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RSVP 2009 Robert L. Colby Scholarly
Book Prize Lecture

“Much of Sala, and but Little of
Russia”:
“A Journey Due North,” *Household
Words*, and the Birth of a Special
Correspondent

CATHERINE WATERS

When Dickens sent George Augustus Sala as a special correspondent to Russia just after the end of the Crimean War, he launched him in what was to become his best-known role as a journalist. As Sala later claimed in his autobiography, for the preceding five years he had been idling away his days in “Lazy-land” as “a slovenly, careless young ne’er-do-weel,” a Bohemian characterised by “a liking for vagabondising, sauntering, and treading obviously and disgracefully unprofitable paths.”¹ This “Lotus-eating,” as he called it (after Thackeray’s description of British Bohemia in *Philip*²), was brought to an end when he convinced Dickens that, following the cessation of hostilities in the Crimea, “the British reading public would like to know something about Russia itself, its manners, and social usages.”³ Dickens accepted the proposal, and thus Sala embarked in April 1856 for fifteen weeks to write “a series of descriptive essays touching Muscovy and the Muscovites, in the pages of *Household Words*.”⁴

Comprising twenty-two articles appearing in weekly instalments from 4 October 1856 to 14 March 1857, “A Journey Due North” is of interest not only for its representation of one of the most significant geographical and cultural “others” of the mid-Victorian imagination,⁵ but for the distinctive style of Sala’s special correspondence, which eschews political analysis and statistical information in favour of sketching Russian everyday life.

As his biographer, Ralph Strauss, observes, Sala's reports were "almost strikingly different from previous 'travellers' tales': "Here were no long and learned disquisitions on Russia's politics or her geographical peculiarities or her past history, of the kind which had hitherto been considered an essential feature of any such book." Rather, Sala went to Russia "as an ordinary sight-seer."⁶ While he undoubtedly avoids the "learned disquisition" informed by facts and figures, however—"I am boldly bankrupt in statistics" he declares at one point⁷—Sala's correspondence is hardly the account of an "ordinary sight-seer." Vivid, lively and polyglot, it is characterised by the predilection for metropolitan sketching and the "streety" voice already evinced in his earlier contributions to *Household Words*.

Sala's first contribution to Dickens's journal, "The Key of the Street" (6 September 1851), was a narrative of his "enforced perambulations of the thoroughfares of the metropolis" that resulted from his being accidentally locked out of his lodgings in Upper Wellington Street with only ninepence in his pocket and having to walk the streets until seven o'clock the next morning.⁸ He went on to become *Household Words*'s most prolific contributor in the genre of metropolitan travel writing, and he reiterates his love of such loitering at the outset of his journey to Russia, declaring: "I am of the streets, and streety—*eis ten polin* is my haven. Like the starling, I can't get out of cities."⁹ As Peter Blake notes, this phrase is borrowed from Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, "The first man is of the earth, earthy" (1 Corinthians 15:47);¹⁰ but it is adapted with an irony typical of Sala and becomes something of a *leitmotif* that he repeats in a number of essays. In "Down Whitechapel Way" he proclaims again, "I am of the streets, streety. I love to take long walks, not only down Fleet Street, but up and down all other streets, alleys, and lanes."¹¹ In the tenth instalment of his "Journey Due North," he captures the vagabond nature of such roaming, describing "what in Bohemian euphuism is known as the Grand Scud":

This, though difficult of exact translation, may be accepted as implying a sort of purposelessness journeying—a viatorial meandering—a pilgrimage to the shrine of our Lady of Haphazard—an expedition in which charts, compasses, and chronometers have been left behind as needless impediments, and in which any degree of latitude the traveller may happen to find himself in, is cheerfully accepted as an accomplished fact.¹²

As *Household Words*'s pre-eminent *flâneur*, Sala continues to practice abroad that discursive urban portraiture so popular with mid nineteenth-century readers and which would characterise his ongoing work as a special correspondent. As Percy Fitzgerald, another regular contributor to the journal, summarised the distinctiveness of his narrative: "there was much

of Sala, and but little of Russia” in the series.¹³ The *Saturday Review* (a “slashing reviewer” of Sala, as well as Dickens) made a similar point about the characteristic manner of his series, remarking with asperity that “[i]t is a real injury to literature—this fluent style of would-be-jocular word-spinning; and it is surprising that the conceit and egotism of writers of this school can be tolerated by any large body of readers.”¹⁴ But tolerate it they did, with the early chapters of “A Journey Due North” proving to be “an undoubted success.”¹⁵

