There is a “mythical” aura about odd Mr. Pickwick, that very aura which accompanies all creatures suspended between fiction and reality and yet perceived by the man in the street as human beings, existing in the real world, living in a recognisable place or even possibly walking in a nearby street. Creatures that appear for some strange reason at one time grand and diminished, like sympathetic minor local gods. The story of The Pickwick Papers’s reception illustrates the paradoxes of “fictional truths”, showing the way language virtualizes signs, creates acting energies, gives voices and bodies to the ghosts of imagination.

For Chesterton and Auden, among the most enthusiastic admirers of this fiction of vividness, speaking of Pickwick implies a discourse on myth and mythopoiesis; Picwick’s physical appearance is enough to make him immortal, and to enter the gallery of those memorable characters who are, in Auden’s words:

> instantaneously recognizable by the fact that their existence is not defined by their social or historical context; transfer them to another society or another age and their characters and behaviour will remain unchanged. In consequence, once they have been created, they cease to be their author’s character and become the reader’s; he can continue their story for himself (1967: 68).

Juliet McMaster has recently returned on the topic, observing that Pickwick is among those “characters who refuse to be confined within the pages of the novels that bear their names, but emerge as familiar characters in our culture at large” (1987: 75), herself relating Pickwick’s mythical impact to the distinctive shape of his figure: namely to his

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buoyant “roundness”, or, in Steven Marcus’s provoking reading, to a “certain spherical simplicity” (1972: 188).

We can of course accept McMaster’s visual challenge, and recognize Pickwick’s round emblems as mythical catalizers, possibly relevant both to the author’s imagination as well as to the aesthetic reception of the character, yet the very genesis of Pickwick, as Dickens himself reminds us, remains largely a linguistic gesture: “I thought of Mr. Pickwick, and wrote the first number” (Patten 1972: 50). Also J. Hillis Miller, though aware of the original figurative impact of Pickwick — conveyed by a vignette that clearly plays with shapes magnifying verbal descriptions — maintains that “Pickwick comes into existence as language” (1992: 97), thereby linking Pickwick’s mythical impact to the narrator’s verbal genius, and to the epistemic drive engendered by this apparently light and comic fiction, rather than to the illustrator’s genius. A creature conjured up purely in language and made “true” by discursive strategies (namely, logical cohesion and presumption of unity), Pickwick is a “figure of speech” and Dickens’s text operates as an extended “speech act”, that is a way of doing something with words, and also bringing something new into the world (1995: 97).

“Figures of speech” are indeed, for Susan Horton, all of the characters of The Pickwick Papers, vaguely inconsistent in terms of mimesis and plot construction and thus endowed with an “instability” that makes them perfectly consistent with real life, “simulacra of life”: 

They are there, they wander into the novel on their own steam, are just as “real” [...] real enough to reach out grab the coat-sleeves of the unweary wanderer through the streets of Dickens’s world (1981: 58).

A world where, just like in real life:

we are never sure where and when a new human being will enter our line of vision, and equally unsure whether these new people will demand attention and reaction, or whether we can afford to ignore them (1981: 58-59).

On similar premises, philosophers of language have devoted – curiously enough – their attention to Pickwick. Thomas G. Pavel, in reflecting on “fictional worlds” and their effects on reality, focuses his attention on Pickwick as a case-study that was even the object of a philosophical controversy between segregational and integrational logicians2. There is a paradox, so to speak, about Mr. Pickwick,

2 See T.J. Pavel’s “Enti di invenzione”, in Mondi di invenzione. Realità e immaginario narrativo.
explains Pavel: though Pickwick was a fictional character, inhabiting a world that one immediately recognizes as an “ontological no man’s land”, he was perceived by his readers as a “real man”, with an appearance, an attitude and a language which sounded distinctively his own. With Pickwick, a genealogy of human beings has entered the world, designating an experience that cannot be designated and qualified other than by that very name. But how can a name designate an ontological void? Hence the above mentioned controversy.

A segregational logician would say that fictional statements belong to the category of the so called untrue statements: so, following Pavel’s argumentation (Pavel 1992: 21-28), when Dickens states “Pickwick was wearing slack trousers” the name seems employed to designate someone, but as no man named “Pickwick” actually existed, the statements referring to a man named “Pickwick” can’t be termed neither true nor false, simply because nobody ever existed under that proper name. So, while a segregational logician would then conclude that statement actually concerns nobody, on the contrary, an integrational logician would maintain that fictional texts construct a reference that exceeds the ontological reference, implying a larger theory of being and of truth, implying in other words the power of what Pavel calls “narrative truth”.

