-five years then, Vendale becomes the main character and the narrative pace gradually slows down until it nearly comes to a standstill at the climax of the story on the Simplon Pass.

As a landmark that gives the measure of the character's inner self, the Alps are also a source of anguish being an ever gigantic obstacle with an unstable surface. Faced with a perilous place that snow and wind can alter completely within minutes, Vendale's quickness of mind, his capacity to adjust and his adamant will to make it through are put to the test. All that happened in Cripple corner that led Walter Wilding to dying as a no one, is here at stake again, but this time it is shown as infinitely more dangerous and urgent as sky and earth seem to come closer to imprison him. The same geographical structure is sublimed and in a few endless hours it condenses the essential meaning of character shaping in relation with space. What Vendale is profoundly is brought forward because it is what in himself remains even when the context keeps changing.

In the mountains Obenreizer first seems stronger than Vendale as he is a born mountaineer, a son of the land. His experience is precious to read the mountain and interpret it when Vendale can't. Yet Vendale's journey proves that belonging is not only *jus soli* it's also a matter of experience. Vendale only adjusts to eventually impose himself on the pass. He follows Obenreizer but also learns from him hence the latter's gradual silence lest Vendale should pick up the means to interpret the mountain and to win the challenge. Obenreizer even prevents the locals from speaking to Vendale.

By his might and determination Vendale imposes himself on the Pass. He tames the "*monstrous range [...] of furious violence*" (99) that would have swallowed him by rendering it a reserved passage for the mighty that he is. Obeying his own will Vendale does better than the locals, who know the limits when he goes beyond. He tames his environment, with what appears as superhuman strength managing to survive in an abyssal ravine after he was drugged twice: "*The sight of him fighting so hard for his senses and the doubt whether he might not for the instant be possessed by the strength of a dozen men, kept his opponent still.*"(101). The Simplon Pass and the Alps are therefore defined as a reserved passage or a dead end according to who crosses them or moves back, the crossing is therefore a sense framing process as well as a character framing one. In the case of Vendale, his experience and observation of the mountain has not physically changed it, but in managing to cross the Pass under such conditions, he gives a new definition to it. It is no more a dead end but a passage through Europe.

Conclusion

No Thoroughfare was published three years before Dickens died. As a late-career fiction, it gave new perspectives on characterization/space relations. Dickens witnessed the tremendous development of continental and transcontinental travels and fulfilled his need to see the world. His fiction shows how much geography exploring gives grounds to people and fictional characters. In this book, by staging trader characters, especially traders with blurred origins, Dickens highlighted their travellers' fate. The development of trade in the lower rungs of society meant that characterization couldn't but expand and take European dimensions. Dickens's writings, not only travel texts, thus contributed in mapping the continent. For even though the marks of Dickens's European travels and his representation of Europe only seldom appear directly in his fictions, there is still more to be sought of the effects of his travels across Europe in his fiction: indeed, "*Identifying a geographic space in a text does not necessarily involve a physical representation of it; there is a dimension of invisibility that still renders manifest the existence of places as life-experienced spaces.*"⁸

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⁸ « *l'identification d'un espace géographique dans un texte ne passe pas nécessairement par son attestation matérielle ; il existe une dimension d'invisibilité qui rend néanmoins manifeste l'existence d'espaces vécus* » (Baron, 5).

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