Sala left London with a monthly travelling allowance of £40, after having signed a memorandum with Dickens that the question of the copyright of the completed book would be reserved until the book itself was produced: a cautious move on Dickens’s part, given Sala’s poor recent track record in the regular delivery of copy.¹⁶ *Household Words*’s sub-editor, W.H. Wills, had proposed that he travel direct to the Russian port of Cronstadt by sea, from Hull or another northern England seaport; but having had “as yet, the merest glimpse of Germany,” Sala chose instead to go to Berlin with the intention of proceeding to St Petersburg from there, “drawing, of course, some *Household Words* pictures by the way.”¹⁷ However, he found this route more difficult than he imagined, and was brought to a “standstill” in Berlin on 27 April by the news that passage north through the Gulf of Finland was blocked by ice, and that the Fast Mail-packet Prussian Eagle would not start from the Baltic seaport of Stettin until 17 May. In these circumstances, he was forced to cool his heels in Berlin for three weeks, and he communicated his frustration with characteristic jocularly in the first instalment, as he exclaims: “Behold me. . . . Here is my fare, sixty-two dollars in greasy Prussian notes—like curl-papers smoothed out—here is my Foreign-Office passport, not visé yet for Russia, but which tomorrow will be; here are my brains and my heart, bounding, yearning, for Muscovite impressions . . .”; and yet he could not proceed due north.¹⁸ The extended narrative generated by this delay caused Dickens to cut “a good deal out of the two first papers” Sala sent him; and a note of exasperation may be detected in Dickens’s italics as he wrote to Sala explaining that these had to be “so compressed together, as that you might be fairly on your way *to Russia itself* in the first periodical” instalment.¹⁹ Such a protracted commencement highlights the irony of the title finally chosen for the series, for the linear directness, exactitude and end-focus implied by a journey “due” north are continually subverted by Sala’s typically excursive mode of travelling and of writing.

Sala was of course right that British interest in things Russian had been spurred by the events in the Crimea, and *Household Words* had published articles on Russian life by Henry Morley, Edmund Saul Dixon, and Otto von Wenckstern earlier in the decade. Von Wenckstern was a German émigré who wrote of Russian bribery and corruption with some first-hand experi-

ence, but Morley and Dixon based their essays upon published accounts by other travellers, such as Turgenev's *A Sportsman's Sketches* (1854) or the memoirs of Etienne-Gaspard Robertson (1831–33).²⁰ While Sala shares their animadversions against such notorious targets as the intrusive Russian passport system, aristocratic despotism, censorship, slavery, and the knout, the intimacy and immediacy of his correspondence provide a much more lively and engaging account of Russian life and manners than these second-hand reports do. As Fitzgerald observed, Sala "could write upon any subject, upon a broomstick even, could travel to remote regions, could "word-paint" to perfection[,] . . . filling his report with vivid strokes and 'purple patches' as no other could." "He had the most extraordinary art of saying an infinite deal about nothing, all the while seeming to be writing down facts and incidents."²¹

Objecting to this rhetorical facility, the *Saturday Review* attacked the 1858 collected volume form of *A Journey Due North* as "one tissue of affected, overstrained, laborious *badinage*": "Mr Dickens is out-Dickensed by this imitator of his overwrought style of word-painting," it declared.²² But combined as it is with wit and humour, Sala's "word-painting" was, and remains, beguiling. Constantly diverted by digressive observations and sketches, even when he is claiming to eschew such waywardness, Sala is winningly candid about the unruliness of his Shandean style. As he admits with mock-modesty in the fourth instalment:

I am incorrigible. If you want a man to explore the interior of Australia, or to discover the North-West Passage, or the sources of the Niger, don't send me. I should come back with a sketch of Victoria Street, Sydney, or the journal of a residence in Cape Coast Castle, or notes of the peculiarities of the skipper of a Hull whaler. If ever I write a biography it will be the life of John Smith; and the great historical work which is to gild, I hope, the evening of my days will be a Defence of Queen Elizabeth from the scandal, unwarrantably cast upon her, or an Account of the death of Queen Anne. Lo! I have spent a summer in Russia; and I have nothing to tell you of the Altai Mountains, the Kirghese tribes, Chinese Tartary, the Steppes, Kamschatka, or even the Czar's coronation.²³

Indeed, despite his plans and travelling allowance, Sala ran short of money and did not make it to Moscow at all, spending the whole of his fifteen weeks in Russia in St Petersburg, "apart from a short stay in the country in the first half of June."²⁴ Peter Edwards speculates that "[e]ither he had failed to keep the vow of sobriety (and perhaps abstinence from gambling) that Dickens had no doubt insisted upon, or, as he maintained in his [autobiography], the travel allowance he was paid was simply inadequate."²⁵ But whatever the reason, he missed the most notable event reported by the rest of the foreign press: the coronation of the new Czar, Alexander II, in

Moscow in September. Characteristically, Sala made a virtue of necessity regarding his failure to cover this event. He uses the occasion to contrast the nature of his Russian correspondence with what he mistakenly took to be William Howard Russell's reports upon this great pageant in the *Daily News* thus:

You, who are yet fresh from the graphic and glowing description of the coronation illuminations at Moscow, by the Man who fought the Battle of England in the Crimea, better and more bravely than the whole brilliant staff who have been decorated with the order of the bath, . . . doubtless expect a very splendid account from me of illuminations at St Petersburg. But it was my fortune to see Russia, not in its gala uniform, with its face washed, and all its orders on; but Russia in its shirt-sleeves (with its caftan off . . .), Russia at-home, and not expecting visitors till September—Russia just recovering its breath, raw, bruised, exhausted, torn, begrimed from a long and bloody conflict.²⁶

Like his earlier *Household Words* accounts of Constantinople, Venice, Naples and Paris in "Cities in Plain Clothes," where the trope of clothing is used to expose the illusionism involved in the conventional travel accounts of poets, painters, and "rapturous tourists,"²⁷ Sala's view of Russia "in its shirt-sleeves" eschews the received mode of the guide book or traveller's tale, and repudiates what he refers to as "Annualism": "that long and fondly preserved Annual tradition of the beauty of peasant girls, the merry ways of peasant children, the prettiness of villages, the picturesqueness of peasant costume. I have buried the fallacious tradition along with other illusions."²⁸ Rather than portraying St Petersburg, with its grand architecture and monuments, as the glittering icon of Russian state power that its founder, Peter the Great, had aspired to establish, Sala depicts the graphic bustle and dirt of everyday life in the city's streets.