To translate the logician’s point within our argumentation, we will say that Pickwick was not of this world until the text created him, giving name and “reality” to a given complex of experience. Through the text, to evoke a powerful “creative” metaphor, word was made flesh, the narrative word virtualizes a being that the real world will accept as his complement. Dickens and his novel have created something that was not of our world, neither of our culture nor of our language, thus creating through language and within language a gap of knowledge that didn’t exist before and that only the text could fill.

And the novelty was such that the dictionary and the encyclopaedia would soon create a new entry: a tautology indeed, as “Pickwick is Pickwick”, or “Pickwick is what Pickwick does”, while “Pickwickian” designates an attitude, a language, a body-form (that might turn into a pathology). No wonder that “odd”, “eccentric”, “peculiar” are the non-defining adjectives that the dictionary couples with the name. The text, in however small a way, has modified reality, and has added something to our knowledge. In this precise sense then Dickens’s work is, as J. Hillis Miller would say, “constitutive” rather than

representational, as “it brings something new into the world”; and in this precise sense:

The first sentence of that first number of The Pickwick Papers does more than affirm a correspondence between the light-making word of God and the creative word of the novelist who makes characters out of nothing and brings into light an entire fictional world. It signals the way this world enters with determining force into the culture of Dickens’s readers and even, in time, into the culture of those who have not read Dickens (Miller 1992: 97).

As a matter of fact, in the incipit of the novel, before Pickwick’s name is uttered, there are some anticipations of the text as a founding act. Here the reader meets the voice of the first narrator and is entangled into his “world”:

The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the public career of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved, is derived from the perusal of the following entry in the Transactions of the Pickwick Club, which the editor of these papers feels the highest pleasure in laying before his readers, as a proof of the careful attention, indefatigable assiduity, and nice discrimination with which his search among the multifarious documents confided to him has been conducted (Pickwick Papers: 67).

That “first ray of light” that breaks through the void of the blank page is an ouvert echo of well known the fiat lux: but far from alluding to a “divine” gesture, this incipit inscribes the text into a logos that exhibits its entirely human origin, and a mythos that, devoid of any origin, rather calls for intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The Pickwick Papers, we are made to understand, consists in fact of documents about documents, a palimpsest of voices where the author turns immediately into a narrator — Boz — who is then turned into the editor of papers which he has not written but which he is simply presenting to the reader, introducing afterwards a Mr. Pickwick that will be the hero and then the hero-narrator of the story.

Steven Marcus described this incipit as a parody of the Genesis; and so does J. Hillis Miller who affirms that this fiat lux comes from a diminished voice “condemned to dwell in parody, in various forms of displacement and indirection” (Miller 1992: 98). It is surely a convincing interpretation if we read the incipit against the second chapter’s incipit, where parody marks the coming into existence of Mr. Pickwick (“another sun” quite comically compared to a natural sun which men have nonetheless diminished), and of the world which materializes “at his feet”.

However, before parody gains ground, the first sentence of that first number of the novel is more than anything else a metafictional discourse, which sounds unusual in the context of comic-popular
writing (as The Pickwick Papers was required to be by the devisor of the project, Robert Seymour), but which was not an unusual strategy for the still young writer, inclined to make a reflective surface out of his writing and then to mirror himself while writing. Again, as in Sketches by Boz — his first book — Dickens is captured by meta-images, reflecting as a kind of semiotician on writing as an “engraving” activity, a jotting out of signs capable of turning themselves into worlds of words (“We almost fancy we see the pen’s point following the letter, to impress its form more strongly on our bewildered imagination” — Dickens 1994: 106).

Following displacement and indirection, working on doubled and redoubled perspectives, Dickens launches the image of the author as a (meta)reflecting agent — not a creative one — someone who intercepts voices and forms, including his own, which are, suspended between imagination and reality. A weak author, in a sense, which however legitimates his “authority” through meta-subjective and intersubjective strategies.

What emerges is a “hybrid discourse” — in Bakhtin’s words — where at least three different glances, three different languages and three different styles — Dickens’s, Boz’s and Pickwick’s — are melted. Parody, the strong code of this writing, should itself be actually re-read in the context of the above mentioned hybrid discourse, also identified as that “multiform game with the discourse boundaries” which characterizes pluridiscursivity. In other words, this text, like many Dickensian texts might be

dotted with quotation marks that serve to separate out little islands of scattered direct speech and purely authorial speech, washed by heteroglot ways from all sides (Bakhtin 1981: 307).

