Not Just “Tittering at the Natives”:
Laughter in Italy and in a Colder Climate
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Laughter and sightseeing

Where traveller-narrators produce effects of laughter, from at least the late eighteenth century onwards, they often focus upon the practice of sightseeing, and the odd situations and utterances that it provokes. Such a practice is not, of course, accorded the same degree of attention within all imaginative topographies: while pilgrimage literature and narratives of travel on the Grand Tour readily find places and objects to hand that can be defined as worthy of exalted attention, travel writings concerned with less heavily mediated locations might seem likely to struggle to produce the precise effects of laughter that spring up so easily in countries rich in sights.

One way of embarking upon an enquiry into laughter in diverse imaginative topographies of the foreign is to examine what happens when a joke – or joking anecdote – is transferred from the context of the Grand Tour to that of a rather different practice of travel. This joke, in its initial forms, focuses on the Coliseum – in other words, on one of the most famous sights of Rome, the city that supplies a destination crucial to the very definition of the Grand Tour.1 The joke appears in an early form in Giovanni Gherardo de Rossi’s play Il Calzolajo Inglese in Roma (1790), in which a rich English cobbler named Pscth [sic!] has been talked by a scheming Italian into pretending to be a milord. After a visit to the Coliseum (Figs. 1, 2), he exclaims: “Oh! Bella cosa! Bella cosa! Quando quella fabbrica sarà terminata, sarà uno stupore. Turati quei buchi, e imbiancata dev’essere un portento.”2

In developing my ideas about travel in Nordic countries, I profited from discussions with Katrina O’Loughlin, after I gave an earlier version of this paper at a conference at the University of Leicester, and with Wendy Bracewell. I am very grateful, too, to Todd Longstaffe-Gowan, not just for lively intellectual exchange, but also for tremendous amounts of practical help; among those of his team at his landscape design practice who provided me with crucial support, I should especially like to thank Hugo Elwes and Joe Reynolds. And I also owe a debt of gratitude to Anna Blennow and Stefano Fogelberg Rota, for understanding that I was finding it difficult to grapple with the mysteries of narratives of travel to the cold North – to which I am a newcomer – and allowing me some much-needed extra time to assemble my thoughts on the matter.

1. The preconditions for a claim to participation in the Tour are, in my view: a desire to move from a point of origin in northern Europe across or around the symbolic and geographical barrier of the Alps and towards the warm South, an intention or aspiration to visit Rome and a sense that the foreign should be appropriated as a source both of pleasure and of benefit. See Chard 1999, 14–26.

2. “Oh! Beautiful! Beautiful! When that structure is finished, it will be a wonder. When those holes are filled and the building is whitewashed, it will be a miracle.” De Rossi 1790–1798, 1, 192.
Fig. 1. Richard Cooper II (?), *Inside – Coliseo at Rome (c. 1778)*, watercolour with some pen and brown ink, 35.9 cm x 48.2 cm. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Museum number 1882,0311.1135

Stendhal, in his *Promenades dans Rome* (1830), tells a similar story, in which the traveller is more lordly in demeanour, but no less naïve: an Englishman brings his horses to the Eternal City, and rides one of them into this monument, where he sees some masons at work on repairs. He observes, that evening: “Par Dieu! Le Colisée est ce que j’ai vu de mieux à Rome. Cet édifice me plaît; il sera magnifique quand il sera fini.” An oblique reference to the same anecdote in Henry James’s *Italian Hours* (1909) assigns the naïve traveller to a different nationality: “Perugia too has an ancient stronghold, which one must speak of in earnest as that unconscious humourist the classic American traveller is supposed invariably to speak of the Colosseum: it will be a very handsome building when it’s finished.”

In these three versions of the joke, the hapless traveller fails to recognize the famous sight, and does so partly because of a failure to realize that ruins, as bearers of cultural memory, play a major role in sightseeing in Italy. In a much later work, *Brendan Behan’s New York* (1964), a version of the punchline (whether or not borrowed knowingly) is transported to the New World, and is confidently delivered in the first person, rather than cited as an instance of travel commentary going awry; it is also presented, more or less explicitly, as a means of allowing the traveller-narrator to regain a sense of control in the wake of an unpleasant experience. Talking with the District Attorney of New York, Behan reminisces ruefully:

> I was in a little bit of trouble myself once, north of the border, up in Canada, which may or may not have been my fault. I am not trying to give Canada a boost I can tell you, despite the fact that if any Canadian is a cash customer and buys this book, he has got my blessing. But Toronto will be a fine place when it is finished.