Readers of *Household Words* familiar with Sala's ethnographic sketches of London streets would not have been surprised at the direction taken for his first Russian walk: "I have not been twenty minutes established in Petersburg [he declares], before I feel that I am due on the Nevskoi; that the houses are waiting for me there; that the Nevskoians are walking up and down, impatient for me to come and contemplate them."²⁹ The main thoroughfare in St Petersburg, the Nevsky Prospekt was a well-known axis sometimes depicted in moving panoramas of the early nineteenth century,³⁰ and we accompany Sala along its length as his initial disappointment at the absence of a crowd gives way to the discovery that "the Nevskoi is immensely wide and stupendously long, and magnificently paved" and "is the handsomest and the most remarkable street in the world."³¹ Fitzgerald later criticised the amount of attention Sala gave to it and to the Droshky drivers who raced along its length, complaining that Sala "maun-

dered for weeks” over the Nevsky and “devoted column after column to the subject of the Russian cab-drivers, which then led him on to the cab-drivers of other countries.”³² The complaint, however, ignores the genre of nineteenth-century urban sketch-writing upon which Sala was drawing and which would help to establish the distinctive style of his special correspondence. He was strongly influenced by Louis-Sebastien Mercier’s *Le Tableau de Paris* (1776–88), a series of eyewitness accounts of Parisian coffee-houses, changing fashions, old clothes markets, bill-stickers, and so on, published in the 1780s and identified by Martina Lauster as marking the birth of city sketches or the French *physiologies*.³³ Sala mentions his ambition to “bring Mercier’s *Tableau* . . . down to the present day” twenty years later in his preface to the second edition of *Paris Herself Again in 1878–9*³⁴ (a collection of his correspondence for the *Daily Telegraph*); and his friend and colleague Albert Smith had popularised the form of the *physiologie* in England with his series of “Natural Histories” of London types—the idler, the gent, the flirt and others—published in the late 1840s. The genre involves the application of a quasi-scientific method of categorising types to the humorous study of social life, and Sala employs it in the fifth instalment of “A Journey Due North,” which is unashamedly given over to the Ischvostchik, a representative type of Russian “coachmanhood,” as he declares: “I shall make no more bones about sketching the ischvostchik, than if he were a new butterfly, or an inedited fern, or a Niam-Niam, or any other rare specimen entomological, or zoological.”³⁵

The Ischvostchik elicits Sala’s self-confessed “literary craze” for costume and fashion (derived from his “experience as a periodical stocktaker in the wardrobes of the Princess’s Theatre” and early sketches made for *The Lady’s Newspaper*).³⁶ He is described wearing a distinctive long caftan or coat of dark blue or grass green cloth or serge, “a pair of baggy galigaskins, blue or pink striped, heavy bucket boots well greased,” a girdle that was once scarlet and a brass badge with the number of his vehicle.³⁷ He speaks a peculiar language, a “Lingua non scripta,” of which Sala provides a sample of ten phrases sufficient “to all droschky-driving intents and purposes”:

1. Na Prava—To the right.
2. Na leva—To the left.
3. Ponyiama—Straight on. Right a-head.
4. Stoi—Stop!
5. Pashol-Scorreï—Quick, go a-head.
6. Shivai—Faster.
7. Dam na Vodka—I’ll stand something to drink above the fare.
8. Durak—Fool!
9. Sabakoutchelovek—Son of a dog!
10. Tippian—You’re drunk.³⁸

The humour of the increasingly vituperative list recalls Boz's comic sketches of London cab-drivers. But Sala uses the figure of the droschky-driver as an emblem of Russian social barbarism. He juxtaposes description of the many "adjuncts to civilisation" available in St Petersburg—the "thriving trade in wax candles, pineapple ices, patent leather boots, Clicquot's champagne, crinoline petticoats, artificial flowers," the fact that "Grisi and Lablanche sing at the Grand Opera; Mademoiselle Cerito dances there; French is habitually spoken in society; and invitations to balls and dinners are sent to you on enamelled cards, and in pink billets smelling of musk and millefleurs"—with the brutal state of the droschky-driver who drives "you to your domicile." His dismay at this contrast is conveyed with the characteristic immediacy of a shift into the second person and a sharp awareness of the cultural boundaries defined by dress:

I know nothing more striking in my Russian experience than the sudden plunge from a hothouse of refinement to a cold bath of sheer barbarism. . . . Your civilisation, your evening dress, your carefully selected stock of pure Parisian French, avail you nothing with the Ischvostchik. He speaks nothing but Russ; he cannot read; he has nothing, nothing in common with you—closely shaven (as regards the cheeks and chin) and swathed in the tight sables of European etiquette, as you are—he in his flowing oriental caftan, and oriental beard, and more than oriental dirt.³⁹

This "ragged, dirty Ischvostchik," dubbed Ivan Ivanovitch, is contrasted in appearance with the coachman of the Princess Schiliapoff "(or any other princess you like to find a name for)," whose

caftan is made of superfine broadcloth, sometimes of velvet, slashed at the back and sides with embroidery, as if he had been knouted with a golden whip; his hat is of the shiniest nap, has a velvet band, a silver buckle, and is decorated with a bunch of rosy ribbons, a bouquet of artificial flowers, or a peacock's feather . . .