In such a discursive strategy one can, like a ventriloquist, “express one’s own opinion in a language which is of others, and speak one’s own language to express someone else’s opinions” (Bakhtin 1979: 123 — our translation). As a result, The Pickwick Papers’ hybrid discourse could be seen to consist simultaneously of authorial comments, “true to facts” or at least mimetic statements of the editor-narrator, and the “odd” and yet serious opinions of a character scarcely credible, an “odd hero”, in Bakhtin’s definition, bound however to unveil his social group’s conventions and vices through his disarming incomprehension of the world. The author and the character confront each other in terms of genre and style — the former being apparently in power and “indirect”, and the second apparently innocent and “direct”. Though the author’s comment frames the whole discourse, which is laid down by its foreground position in the writing’s temporal hierarchy, influencing the
perception and reception of the words of others, the truth-value of any fraction of Pickwick’s discourse is nonetheless maintained. Pickwick himself is in fact allowed to think and to criticize extensively according to his own standards, in other words to be an interpreter and a semantic operator.

When he encounters the reader, Pickwick looks like a kind of god, although a mock-god with his “diminished” aspect, who every morning performs his own fiat lux and with tranquil satisfaction faces his ‘creation’ (“his countenance beamed with the most sunny smiles, laughter played round his lips, and good-humoured merriment”) (Pickwick Papers: 337). When this world materializes out of the window, it appears “at his feet” under the shape and with the name of a London street. This is then a “diminished” world, further narrowed by a grotesque empirical reduction, an utterly Pickwick-sized world: the reader would search in vain for a topographic or a photographic description of Goswell street, which is simply “down there”:

Goswell street was at his feet, Goswell street was at his right hand – as far as the eye could reach – Goswell street extended at his left: and the opposite side of Goswell street was over the way (Pickwick Papers: 72-73).

Are we here simply introduced to a paranoic topography or is innocent Pickwick the mask for a discourse, be it serious or parodical, on the paradoxes of human knowledge, forever suspended between the evidence of “things that lie before” and the drive for “truths which are hidden beyond”? And isn’t Pickwick after all also voicing a doubt probably growing in many of his contemporaries’ minds, when he wonders whether Goswell street is where the world should end? What are – and what should be – the boundaries that define England as a country? Does the imaginary country coincide with the real country, now emerging from the substantial transformation brought about by the agrarian and the industrial revolution? And what about the countryside? Is there an English countryside still worthy being mentioned and remembered, or even celebrated?

In a way, the official act of constitution of the Pickwick Club (“requested to forward, from time to time, authenticated accounts of their journeys and investigations, of their observations of character and manners, and of the whole of their adventures, together with all tales and papers to which local scenery or associations may give rise”) (Pickwick Papers: 68), is a clear statement about the function assigned to these characters, and in general more about the “intention” of the text: that is, to verify the new boundaries of England and to inspect the condition of the English people.
With his eyes wide-open and “in a scientific spirit of observation”, Pickwick is commanded around the country, to watch, to study and to report. The solar metaphor, which has been traditionally read by critics especially in terms of buoyancy and jocundity, indeed designates Pickwick’s original “visual” and cognitive task. Like a sun, Pickwick works in the text both as an illuminating centre and as a focalizer: from him and through him we are made to advance into the world, as if in an island of light and buoyancy piercing the obscurity of the surrounding world. As J. Hillis Miller observes, Phiz’s illustrations for The Pickwick Papers catch and magnify Pickwick’s “radiance”, calling the attention of the reader to certain anatomical details and objects such as his pellucid round bold head, his shining spectacles, his beaming smile, his bright and rotund belly. And quite often, thanks to a skilful montage of shapes and lights, his figure dominates the plate like a big X (evoking a multiple radiance): “another sun” proper that “illumines” new angles and details “to bring into visibility objects and people in what are often dark and enclosed interiors” (Miller 1992: 104), like a camera-eye.

After the short cut along Goswell street, Pickwick’s camera eye moves around London, driving the readers about at the pace of the coach, which carries the group on their “perambulations, perils, travels, adventures and sporting transactions”. And indeed London is reduced to a strip of streets and buildings and places, crowded with men and women shown in frantic activity, a succession of points attached to more or less well-known names, Hampstead, St. Martin’s, Golden Cross, the Chancery: what emerges is a toponymic circumstantiality devoid of any descriptive detail, as if the landscape or the characters’ relation to that landscape were not relevant except as in a mapping process. As for Goswell street, reduced to a Pickwick-sized place, London’s topography exists solely as a back-drop to locate the activities of Pickwick and his friends: Hampstead is but the pond where to test a visionary “theory of Tittlebats”; St. Martin’s Le Grand, the legendary coach-station, is but the stage for a catastrophic fight between the members of the Club and a mob of angry coachmen; while the Fleet, the notorious debtors’ prison, is part of the textual map because it was Pickwick’s home for a while. In vain will the reader search for an image of the new London, with its new urban inscriptions and its social realities, a place and not the blurred image of the eighteenth-century big city of “Business, Downfalls, Double Knock and other Affairs”. Nevertheless something new has been added: a network has been created, a topographical continuum translated into a mental

1 Cfr. Auden, Connor, Marcus, McMaster, works cited.
road-map suggested by motion and made possible by the imagination of a panoramic point of view. In however small a way then, the text again brings to light a reality, namely a space-reality in the process of a new perception.