In transferring this form of words to a topography in which sightseeing is far less securely established as a dominant mode of viewing, Behan risks aligning himself with a stock figure in travel writing who differs from artless comedy in the Coliseum jokes, but who is no less in danger of losing authority: the traveller who laughs dismissively rather than observes. In literature of the Grand Tour, and, to a great extent, in later travel writings, one of the pitfalls confronting those who pronounce upon the foreign is defined as that of sneering at people and places simply because doing so is far easier than engaging in careful observation and critical reflection. Hester Piozzi, in a letter of 1785, refers to Lord Chesterfield’s account of English responses to the Leaning Tower of Pisa (Fig. 3) (“the oddest thing I ever saw in my life; it stands all awry; I wonder it does not tumble down”) in the same sentence as a dismissive remark (also citing Chesterfield) about English travellers “who keep all together – and tittering at the Natives when they see them – do

3. “Par Dieu! The Coliseum is the best thing that I’ve seen in Rome. I like this building; it will be magnificent when it’s finished.” Stendhal 1973 [1830], 846.


5. Behan 1964, 16.
noting but *Huzza for old England*. Laughter of a potentially denigratory kind, Piozzi implies, fills the void that opens up when travellers pay proper attention neither to sights – such as the Leaning Tower – nor to the spectacle of foreign society and manners that confronts them.

By introducing other, palpably inadequate traveller-spectators, then, the speakers in the three jokes about the Colosseum shift responsibility for a lack of such attention onto these figures, but relish three of the pleasures offered by joking about sightseeing – pleasures absent, or less immediately evident, in Behan’s joke about Toronto. First, the effect of laughter temporarily dispels the unease and anxiety facing those travellers who aspire to write as participants in the socially and culturally privileged practice of travel on the Grand Tour, and who are therefore required to display exalted responses to the sights and wonders of Italy – while at the same time taking care not to risk any imputation of insincerity, pretentiousness and affectation. The jokes, in other words, invite a certain sympathetic awareness that commenting on the topography of the Grand Tour is an enterprise that may easily go wrong.

Secondly, the sightseeing jokes, in citing an absurdly inappropriate response, open up the possibility of a liberatory upsurge of disorder, amid the rhetoric of formalized responsiveness and orderly progression through an itinerary of sights and wonders that sightseeing demands. In jokes, as Mary Douglas suggests, “something is saved in psychic effort, something which might have been repressed has been allowed to appear, a new improbable form of life has been glimpsed”. Considering the approaches to laughter and jokes of Bergson and Freud, Douglas comments:

6. Piozzi 1989, 1, 165, citing Chesterfield, *The World* (1793), no. 29, 174. The young traveller’s account of the Tower is in Chesterfield’s article (presented as a letter from a son in Italy to his father), to which Piozzi merely refers in general terms.

It might be useful to provide a contemporary definition of the word *tittering* here. An anonymous late eighteenth-century ‘Dissertation upon Laughter’ (*The Repository*, 1790, 1, 256), describes a response of this kind as “a laugh smothered in its birth, the person not being in a convenient and proper place for the delivery of it”. The essayist adds helpfully: “these miscarriages frequently happen in church, and other public places”.

7. This point is developed further in Chard 2014, 82–84, 160–184.
For both the essence of the joke is that something formal is attacked by something informal, something organized and controlled, by something vital, energetic, an upsurge of life for Bergson, of libido for Freud. The common denominator underlying both approaches is the joke seen as an attack on control. 8

The Coliseum jokes, then, introduce a figure who is impervious to the traditions and rules of sightseeing – such as recognizing an ancient ruin as different from a building in progress. Behan, too, could be said to be introducing “an attack on control” into his joke, in overtly drawing attention to the fact that his words are motivated by vengefulness. He forgoes, however, a third effect of pleasure that is offered by the Coliseum jokes – and is closely related to the “attack on control”. These jokes allow the narrator – and reader – to enjoy the comic potential of the effect that Georges Bataille, in his essay ‘L’experience interieure,’ terms a dénivellation – a drop in level. Bataille analyses the pleasure of laughing at the discomfiture of someone else, and feeling not superiority but a freedom from the responsibility to be serious:

“Si je tire la chaise ... à la suffisance d’un sérieux personnage succède soudain la révélation d’une insuffisance dernière (on tire la chaise à des êtres fallacieux). Je suis heureux, quoi qu’il en soit, de l’échec éprouvé. Et je perds mon sérieux moi-même, en riant. Comme si c’était un soulagement d’échapper au souci de ma suffisance.” 9

**Laughter in a cold climate**

This essay, then, sets out to explore what happens when traveller-narrators, incorporating in their narratives an assumption that travel will follow patterns mapped out by the Grand Tour, produce effects of laughter in response to a topography that they see as producing relatively few sights of the kind that, in Italy, would demand an exalted responsiveness: the topography of the cold North, as represented by the Nordic countries visited by a number of travellers from other parts of Europe during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The paucity of such sights would seem to reduce rather considerably the opportunities for both uneasy and disruptive humour: as George Orwell has noted: “Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke. It would be better fun to throw a custard pie at a bishop than at a curate.” 10 What is left when there is no Coliseum to misunderstand, and so to drag down for a moment into the ambit of dull contemporaneity?

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Scandinavia, of course, does have some sights that are recognized as such at the time – such as the cataract at Trollhättan, which Giuseppe Acerbi, for example, acknowledges as a place sought out by others through an extended account of the entries in the visitors’ book.13 The traveller-narrator, moreover, has the option of following the same strategy that Behan implicitly adopts, and mocking the topography for its lack of sights: Matthew Consett, in his *Tour through Sweden, Swedish–Lapland, Finland and Denmark* (1789), protects himself from the charge of “tittering at the natives” by citing a seventeenth-century Swede, King Charles XI, as the source of light-hearted remarks on the objects of curiosity to be found in the far North. The King, in this account, welcomes such objects wherever he can find them; he begins with a natural wonder, but swiftly moves on to less obvious choices:

After crossing a very indifferent ferry, we arrived at a small but neat town called Gambelstaden, where it is recorded, that King Charles XI, of Sweden on his return from Tornao, humorously declared, that he had in his tour met with three very extraordinary circumstances; the first was, seeing the sun at midnight at Tornao; the second, that in crossing the ferry, a large Salmon leaped into the boat; and lastly, that when he attended divine service at Gambelstaden, the parish minister ascended the rostrum to preach before him, but being overcome by dizziness, and awed by the presence of majesty, returned again to his seat without uttering a word.12

While travellers have fewer opportunities than in Italy to puncture the reverence accorded to sights, moreover, they can still dissipate the unease of pronouncing on the foreign by laughing at other travellers, and suggesting that these figures have accomplished the tasks of confronting the foreign and converting it into forms of language less competently – or just more oddly – than they themselves have. This strategy is often used in writings about Italy: Piozzi, for example, in her *Observations and Reflections Made in the Course of a Journey through France, Italy and Germany* (1789), refers glancingly to “Tournefort, the great French botanist; who, while his works swell with learning, and sparkle with general knowledge; ... laments pathetically that he could not get down the partridges caught for him in one of the Archipelagon islands, because they were not larded – à la mode de Paris.”13 Edward Daniel Clarke, in the three volumes of his *Travels in Various Countries of Europe Asia and Africa* that are devoted to Scandinavia (1824; Figs. 4, 5, 6), mentions the French émigré Jacques-Louis de la Tocnaye, whom he and his travelling companion John Marten Cripps meet in Trondheim, and who demonstrates an insistent “mauvaise humeur”, demonstrating

11. Acerbi 1802, 1, 24–27. Acerbi’s account of his own entry in the book, on his first visit, gives an idea both of his estimation of Trollhättan (which included “works”at the end of a canal from Göteborg) and of the general distribution of sights in the region: “What I said was to this effect: that the cataracts and works at Trollhättan [sic] were objects which abundantly compensated to two Italian travellers the want of any thing curious in the southern parts of Sweden, and which could make them forget the beauties of their native country” (1, 26).
12. Consett 1789, 48–49. The two towns are now known as Gamlestaden and Tornå.
13. Piozzi 1789, 1, 331–332; see Pitton de Tournefort 1982 [1717], 1, 276.
a particularity derived not only from his nationality but also from his situation as an impoverished exile: he falls neatly into the category that Laurence Sterne, in *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768), defines as “Spleenetic Travellers”.¹⁴ After taking the Frenchman to the island of “Munckholm” (Munkholmen), the two Englishmen entertain him for the evening; de la Tocnaye displays, simultaneously, his proclivity for spleen and his Gallic preoccupation with the gastronomic – as exemplified, in Piozzi’s travel narrative, by Tournefort:

For his dinner we had reserved a haunch of the Reindeer venison we had bought of the Laplanders, near Malmagens, in our passage over the Alpine barrier. In the evening, we endeavoured to amuse him by the exhibition of every thing curious collected in our travels, and by communicating any information that we possessed, respecting the countries we had visited in common with him, for his own use. Nothing, however, could get the better of his habitual spleen, or mitigate, for a moment, the stings of his disappointed pride, excepting the haunch of Reindeer venison. Upon this, which he said was “the only good thing he had found in all Scandinavia”, he broke forth in true Gallic raptures.¹⁵

¹⁴. Sterne 1984 [1768], 11.
¹⁵. Clarke 1824, 10, 282, 283–284. Clarke’s travels in Scandinavia and Russia took place in 1799–1802, many years before the publication of the Nordic volumes, following he author’s death in 1822.
Fig. 6. ‘Nomade, or Wild Laplander, in his Summer Clothing’, engraving, 21.5 cm x 13.2 cm (page), in Edward Daniel Clarke, Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa, 9, facing page 507. Courtesy of the London Library.
As though acknowledging the importance of odd travellers in travel books, in emphasizing what an uncertain undertaking travel is, and allowing those commenting on the foreign to displace any sense of their own haplessness in the face of this uncertainty onto others, Clarke then observes that “it may amuse the Reader” to see the encounter from de la Tocnaye’s point of view; he quotes the account of the visit to Munkholmen and its aftermath from the latter’s *Promenade d’un français en Suède et en Norvège* (1801):

“I visited the spot”, says he, “with two young Englishmen, who had just completed an expedition, truly English, into the North. After having quitted London, they pushed on, all at once, without stopping, twenty miles to the north of Tornaé, and launched a balloon in Lapland, to the great astonishment of the natives: yet the Lapps had been less touched by this exhibition, than by that of a paper-kite, which they let fly afterwards...They were laden with (pierres) fragments of rocks, minerals, mosses, Runic staves, Lapland purses and costumes, hides and horns of Reindeer, and, above all, with a succulent haunch of the same animal, to which I, like a poor simpleton, attached more value than to all their other curiosities.”

*Spectator and spectacle: the locals look back*

The awareness of a comic potential in travellers scrutinizing other travellers for national or other eccentricities appears superficially similar to another incipiently humorous situation, which is, however, rather different, in the sense that it incorporates a reversal of roles, and therefore an element of the unexpected, rather than an aberrancy within the same role. This is the situation in which the locals look back at the travellers who have come to observe them. Such a situation is set up quite often in eighteenth-century accounts of Italy. Piozzi, in Leghorn (Livorno), walks to the shoreline and steps “upon some rocks that broke the waves as they rolled in”; returning to the coach, she refuses to enter the vehicle “not without screaming I fear, as a vast hornet had taken possession in our absence, and the very notion of such a companion threw me into an agony”. She soon begins to laugh, however, at the words of the *laquais de place* to the coachman: “*Ora si vede amico*” (says he), “*è cos’è la Donna; del mare istesso non hà paura e pur và in convulsioni per via d’una mosca.*” (Piozzi’s translation is: “Now, my friend, do but observe what a thing is a woman! She is not afraid even of the roaring ocean, and yet goes into fits almost at the sight of a fly.”)

In the cold North, travellers frequently open up the possibility of such reversals of spectator and spectacle by noting the extreme curiosity of the Scandinavians towards travellers. Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), declares: “I was half tempted to adopt Dr Franklin’s plan, when travelling in America, where they are equally prying, which was to write on paper, for public inspection, my name, from whence I came, where I was going, and what was my business.”