But "though he is a coachman to a princess," his "social position [is not] one whit better than that of Ivan Ivanovitch": "he is a SLAVE, body and bones [and] the Princess Schiliapoff may sell him to-morrow if she have a mind," or "send him to the police, and have him beaten like a sack if he take a wrong turning or pull up at the wrong milliner's shop."⁴⁰

While the notorious stick or knout recurs as an emblem of Russian barbarity throughout the narrative of his journey, as an habitué of the streets, Sala characteristically regards the Czar's highway as his key symbol of imperial progress or the lack thereof. "There is no such civiliser as a good road," he declares: "Our shops, our horses' legs, our boots, our hearts,

have all benefited by the introduction of Macadam.”⁴¹ But the “Czar’s highway, which is literally his—for everything in the empire, movable and immovable, animated and inanimated, is his own private and personal property—is the worst highway that was ever seen”⁴²: “Looking-glass slipperiness in winter; uncomfortable mud in spring; simoons of dust in summer; lakes of sloppy horrors in autumn; these are the characteristics of the Czar’s highway.”⁴³ The pavement of St Petersburg, built upon land reclaimed from the river Neva, is treacherously uneven—“It is as though you were walking on the sloping roofs of houses which had sunk into the boggy soil up to the frieze and architrave”—and “as for the gas-lamps on the Czar’s highway, they puzzle a stranger in Russia terribly,”⁴⁴ for “all the posts in Petersburg are lampless from the first of May to the first of August in every year,” during which “three months, there is, meteorologically and officially, no night.”⁴⁵

Linda Nead has written of the fashioning of Victorian London into a modern metropolis through the spatial ordering of improved streets, designed to ensure “constant, purposeful movement: of water, air, traffic, people and commodities,” and the effects of gas lighting, which introduced public order to city thoroughfares at night and created a new commercial world of gaslit display.⁴⁶ Sala had memorably described the poetics and economics of London streets at night in “The Secrets of the Gas,” published as the leader in *Household Words* on 4 March 1854, where the personified gas bears witness to both the beauty and the danger of the nocturnal city. But his focus on the gaslit streets of St Petersburg provides a contrasting tale of disordered urban space in which the free circulation of people and goods is blocked or impeded by bad paving, and gas is regarded by the people as “the precursor of the sleety, rainy, sopping autumn, with its fierce gusts of west wind; gas is the herald, the avant-courier, of the awful winter: of oven-like rooms, nose-biting outward temperature, frozen fish, frozen meat, frozen tears, frozen everything.”⁴⁷ Rather than signifying metropolitan improvement, or delighting the night-walker with its spectacular illumination, gas is welcomed back by the Russians “with dolorous faces and half-suppressed sighs.” Sala describes the gas-lamps on the Nevskoi and the Morskaias, “handsome erections in bronze, real or sham, rich in mouldings and metallic foliage,” and the wooden obelisks, like sentry-boxes, which serve as lamp-posts on the quays, but again remarks a crucial difference: “In Western Europe these inviting spaces would be very speedily covered with rainbow-hued placards relating to pills and plays and penny-newspapers.” The bill-sticker is outlawed here, where “the Russian police have a way of posting bills on the backs of human houses very plain and legible to the view. They always print too in red ink.”⁴⁸

On the left-hand side of the Nevskoi Perspective stands the Gostinnoi-Dvor or great bazaar of St Petersburg, “(literally, Things Yard),” where

Sala is immediately in his element. Regarding this account, even his fiercest critic, the *Saturday Review*, conceded that “of the omnigenous contents” of the great bazaar, “Mr Sala’s inventory-like style qualifies him for giving a very sufficient description.”⁴⁹

If you take one avenue of the glorious Palais Royal, say that where the goldsmith and jewellers’ shops are, and with this combine the old colonnade of the Regent’s Quadrant; if to this you add a dwarfed semblance of the Piazza in Covent Garden—especially as regards the coffee-stalls at early morning; if you throw in a dash of the Cloisters of Westminster Abbey—taking care to Byzantinise all the Gothic, but keeping all the chequered effects of chiaro-oscuro; if, still elaborating your work, you piece on a fragment of that musty little colonnade out of Lower Regent Street, which ought to belong to the Italian Opera House, but doesn’t, and at whose corner Mr Seguin’s library used to be; if, as a final architectural effort, you finish off with a few yards of the dark entry in Canterbury Cathedral yard, and with as much as you like (there is not much) of that particularly grim, ghostly, and mildewed arcade at the Fields corner of Great Queen Street, Lincoln’s Inn; if you make an architectural salmagundy of all these; . . . garnish with that portion of the peristyle of the Palace of the Institute of Paris, where the print-stalls are; and serve up hot with reminiscences of what old Exeter ‘Change must have been like; you will have something of a skeleton notion of the outward appearance of the Gostinnoi-dvor.⁵⁰

This flamboyant account is typical of Sala’s so-called “word-painting,” its appeal lying in the wit and ingenuity with which its far-fetched ingredients are gathered to form the miscellaneous dish. While the construction of binary oppositions between the familiar and the foreign was a characteristic trope of earlier travel writing devoted to the Grand Tour,⁵¹ Sala’s description estranges the known points of reference invoked through their fantastical assemblage. The description yokes past and present together, as he combines an avenue of the Palais Royal with the Quadrant colonnades, which were removed from Regent Street in 1848, or blends classical, Byzantine and neo-classical architectural forms together. The mixture anticipates the multi-layered nature of the nineteenth-century city and its monuments as theorised by Walter Benjamin: “The street conducts the *flâneur* into a vanished time. . . . In the asphalt over which he passes, his steps awaken a surprising resonance. The gaslight that streams down on the paving stones throws an equivocal light on this double ground.”⁵²