The same thing happens with the other towns included in Pickwick’s journey: again mere names associated with other names of places – squares, pubs, inns – where Pickwick and his friends stop to eat, to sleep, to get into their usual troubles, or names consigned to collective clichés (like Bath, “Paradise... of music, elegance, fashion, etiquette”). And again, although the spots remain faceless or moulded into stereotype images, a mental map emerges: this time a country-map sketched against a space which the text presents as “home”... The English province is then shaped into a possible travel itinerary, for commercial or uncommercial travellers, even for tourists: a tour of England which in a few years will be the source of a railway-network. The text makes visible a territory where any English man could feel “at home”, in a home-land where people speak the same language, share customs, habits, food and possibly many other things still to be discovered and celebrated. In this precise sense the text itself becomes a space for imaginary negotiations someway related to the construction of the Nation-space and of the national community.

It is only when dealing with Birmingham, the mother of the English industrial towns, that the text abandons the topographical metaphor and embraces description, performing another fiat lux: a powerful vision that opens up a landscape largely unknown to the majority of the Victorian readers and here illustrated with extraordinary clarity and richness of details. In spite of its being just a fragment embodied in a few pages and apparently unnecessary on the plot level, the passage conveys the idea of an intense emotional and aesthetical experience which has been turned into a cognitive move: in front of us is a disquieting scenario, a fascinating “inferno”, on one side new though on the other side simply “there” awaiting expression.

Finally, what about the country-side? Were the “Papers” and the text not expected to say something about the “true manners and the life in the countryside”, as Robert Seymour – the deviser of the original idea – recommended and Dickens seemingly accepted to do? Again, we recognize a topographic imagery based on the shared “imagined space” in the community of the readers: Southern England’s roads, bridges, coach-stops, inns, noble mansions, woods. But, as for the city landscape, neither nature in itself nor man’s relationship to nature is

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4 On the English novel, and on Dickens’s novels, as powerful discourse on national space and nationhood, see esp. Moretti 1997.

5 On this topic see the chapter on “Memory and Invention” in Bonadei 1996: 73-76.
here an important topic. Any outdoor scene or landscape appears as a fully humanized space mainly centred on the activities of the Club, and paradoxically enough in the countryside more than anywhere else interiors and artificial light dominate. The impression we receive is that of a gallery of “landscape with figures”, where figures are magnified against a blurred landscape just sketched out as a background to “conversation pieces” or “fêtes galantes” or “masquerades”. Welcome to the parody of the Olde Merry England, a parody of an idyllic countryside that has become solely a proper place for Pickwick’s “harlequinades”.

Again Pickwick, incongruously happy and triumphant, is the unaware agent of an unspeakable truth: those happy days are gone, those places, those happy people are no longer with us: they are in fact “posthumous”. The comic vignette makes that “life” more and more distant, turning it into a kind of bittersweet elegy full of nostalgic intimations. Lost in the fable of the English country-side, the posthumous papers lose any value of “truth” and construct a place that is not of this world, because it is dead. As Kim Taplin suggests, Dickens with The Pickwick Papers brutally shows that the “connecting thread” of the footpath binding the new English community to its rural origin was now broken, and no narrative “true to life” could recover it:

For Dickens the countryside was clean, quiet, good, beautiful and dead [...] the process of urbanization and industrialisation has gone so far that people are not now any longer joined to their rural past, nor able to draw reviving strength from the countryside (Taplin 1979: 38).

The countryside is thus not a place to live in, but a dissolving landscape, suitable for occasional wanderings and tourist adventures. Though not yet a speakable truth, life now pulses in London or in Birmingham and in similar towns, where human hearts pace with the “harsh music” of machinery. A “deathly” peace will await meanwhile all those who would figure the countryside as a refuge from this harsh music, or as a defensive flight “back” from progress and history.

Killing, in a sense, Wordsworth and his wandering heroes, Dickens’s Bildungsroman chooses the cityscape both as its origin and its goal.

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6 On pantomime and “harlequinade” as genres especially pertaining The Pickwick Papers, see Edwin M. Eigner, 1989, and Bonadei 1996.
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