16. Clarke 1824, 10, 282, 284–285. The original – de La Tocnaye 1801, 2, 136–137 – is quoted in a footnote; “like a poor simpleton” in the text translates “comme un franc ignorant” (2, 136), which draws slightly more attention to the comic potential of foreigners assessing each other from different cultural viewpoints.
17. Piozzi 1789, 1, 355, 356.
18. Wollstonecraft 1987 [1796], 96.
At various points in Clarke’s writings, situations in which foreigners gaze at the travellers as objects of curiosity are set up directly: in the cathedral at Åbo (Turku in Finnish), Clarke and Cripps realize that they are “objects of universal derision”: “The women tittered; and the men, laughing and whispering to each other, frequently regarded us, without its being possible for us to divine the cause of the amusement we had thus afforded.” The travellers eventually realize that, oblivious of the segregation of men and women in church in the North, “we had inadvertently seated ourselves on the female side of the aisle”. In a version of the narrative established by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (reworked in various other travel books), in which the traveller is asked to disrobe in a Turkish baths in Sofia, the large family of “our Lappish host” at Kuru come to see the travellers undress, and “we could not repress their curiosity without giving offence”. The interpreter is described “cracking his jokes with the women, who would be prying into everything”, and “a momentary mirth is excited.”

The piquancy of situations in which locals look back is emphasized yet more strongly, however, in an interlude in Clarke’s Travels in which he and Cripps react to Laplanders’ gastronomic preferences, the Laplanders evince surprise, and this leads the traveller to introduce two more cross-cultural encounters, one imagined and one remembered. The initial reaction is provoked by “a beverage, swallowed greedily by quarts at a time, of ... coagulated sour-milk”, with which the locals wash down their scanty fare:

> When any of this fell into the river, it appeared ropy, and thick, and did not mingle with the water. Yet this is *Lapland* nectar; a revolting slime, “corrupted,” as Tacitus said of beer, “into a semblance of wine”: they speak of it as of *wine*, saying, that it gladdens and strengthens the heart, refreshes the spirits, and fortifies them for labour.

Clarke then remarks tolerantly that “doubtless ... use would have made us as fond of it as the Laplanders”, and, noting the reaction of these Laplanders to the travellers’ unexpected aversion, uses this to shift the scene entirely, to one in which a Neapolitan reacts with similar distaste to the proffered refreshment of an Englishman:

> They were as much surprised at seeing us refuse this beverage, as a coal-heaver of London would be, who after prevailing upon one of he Neapolitan Lazzaroni to taste his pot of porter, should see him eject it from his mouth, with a curse; which would infallibly be the case.

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19. Clarke 1824, 11, 294; 9, 542, 543. See Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, 1, 174; similar stories are told, for example, in Park 1799, 132 and Belzoni 1820, 446. Unlike Clarke, whose exact degree of *deshabille* is left uncertain, and whose “Lappish” spectators appear as much interested in unfamiliar items of clothing as in seeing the travellers naked (“if we took off our stockings, or put on a night-cap, the wonder was heightened”; 9, 542), these other travellers place some emphasis on the fact that they do not completely undress.

20. Clarke 1824, 9, 400, 400–401. I have chosen to use terms adopted by travellers of the time, such as *Laplanders*, since the contemporary name the *Sami people* introduces a concept of cultural identity that would seem intrusively anachronistic in the context of writings of this period.

This evocation of an indubitably decisive response is not the end of Clarke’s exploration of situations in which foreigners look back: as though unwilling to abandon the scene of reciprocal viewing, Clarke appends to this imagined exchange an autobiographical footnote, in which he describes a cross-cultural encounter in yet another part of the world – dramatically, the summit of Vesuvius (Figs 7, 8). The lazzarone of the imagined meeting with the London “coal-heaver” becomes a local looking back at the traveller. The force with which the Neapolitan registers cultural difference is dramatized by reiteration: his words of distaste are translated, from dialect, first into Italian and then into English:

The author once gave some bottled-porter to a peasant of Vesuvius, who was almost fainting with thirst, upon the summit of that mountain. He had no sooner tasted it, than he threw it from his mouth, uttering, in the strange Patois of the Lazzaroni, the heartiest malediction he could bestow upon it: “Mannaggia tu vin’Anglese!” or, in other words, “Managgia il vino Inglese”; “D—n the English wine.”