Even more alluring than the fantastical façade, however, is the panorama of life within:

It is here that you can watch in its fullest development that most marvellous mixture of super-civilisation and ultra-barbarism; of dirt and perfumes;

accomplished, heartless scepticism, and naïve though gross superstition; of prince and beggar; poodle and bear; prevailing tyrant and oppressed creature which make St Petersburg to me one magnificent, fantastic volume; a French translation of the Arabian Nights, bound in Russia, illustrated with Byzantine pictures, and compiled by slaves for the amusement of masters as luxurious as the old Persians, as astute and accomplished as the Greeks, as cruel as the Romans, as debauched as those who dwelt in the Destroyed Cities, and whom it is a sin to name.⁵³

The allusions to antiquity, to ancient empires built from slavery, suggest the inevitable demise of Russian serfdom. But the description is also shadowed by hints of illicit desire. *Household Words* was of course a respectable family magazine, but Sala sails rather close to the wind here with his suggestive references to the French translation of the tales of the Arabian nights bound in Russian leather (notwithstanding the fact that Burton's unexpurgated translation would not appear until 1885) and the allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah. Peter Edwards argues that Sala's "private letters, the private remarks of friends like Swinburne, and even some of his published writings leave little room for doubt that the inveterate vices which so often drained his purse included not only gambling and Bohemian roistering, but also flagellation, and possibly pædophilia."⁵⁴ Whatever the truth of these claims, Sala's description of the Gostinnoi-dvor shows some queer personal obsessions which can assume almost the (dis)proportion of fetishes. This is most evident as he approaches the row of shops selling boots. Offering a kind of *physiologie* of boots, Sala begins with the "tall jack-boots, worn till within a few months by the Czar's chevalier guard," and goes on to describe the "hessians worn by the dashing hussars of Grodno," the "slight, shapely boots of the militia officer," the "curious boots, shelving down at the tops like vertical coal-scuttles" worn by the Imperial Escort, the "barbarically gorgeous boots—or rather boot-hose—of the Circassians of the Guard" and the "long boots of Tamboff, reaching high up the thigh, and all of scarlet leather." But the tour de force is his account of the Kasan boot:

The Kasan boot supplies the long-sought-after and sighed-for desideratum of a slipper that will keep on—of a boot that the wearer may lounge and kick his legs about in, unmindful of the state of his stocking-heels (I do not allude to holes, though they will happen in the best regulated bachelor families, but to darns, which, though tidier, are equally distasteful to the sight), or a boot-slipper, or a slipper-boot, which can be pulled off and on with far greater ease than a glove; which cannot be trodden down at heel, and which will last through all sorts of usage a most delightfully unreasonable time.⁵⁵

Like the great bazaar in which it is displayed and sold, the Kasan boot manifests a puzzling mixture of nationalities: “It isn’t Turkish, it isn’t Byzantine, it isn’t Venetian, it isn’t Moyen-age Bohemian,” but it has “most certain dim characteristics” of all of these “which all succumb . . . in the long run to the pure barbaric Muscovite element.” Despite the one drawback of “a very powerful and remarkably unpleasant odour, of which fried candle-grease and a wet day in Bermondsey would appear to be the chief components,” the Kasan remains Sala’s beau-ideal of a boot: “I have but to thrust my foot out of bed in the morning, for the Kasan boot to come, as it were of its own volition, and nestle to my foot till it has coiled itself round it, rather than shod me.”

It was no doubt such writing as this that provoked Sala’s critics to complain of his “insufferably inflated and spasmodic” style.⁵⁶ Even the otherwise admiring reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* admitted that “he is rather too lavish of his spice,” having “such a profusion of rich condiments ready to his hands that he is apt sometimes to overseason our taste.”⁵⁷ But Sala is also capable of more sober social comment in his “Journey.” In the seventeenth instalment, subtitled “The Great Russian Boguey,” for example, he turns his attention to the police and their reputation for espionage and corruption. He describes the “Siège or Seat”⁵⁸ where the major of police dwells and “decides on the number of blows with stick, or rod, or whip, to be administered to Ischvostchiks who have been drunk over night, or to cooks who have been sent to the police-station to be flogged for burning the soup, or serving the broccoli with the wrong sauce. Here he sits, and here he Takes.”⁵⁹ To illustrate the point, he imagines the scenario that would unfold if he had a gold watch stolen and were naïve enough to complain about it to the police.⁶⁰ Such an application would set off an endless round of bureaucratic circumlocution and bribery in which

Boguey catches sham thieves for me—worsted stocking knaves with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins’ heads—mere toasts and butter, who would as lieve steal the Czar’s crown as a gold watch, and whose boldest feat of larceny would probably be the purloining of a pickled cucumber from a stall. . . . Boguey’s outlying myrmidons bring me vile pinchbeck saucepan lids, infamous tinpot sconces, which they call watches; and would much like to know if I can recognize them as my property? All this time I am paying rouble after rouble for perquisitions, and inquiries, and gratifications, and messengers’ expenses, and stamps, and an infinity of other engines of extortion. At last (under advice) I rush to the major of police, and ask him plainly (but privately), for how much he will let me off?⁶¹

