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# *OLIVER TWIST* : EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN THE VICTIORIAN UNDERWORLD

**Chantal CORNUT-GENTILLE D'ARCY**

"O for the coming of that glorious time
When, prizing knowledge as her noblest wealth
And best protection, this imperial Realm,
While she exacts allegiance, shall admit
An obligation, on her part, to teach
Them who are born to serve her and obey;
Binding herself by statute to secure
For all the children whom her soil maintains
The rudiments of letters".

(Wordswoth, 1904: lines 293-301)

Wordsworth's lines, which have been quoted again and again by generations of orators and pamphleteers, may have proved more influencial over the years than the educational writings of the economists and political philosophers of the time. This fact may remind us that Dickens was not a pioneer in using literature for educational propaganda. Rather, he was the first important novelist to do so.

In 1808, six years before "The Excursion", the first of the great religious societies was established, to promote the education of the poor: The Royal Lancasterian Society (later renamed the British and Foreign), soon followed by the Church of England National Society. A few years later, Brougham introduced into Parliament the first of his educational bills. During the 1830s, when Dickens began writing, Parliament rejected four more Educational bills, but in 1833 it took its first tentative step towards financing popular education by voting 20,000 pounds in aid of the school societies.

There is no doubt that the commissioners's reports and subsequent debates sufficiently impressed Dickens who, from the reporters' gallery was jotting down every word said in the House[1]. But the uneasiness he felt about the policies proposed for the betterment of the lower classes must have been enhanced by the great issue of the time -the revolutionary New Poor Law- which the same utilitarians were trying to push through Parliament.

Chadwick and his clique were mainly concerned with demonstrating to Parliament the deplorable effects of the Old Poor Law. But the strong supporters of repealing the poor laws wanted, not simply theoretical evidence against outdoor relief, family allowances and inefficient workhouses, but evidence illustrating their failings of a kind that would circulate over dinner tables, tea parties and gatherings in general. This is why Brougham enlisted the help of Harriet Martineau who, within months of the publication of her *Illustrations of Political Economy*, was the most sought after of the capital's big names. If Harriet Martineau wrote up the New Poor Law proposals in the same way and with the same success as she had popularized political economy, she would help both the Government and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge which aimed at the expansion of mass Education[2].

The six Poor Law Tales she finally agreed to write had two basic aims: firstly, to show the evils of the old Poor Law, and



secondly to "educate" working men by imbuing them with "true notions of orderliness, sobriety and political economy". (Silver,1975: 44)[3]

The out and out bias and mawkishness of these tales must have inflamed Dickens to such a point that, by means of *Oliver Twist*, he embarked on a scathing denounciation of the New Poor Law and its "education-mad" supporters.

Dickens therefore launched on a story that, unlike Harriet Martineau's idealized world, forced upon the eyes of his contemporaries a vision of existing conditions in the "Poor Law Bastilles" and a panorama of the slum world which society haughtily ignored and scorned at while happily permitting that such drastic measures should direct the lives of the very people they did not know - they WOULD not know. Thus, Dickens unsparingly described the lives of thieves, prostitutes and murderers in all their squalor. The first readers of *Oliver Twist* were shocked and appalled and indignantly refused to believe that the conditions described in the novel had any basis in real life, to such a point that in the preface to the book's third edition, published in 1841, Dickens found it necessary to defend himself by saying that the pictures of the criminal underworld were the simple truth:

> "but it is the truth. I am glad to have had it doubted for in that circumstance I should find a sufficient assurance (if Iwanted any) that it needed to be told". (1976: 37)

He believed that the stark reality of the scenes would prove a more effective deterrent to crime than: "criminal characters (...) in delicate disguise". (1976: 35)

The first eight chapters of *Oliver Twist* therefore represent a direct attack on the utilitarian tainted Poor Law, while the whole novel seems to be a back-kick to the utilitarian patronizing of

Harriet Martineau's romanticized stories, and to the brain-washing type of education they thus proposed to impart to the readers.

*Oliver Twist* is the story of a sweet and gentle boy who was born in a workhouse. In a previous article[4], we focussed on these opening chapters and determined how the pattern was that of a waif striving for some foothold on existence only to find himself rejected by the so-called "benevolent" society dominated by the utilitarian school of thought. He eventually runs away from his first job as apprentice to an undertaker and goes to London, where he falls in with Fagin's gang.

The first representative of this underworld is the Artful Dodger, whom Oliver meets on his way to London. The swaggering and precocious yougster "adopts" Oliver and takes him to "the dirtiest and most wretched place he had ever seen" (1976: 103). The dominant figure in this den is an "old shrivelled Jew whose villainous looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair" (1976:105). Before going to bed, Oliver has the opportunity of observing the "merry old gentleman and his pupils" (1976: 106). The boy's ironic concept of Fagin as a "merry old gentleman", or of Bet and Nancy as "very nice girls indeed" (1976: 111) suggests that Oliver's ignorance and subsequent naivety, like that of so many other pauper children, will make of him an easy prey for wicked people.