Affirming dramatic difference

At least three preconditions for the incipient humour in such scenes can be charted. One of these is simply the sense of relief that is elicited when foreigners look back at travellers in surprise or shock: the gratifying reassurance that foreign places do in fact provide the quality of dramatic difference that the traveller demands of them – and needs them to supply, in order to demonstrate her or his proficiency in appropriating them as a source of pleasure and benefit. From at least the eighteenth century onwards, cultural commentaries register an anxiety that difference is disappearing: Rousseau, for example, in Émile (1762), sees the contemporary world as one in which “Les caractères originaux des peuples, s’effaçant de jour en jour, deviennent en même raison plus difficiles à saisir.”

23. “The original characters of peoples, being erased from day to day, become for that reason more difficult to grasp”, Rousseau 1966 [1762], 593. Rousseau explains: “À mesure que les races se mêlent, et que les peuples se confondent, on voit peu à peu disparaître ces différences nationales qui frappaient jadis au premier coup d’œil” (“As the races mingle with each other, and the boundaries between peoples become blurred, we see, little by little, the national differences that were once immediately and strikingly evident simply disappear.”); 593.
The crucial role in travel writing of such a reassurance that foreign places are in fact dramatically different from the familiar is strongly affirmed by another strategy, which also intermittently generates effects of laughter, and which, like reversals of spectator and spectacle, is found both in accounts of Italy and in commentaries on the cold North. This is the suggestion that manners in a particular part of Europe resemble those of some far more distant region. Louis Simond, for example, uses this strategy in his *Voyage en Italie et en Sicile* (1828), translated as *A Tour in Italy and Sicily* (1828), when he observes that “L’on pourroit comparer les mœurs de Naples à celles d’Otahiti,… et ces mœurs sont celles de la nature!” 24 Alphonse de Fortia de Piles, in his *Voyage de deux français en Allemagne, Danemarck, Suède, Russie et Pologne* (1796), deploys this device when commenting on the proclivity of Scandinavians for conferring orders and medals – he has just described an award ceremony – and satirically demanding our indulgence towards “cette simplicité noble”:

Rappelez-vous que l’homme connaît les ordres; que le capitaine Dixon a trouvé l’ordre de l’os, établi dans les îles Pelew. Insensés que nous sommes! Nous voulons ramener l’homme policé au-delà même de l’homme de la nature. 25

**Further attacks on orderly travel**

The other preconditions for the effect of laughter produced by foreigners looking back have in fact, already been mentioned in the context of sightseeing: the eruption of disorder in an apparently ordered mode of viewing, defined with reference to Douglas’s concept of a joke as “an attack on control”, and the relinquishment of seriousness and “sufficiency” (in this case, the position of authority assumed by a detached spectator), as outlined by Bataille.

These two disruptions of established modes of viewing are found, then, not only in accounts of sights and wonders, but also in descriptions of topographies in which the objects of commentary, unlike sights, are far from being mediated and “framed” (that is, singled out as especially worthy of attention from the continuum of life and culture around them). 26 Another element in travel narratives, moreover, like reversals of spectator and spectacle, supplies both these qualities of an upsurge of “something informal” and a loss of seriousness. At certain moments, both in heavily mediated and in relatively unmediated topographies, the traveller is distracted from the task of observing and reflecting by odd incidents along the way (at inns, for example): an alternative,

24. “The manners and morals of Neapolitans are those of Otaheite, or of Nature.” Simond 1828a, 2, 142; 1828b, 431.
25. “Remember that the orders are known to mankind in general, that Captain Dixon found the order of the bone established on the Pelew Islands. What madmen we are! We want to take man of disciplined society beyond the state of natural man.” Fortia de Piles 1796, 2, 182.
26. The term *framing*, here, is used with reference to MacCannell 1976, 44.
incipiently picaresque narrative of travel, in other words, erupts amid the self-possessed narration of the traveller assiduously appropriating the foreign as a source of pleasure and benefit. At an inn near Genoa, for example, Tobias Smollett, caught up in a situation “at the same time shocking and ridiculous”, admits that he “could not help laughing” at the antics of a mad waiter. Clarke singles out incidents of this kind as a source of comedy when he writes to Malthus to thank him for the loan of his Scandinavian journals:

I thought I should have died with laughter at some of the scenes you describe ... especially the visit to the Patron who spoke only Swedish ... and again when when the old Doctor seized you and Otter and kissed you on both cheeks in spite of your Latin.