Straus argues that it “is hardly an exaggeration to say” that this “chapter on the police . . . has rarely been surpassed,” “whether as a piece of

accurate description or as an essay in restrained satire.”⁶² The technique is Dickensian, of course, and the account is reminiscent of *Little Dorrit*'s Circumlocution Office or the satiric tale of persecution found in “The Begging-Letter Writer.”⁶³

Also Dickensian is Sala's need to draw inspiration from the life of the streets. Just as Dickens complained from Lausanne to Forster while composing *Dombey and Son* about the lack of busy London streets which were indispensable to his writing, so in the penultimate instalment of “A Journey Due North,” devoted to the Tchorni Narod or Black People, Sala looks back over his correspondence, seeing a gap between his aims and achievements that he attributes to the absence of crowds:

I know that my intentions, in the first instance, were conscientious. “Be it mine,” I said, the very first night I laid down in my bed in the family vault at Heydes, “to take this Russian people, and spread it out between sheets of paper like caviare in a sandwich, for the million at home to digest as best they may.” But, my dear and forbearing reader, *I couldn't find the people.*⁶⁴

The multitude of shoppers in the great bazaar do not, he says, constitute a crowd. While the Nevskoi might be “thronged” between three and four o'clock in the afternoon, “I never saw a crowd collected on roadway or foot-pavement, that could equal in a tithe of numerical denseness, the gathering one sees every day on a Paris boulevard round a captured pick-pocket . . . ; or that can come up to the assemblage to be brought together twelve hundred times every day in Fleet Street or the Strand, by PUNCH, or a horse falling down.” The rareness of a Russian crowd accounts for the difficulty he has had in depicting characteristic types of the people, and may, depending upon whether you accept his word, help to explain the lengthy attention devoted to sketching the residents of his hotel in St Petersburg (two instalments); or the portraits of eccentric emigrant figures like “the famous St Petersburgian Italian music-master,” Fripanelli, or his Americanized touring companion, Alexis Hardshellovitch. The final instalment attempts to remedy the deficit of true Russian types by sketching representative “iks” as he calls them, where “ik” may be “synonymous with our ‘er’ in Costermonger, Fishmonger, Fruiterer, Poulterer,” and so forth.⁶⁵ He gives another series of *physiologies*—of a Batchmatchnik or shoemaker, a Typograpschtchnik or journeyman printer, a Kammenstchnik or stonemason, and others—concluding with reference to the “great Iks of all Iks, the Moujiks, the Rabotniks (the generic term for workmen, as a Moujik and Christian are for slaves), the indefinable creatures in the caftans who are the verb active of the living Russ condemned for their lifetime to be, to do, and to suffer.”⁶⁶

This instalment abruptly ended the series on 14 March 1857. In the five months since publication of "A Journey Due North" began in *Household Words*, Sala had quarrelled with Dickens over the matter of payment. He later claimed in his *Life* that "having had no experience of the Special Correspondent, who in 1857 was almost a novel personage, [Dickens] failed to see that I had any claim to travelling expenses."⁶⁷ Sala apparently regarded the monthly stipend as the fee for service rather than a living allowance. He had returned to England in November 1856 with, he says, two pounds in his pocket, and the promised flow of copy was evidently becoming a problem, for Dickens wrote to Wills on Christmas Eve asking him to impress upon Sala the necessity "of his being punctual and faithful in the performance of the work he has undertaken."⁶⁸ On 21 January 1857, Sala wrote to his friend Edmund Yates: "Of course you have heard of the great 'mill' between the 'Tavistock House Pet' and the 'Taproom Bruiser' which has ended by the 'Bruiser' being heavily 'grassed,' coming up 'groggy,' 'hitting out wildly,' and at last 'going down at the ropes,' never to rise again."⁶⁹

Of course he did rise again, but only after an estrangement from Dickens of some eighteen months. Sala had secured an offer of £250 from Routledge for the republication of his Russian series while it was still in progress in *Household Words*, and Dickens, angered by the dilatory delivery of copy and continual demands for advance payments, had refused permission for the essays to be reproduced. However, the breach was healed in the summer of 1858 and *A Journey Due North* was published by Richard Bentley in August that year, Routledge having lost interest. There was little change made to the original text apart from the addition of a three-page "Envoi" by way of conclusion, where Sala recounts the extraordinary rumours that had begun to circulate in London about him during the autumn of 1856 while he was still in St Petersburg. Having discovered early after his arrival that his letters home were being opened, the decision had been taken with Wills that Sala would send no copy for *Household Words* until he was actually off Russian soil. His work habit while staying in St Petersburg, as he explained in the fifteenth instalment, was to "make sketches of the strange things and people" he had met on the streets—"very much in the penny-valentine manner of Art"—and then to "make manuscript transcripts of matters Russian that have been written on the tables of my memory during the day, on infinitesimal scraps of paper" in minute handwriting and hide these furtively in the lining of his hat.⁷⁰ He reached Brussels in late September and began sending copy then. But the delay in the appearance of his correspondence set the London gossip mill working, with reports emerging that he had been arrested as a spy by the Russian police; that he had been expelled from St Petersburg; that he had been tried and sent to Siberia; even that he was dead.