Clarke himself, in Norway, recounts a “singular adventure” at a house to which he and Cripps are conducted on the way from Trondheim to Christiania (Oslo):

After an excellent dinner, in which we were regaled with Madeira and Burgundy, our host said he would receive nothing in payment. What could this mean? Had we been conducted, by some Tony Lumpkin, to a Gentleman's house, instead of an inn? Like Goldsmith's travellers in 'She stoops to conquer'.

Word and world

Travel writing and laughing, moreover, are closely related in a way that goes beyond the imaginative possibilities common to the warm South and the cold North. Traveller-narrators, in commentaries on the foreign, are necessarily at grips with the task of translating the topography into language – that is, with forging relations between word and world. Much of humour is also concerned with the ways in which word and world might relate to each other. A joking anecdote that Byron recounts about Beau Brummell, for example, uses a single word to link the famous dandy’s struggle with the French language and the vast aspirations of Napoleon – and so, as the reader reflects back upon Brummell, to provide an effect of comic bathos:

27. Smollett 1981 [1766], 292, 293. Laurence Sterne's Sentimental Journey through France and Italy concludes with a section titled 'The Case of Delicacy', which ironically recognizes the narrative potential of inns: the traveller-narrator, Yorick, is trapped in an establishment of this kind on the Alps by a stone in the road, and soon learns that he must share his bedchamber with two women, “a Piedmontese of about thirty, with a glow of health in her cheeks”, and her fille de chambre, “as brisk and lively a French girl as ever moved” (Sterne, 1984 [1768], 122).

28. Malthus 1966, 21 (quoted in introductory material). The editor explains, here, that Malthus's journals of the Swedish part of his Nordic travels have been lost; unless they have surfaced since 1966, it is therefore impossible to check the details of these anecdotes.

29. Clarke 1824, 10, 351. The traveller's suspicions that this is in fact “a Gentleman's house” are, it seems, confirmed. In Oliver Goldsmith's 'She Stoops to Conquer', Act 1, Scene 2, Tony Lumpkin mischievously directs two travellers, Charles Morley and George Hastings, to the house of Mr Hardcastle, pretending that it is an inn called “The Buck's Head” (Goldsmith 1777 [1772], 229–230). The ensuing misunderstandings supply much of the comedy of the play.
When Brummell was obliged (... it was about money & debt all that) to retire to France – he knew no French & having obtained a Grammar for the purpose of Study – our friend Scrope Davies was asked what progress Brummell had made in French – to which he responded – “that B[rummell ] had been stopped like Buona-parte in Russia by the Elements”.30

The trope deployed here is a version of zeugma – a recurrent figure in travel writing, in which forms of language link together two obviously dissimilar attributes. Perhaps the most famous example of this trope in the context of travel is in Jane Austen’s satire on the Gothic novel in Northanger Abbey, in her reference to “the Alps and Pyrenees, with their pine forests and their vices”.31 In Sweden, Fortia de Piles uses this trope to establish a link between manners and landscape, of a kind common in travel writing, when he describes the Dalecarlians as “ce peuple, presque aussi sauvage que ses montagnes”.32 Wollstonecraft adopts a similar formulation to characterize a remote part of Norway: “the character of the inhabitants is as uncultivated, if not as picturesquely wild, as their abode.”33

The ability of particular words to convey different meanings – as in these examples – can also generate humour through slippages of meaning between languages. Acerbi, and Clarke after him, note such a slippage even in dealings with animals. Acerbi explains a major problem in dealing with horses:

The same sound that is used in Italy to quicken the horses’ pace, is employed in Sweden for the purpose of making them halt: and it often happened that, when we were ascending some steep hill, we uttered that, or a similar sound, to encourage the horses; when, to our great disappointment, they stopped short instantaneously.34

Despite the danger that this cross-cultural mistake entails on steep inclines, and the consequent astonishment of the peasants guiding them, Acerbi says, “we could not help laughing even in the midst of peril”. He transcribes the sound that causes all the trouble as Tpschrúú – a formulation that, like Psctth in de Rossi’s Calzolajo Inglese – the name of the Englishman who innocently produces his version of the Coliseum joke – itself introduces a comic element of cross-cultural incomprehension.35 (Clarke attempts no transcription, but observes the same inverse relation between English and Swedish attempts to communicate with horses.)36