These rumours were eventually stamped out by the publication of Sala's series from October onwards. But they were succeeded by another, a rumour that goes to the heart of the question regarding the distinctive nature of his special correspondence. As Sala puts it,

[p]erhaps . . . the most ingenious report to which these unpretending sketches gave rise was one that *I had never been to Russia at all*, and that, establishing a Patmos at Ostend or Ghent—some said Brussels, some went so far as Spa—I had provided myself with a good library of books of Russian travel, and so “fudged” my “Journey Due North” in the manner attributed (I believe with about equal justice) to M. Alexandre Dumas anent his *Impressions de Voyage*.⁷¹

As the reviewer in the *Daily News* wryly declared: “We will believe—we are not of a sceptical turn—in the reality of Mr Sala's journey, sparse as are its facts and figures, and copious, even to rivalling Montaigne, as are its digressions.”⁷² But the *Saturday Review* was more doubtful, asserting “There is not a trace of local colour in the whole narrative of the voyage from Stettin, and Mr Sala might well have written it—perhaps did write it—before he left London.”⁷³ It was not only the lack of local detail that raised such doubts, however, but the style of writing itself. Of the character sketches Sala had drawn of his fellow passengers and crew on board the *Prussian Eagle*, the *Saturday Review* declared, “We don't believe that these comic descriptions in any way represent the originals. We don't believe there were any such originals to be described”; and of his description of his accommodation in St Petersburg it wrote, “we reject as mere fictions his far-fetched account of the humours and excesses of the guests at Heyde's hotel.”⁷⁴

Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs have argued that forgery has an “especially close, even parasitic relationship to travel writing, since the lone traveller bearing far-fetched facts from remote climes offers the perfect alibi” for fabricating such adventures.⁷⁵ They emphasise the proximity of travel writing to the novel, “especially in its first-person form.”⁷⁶ The critical scepticism that greeted Sala's narrative of his journey due north is thus not altogether surprising. What is significant about this for my purposes, however, is that the objections made by reviewers to Sala's so-called “word-painting” draw attention to the peculiar way in which his journalism blurred the division between fact and fiction. As the reviewer in the *Times* argued, while Sala's “grotesque humour” might be “one of the rarer capacities of a literary workman,”

[t]his is certainly not the best qualification for a traveller who goes to see in our behalf what men of ordinary temperament would see, and who is expected to

make a report which we can rely upon as fairly representative. If a man is tormented by the utter absurdity of earthly things, he will see farces in stones and fun in everything, to the confusion of our impressions if not his own; especially will he be found an unsafe interpreter of the phenomena of a state of semi-civilisation if he regards those mainly in a spirit of contemptuous irony.⁷⁷

Or as the *Saturday Review* concluded: “Had he been more impartial, less anxious for effect, and more forgetful of self, he would have turned his observations to a better account, and might have taught us a great deal more.”⁷⁸ For these reviewers, there was too much Sala and too little of the factuality, objectivity, and impersonality seen as desirable in conventional travel writing, where wit and entertainment were not to be provided at the expense of instruction.

These objections thus draw attention to the distinctive nature of Sala’s special correspondence. While criticised by some for his “Dickensy” mannerism, “A Journey Due North” launched his career as “the chief of travelled specials,”⁷⁹ and his colourful, descriptive style, exhibited therein, made his name. It was a form of “word-painting” cultivated to represent unseen people and events long before the advent of photojournalism, and it blurred the boundaries between literature and journalism at a time when these discourses were in the process of professional and disciplinary formation. The republication of his series in a single volume with Bentley in 1858 earned him £75 for the first edition (of which 1,000 copies were printed and sold), and £70 for the second.⁸⁰ Not only did this venture bring Sala some desperately needed cash, however: the very fact of its republication, transferring his writing from the pages of the periodical to a book, in itself says something important about the ambiguous positioning of special correspondence in the print culture of his day.

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NOTES

1. George Augustus Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala* (London: Cassell, 1896), 258–9. Indeed, his disappearance and failure to provide promised copy for the inaugural issue of Edmund Yates’s shilling magazine, *The Train*, in December 1855 led his friends to insert an advertisement in the *Times* “couched in mysterious terms, intelligible only to the initiated,” which commenced: “Bohemian, where art thou?” Edmund Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences* (London: Bentley, 1885), 224.
2. Quoted in Yates, *Edmund Yates: His Recollections and Experiences*, 206.
3. Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala*, 278.

4. Ibid.
5. Michael Hollington, "Russia," in *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens*, ed. Paul Schlicke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 503.
6. Ralph Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian* (London: Constable and Company, 1942), 121.
7. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Czar's Highway," *Household Words*, 15 November 1856, 423n.
8. George Augustus Sala, *Things I Have Seen and People I Have Known*, 2 vols. (London: Cassell and Company, 1894), 1:67.
9. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: I Begin My Journey," *Household Words*, 4 October 1856, 265.
10. Peter Blake, "Charles Dickens, George Augustus Sala and *Household Words*," *Dickens Quarterly* 26 (2009): 28.
11. [George A. Sala], "Down Whitechapel Way," *Household Words*, 1 November 1851, 126.
12. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Sloboda. A Russian Village," *Household Words*, 6 December 1856, 493.
13. Percy Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens* (Bristol: Arrowsmith, 1913), 256.
14. "Sala's Journey Due North," *Saturday Review*, 11 September 1858, 263. As P.D. Edwards aptly notes, "Too much talkee-talkie, particularly about himself, was to remain the most exasperating, yet most popular, characteristic of all Sala's special correspondent's reports, and all his other journalism." P.D. Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 35.
15. Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian*, 121.
16. Ibid., 118.
17. Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala*, 279.
18. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: I Begin My Journey," 270.
19. Letter to George Augustus Sala, 15 September 1856. Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 8, *The Pilgrim Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 187. The cuts made were not enough to stave off later criticism of this section in the republished volume of Sala's *Journey*. The *Times*, for example, complained of the incidents described on his rail journey and aboard the Prussian Eagle "which he unwarrantably expands to exhibit his skill in grotesque and equivocal portraiture." "A Journey Due North," *Times*, 30 September 1858.
20. [Edmund Saul Dixon], "More Children of the Czar," *Household Words*, 7 April 1855, [Edmund Saul Dixon], "The Children of the Czar," *Household Words*, 3 March 1855, [Henry Morley], "Robertson in Russia," *Household Words*, 4 August 1855.
21. Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens*, 255.

22. "Sala's Journey Due North," 262.
23. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: I Pass the Custom-House, and Take My First Russian Walk," *Household Words*, 25 October 1856, 351.
24. Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism*, 53.
25. *Ibid.*, 35. Sala contrasted the £40 per month paid by Dickens with the salary he later commanded on his return to Russia in 1883: "A little less than thirty years afterwards, when I went to Moscow, for the coronation of the Tsar Alexander III, the proprietors of the *Daily Telegraph* gave me a hundred pounds a-week." George Augustus Sala, *Things I Have Seen and People I Have Known*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (London: Cassell, 1894), 102.
26. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Czar's Highway," 424.
27. [George A. Sala], "Cities in Plain Clothes," *Household Words*, 17 July 1852, 419.
28. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: Russians at Home," *Household Words*, 27 December 1856, 566.
29. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: I Pass the Custom-House, and Take My First Russian Walk," 351.
30. Bernard Comment, *The Panorama* (London: Reaktion, 1999), 64–5.
31. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: I Pass the Custom-House, and Take My First Russian Walk," 352.
32. Fitzgerald, *Memories of Charles Dickens*, 256.
33. Martina Lauster, *Sketches of the Nineteenth Century: European Journalism and Its Physiologies, 1830–50* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 144.
34. George Augustus Sala, *Paris Herself Again in 1878–9*, 2 vols. (London: Remington, 1880), 1:viii. I am grateful to Robert Dingley for alerting me to this point.
35. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: Ischvostchik! The Droschky-Driver," *Household Words*, 1 November 1856, 373.
36. Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala*, 174.
37. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: Ischvostchik! The Droschky-Driver," 376–7.
38. *Ibid.*, 374.
39. *Ibid.*
40. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Droschky," *Household Words*, 8 November 1856, 401.
41. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Czar's Highway," 422.
42. *Ibid.*, 423.
43. *Ibid.*, 427.
44. *Ibid.*, 424.
45. *Ibid.*, 425.
46. Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 9.

47. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Czar's Highway," 425.
48. Ibid.
49. "Sala's Journey Due North," 263.
50. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: Gostinnoi-Dvor. The Great Bazaar," *Household Words*, 22 November 1856, 447.
51. Chloe Chard, *Pleasure and Guilt on the Grand Tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 40.
52. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 416.
53. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: Gostinnoi-Dvor. The Great Bazaar," 446.
54. Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism*, 17. I am grateful to Holly Furneaux for alerting me to the undercurrents in this passage.
55. [Sala], "A Journey Due North: Gostinnoi-Dvor. The Great Bazaar," 452.
56. "Sala's Journey Due North," 262.
57. "A Journey Due North. Being Notes of a Residence in Russia in the Summer of 1856. By George Augustus Sala. (Bentley)," *Literary Gazette*, 21 August 1858, 233.
58. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Great Russian Boguey (the Police)," *Household Words*, 14 February 1857, 149.
59. Ibid., 151.
60. Ibid., 153.
61. Ibid.
62. Straus, *Sala: The Portrait of an Eminent Victorian*, 122.
63. [Charles Dickens], "The Begging-Letter Writer," *Household Words*, 18 May 1850.
64. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: Tchori Narod: (The Black People)," *Household Words*, 7 March 1857, 223.
65. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: The Iks," *Household Words*, 14 March 1857, 253.
66. Ibid.
67. Sala, *The Life and Adventures of George Augustus Sala*, 308.
68. Letter to W.H. Wills, 24 December 1856, Storey and Tillotson, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 246.
69. Quoted in Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism*, 37.
70. [George A. Sala], "A Journey Due North: My Bed and Board," *Household Words*, 17 January 1857, 53.
71. George Augustus Sala, *A Journey Due North. Being Notes of a Residence in Russia in the Summer of 1856* (London: Bentley, 1858), 377.

72. "A Journey Due North. Being Notes of a Residence in Russia in the Summer of 1856. By George Augustus Sala. London: Bentley,," *Daily News*, 20 August 1858.
73. "Sala's Journey Due North," 263.
74. *Ibid.*, 262-3.
75. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.
76. *Ibid.*, 6.
77. "A Journey Due North."
78. "Sala's Journey Due North," 263.
79. Joseph Hatton, *Journalistic London: Being a Series of Sketches of Famous Pens and Papers of the Day* (London: Routledge, 1998), 169.
80. Edwards, *Dickens's 'Young Men': George Augustus Sala, Edmund Yates and the World of Victorian Journalism*, 53.