31. Austen 1995 [1818], 188.
32. “This people, almost as savage as their mountains”. Fortia de Piles 1796, 2, 263.
33. Wollstonecraft 1987 [1796], 131.
34. Acerbi 1802, 1, 9.
35. Acerbi 1802, 1, 9, 8n. To pursue the possibilities of cross-cultural confusion further, Acerbi adds: “It is exactly by the same sound that the country people in Scotland address their horses when they want them to stop” (1, 9).
36. Clarke 1824, 9, 243.
Later in his travels, Acerbi is driven to rather greater hilarity by an unexpected homophone between an anodyne Finnish word and a cheerfully demotic Italian one. At Kemi, he and his companions set out to see “a couple of bells”, which are “loaded with a number of Finlandish inscriptions”:

Most of the party, ourselves excepted, were perfectly acquainted with the language of Finland; and the ladies undertook to read the inscriptions, and translate them into Swedish. The prettiest girl in the company immediately read aloud, “Catzo”, &c. &c. Scarcely had she pronounced the word, when we began to laugh like fools, and the ladies, ignorant of the cause of our mirth, thought that catzo must be a very laughable word, and therefore never ceased repeating it in the whole course of our walk, at table, in conversation, and on all occasions. Let the reader judge what sort of effect the word, so often repeated by the company, must have produced on the ears of two Italians. Catzo, in Finlandish, signifies here is.37

The ability of language to register the comic complexities of cross-cultural difference is strongly affirmed in the trope that might be termed citing the characteristic commonplace: glossing expressions in the language of the place visited that recur in everyday conversation. Sterne, in his Sentimental Journey, uses two such commonplaces to suggest the slipperiness of our understanding of the world in general, when the landlord of an inn at “Montriul”, “supposing I was young in French”, corrects the traveller–narrator, Yorick, on his use of the expression tant pis:

Tant mieux, toujours, Monsieur, said he, when there is any thing to be got – tant pis, when there is nothing. It comes to the same thing, said I. Pardonnez-moi, said the landlord.38

Setting aside the potential lability of language, Yorick then solemnly resorts to the practical approach of the guidebook or phrasebook:

37. Acerbi 1802, 1, 337. The effect of a word so closely resembling cazzo suddenly cropping up, at the turn of the nineteenth century, can be judged by the definition of the Italian term, in a dictionary of a few decade later, as “plebea ed oscena”; its appearance unexpectedly, within a speech in a foreign language, might of course still raise the odd smile (Dizionario, 1839). The Finnish katso in fact translates as “look”, from katsaou, “to look”; Acerbi is presumably translating this term into the Italian eco, and then rendering this in English as “here is”. I am grateful to Wendy Bracewell for the dictionary reference that helped me in my attempt to gauge the precise degree of vulgarity of cazzo in the early nineteenth century, to Stefano Fogelberg Rota for confirming my view of Acerbi’s mistranslation, and to Peter Stadius for explaining the meaning of katso.

On the road to Stockholm, Acerbi cites another equivocal term: “The last stage, or post-house, called Fithia, is remarkable for nothing so much as its double meaning in the Swedish language, when it is pronounced by strangers.” By questioning them about the place, Gustavus III induces travellers, in all innocence, to utter a word regarded as highly coarse, “on which the king would, with little regard to delicacy, fall a laughing”. “This anecdote”, Acerbi says virtuously, “is introduced here, solely for the purpose of warning strangers against mentioning this post-house in the company of Swedish ladies” (1, 31).

Since scholars working on laughter are often accused of stating the obvious, I have refrained from further explanation of cazzo and fitta.
I cannot take a fitter opportunity to observe once for all, that *tant pis* and *tant mieux* being two of the great hinges in French conversation, a stranger would do well to set himself right in the use of them, before he gets to Paris.  

Clarke cites the exclamation *Ja så!* (*jaså* in modern Swedish) as a similar “great hinge” of conversation in Sweden: “from the throne to the cottage it constitutes four-fifths of the remarks made by the Swedes upon all occasions.” Exploring the “multiplied associations” of the expression, and the diverse ways in which it is uttered, Clarke concludes: “If a Swede were told that his head would be struck off within the next half-hour, he would say, beyond doubt, *Yab så!*”  

Sightseeing, such commentaries suggest, is not the only approach to gathering and assimilating information about the foreign that invites a disorderly upsurge of hilarity.

40. Clarke 1824, 10, 157, 156, 156.
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