Unlike Dickens, the Utilitarians did not enter into the whys and wherefores of ignorance. The main focus of Utilitarianism was to apply a rational solution to existing social problems. They saw ignorance as a fact, but a fact that had to be remedied at once, for they were convinced that only extended and improved education would protect social order. James Mill had referred in 1812 to "the hideous deformity (...) of an ignorant and brutal people in an enlightened age and country" (Burston, 1969: 123). In his opinion, the whole purpose of education was to "render the individual, as much as possible, an instrument of happiness, first to himself, and



next to other beings" (James Mill, 1824: 11). This is why E.G. West remarks:

> "In their view, an action which was bad arose simply from ignorance of the best way of pursuing happiness". (1963:164)

This is precisely Oliver's case, he had no power of reasoning and therefore he was being led by events, but Dickens does not allow his hero to be engulfed into the warped and perverse world of thieves. The child's innocence seems to act as an armour against vice.

In the next scene, we see Fagin conscientiously grounding his boys in the element of their trades.

> "The merry old gentleman (...) trotted up and down the room with a stick, in imitation of the manner in which old gentlemen walk about the streets any hour in the day (...).All the time the two boys followed him closely about (...) at last the Dodger trod upon his toes Charley Bates stumbled up against him behind; and in that one moment they took from him, with the most extraordinary rapidity, snuff-box, note-case, watch-guard, chain, shirt-pin, pocket hand-kerchief, even the spectacle case. If the old gentleman felt a hand inany one of his pockets, he cried out where it was; and then the game began all over again". (1976: 110)

This "game" is considerably more serious than any previous efforts at apprenticeship, and although in J. Manning's opinion, Dickens did not possess any deep knowledge of educational theory (1959: 137), Fagin's school for thieves was certainly conducted along admirable pedagogical lines.

The system used by the Jew, decidedly recalls the pedagogical method advocated by the Utilitarians for the education of the lower classes. We have already mentioned the British and

Foreign School Society founded in 1814 by the Lancastarian Society, which Joseph Lancaster had set up in 1808, and the National Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in the Principles of the Established Church, founded in 1811 by Dr. Bell. Apart from a purely religious rivalry, there existed further feud between Lancaster and Bell, for they both claimed the credit for inventing the method of instruction known as the monitorial or mutual system. However, we may point out here that, instead of a brilliant innovation, the system in question seems more like a practical adaptation of Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon plan, whereby prisons, hospitals, mad-houses and even schools could be supervised and run by a minimum of personnel. The information for each lesson was given by the teacher to the senior or more advanced pupils who, in turn, taught their juniors[5].

The utilitarians supported the Lancasterian Schools because they were undenominational and therefore free from Church control and domination[6]. They saw the Lancasterian Schools as a contribution to social stability, as a barrier against crime, and as a piece of labour-saving machinery. The concept of the whole system is best expressed by an Edingburgh Review contributor who defined it in the following way:

> "Every boy seems to be the cog of a wheel - the whole school a perfect machine". (Silver, 1975: 34)

The "game" played by Fagin and his most "promising pupils" could therefore be seen as reflecting a typical Lancasterian "mechanistic drilling" of the lesson to be taught.

However, if we analyse the details of the scene more closely, it seems that the "game" could also be interpreted as a subtle jab on the part of the author at Jeremy Bentham's darling plan: *Chrestomathia*.



*Chrestomathia* was a collection of papers which Bentham published in 1816 and in which he stated his views on the organization of a school, the syllabus that should be followed and the general aims and principles of education. The project was intended to meet the educational needs of the growing and pushing "shopcracy" or middle classes and could be summed up as and amalgam of the thinker's Panopticon plan and the teaching method known by then as the Lancasterian monitorial system. It was therefore taken up by the utilitarians as a more up-to-date, practical and realistic alternative - or possible substitute - for what they considered as the completely useless curriculum of the existing grammar schools.

Bentham's plan was composed of two tables of contents: the first contained the details and the order of the subjects to be taught; the second, the principles of the new pedagogic system which he advocated. This last section seems to be the main target of Dickens when he has his character Fagin demonstrate the lesson to be learnt, humour his pupils, reward them and encourage their efforts. As Elissa S. Itzkin's puts it:

> "(...) constant repetition, drilling and testing (...) accounts for much of Bentham's pedagogy such as his 'place-capturing' and 'proficiency-promising' principles". (1978: 312-313)

We find all these elements in the scene Dickens portrays. The 'proficiency-promising' principle, for example, is illustrated when, after Oliver has made his attempt, Fagin pats him on the shoulder and gives him one shilling. As regards the "place-capturing" principle, Elissa S. Itzkin explains:

> "Bentham proudly asserted that the 'place-capturing' principle had converted what were usually 'corporal exercises' into a game, (...) when saying a lesson, the pupils were placed in line according to scholarship (...) the highest scholar (...) would

> begin to say the lesson, in case of error the next highest, until the place of honour for that day was once again determined." (1978: 311)

The Artful Dodger and Charley Bates, as the "best scholars" have the honour of demonstrating the lesson together with the teacher or supervisor who tells Oliver:

> "Make'em your models, my dear. Make'em your models (...) do everything they bid you, and take their advice in all matters." (1976: 111)

Thus, these two model pupils, and especially the Dodger, who, Fagin tells Oliver:

> "will be a great man himself, and will make you one too, if you take pattern by him." (1976: 111)

are to perform the function of "scholar-teachers" or "scholar-monitors", a fundamental feature of Bentham's Chrestomatic school, based, as we have stated previously, on the Lancaster-Bell monitorial system.

What could have "tickled" Dickens into parodying the project in question and applying its main principles to the practical world of thieves were such statements as the following:

> "(Prior to Bentham's Chrestomathia) no plan of instruction has (ever) been adopted for those engaged in active business life (...) and nothing has been done to enable those who are actually to conduct the affairs of the world." (Itzkin, 1978: 313)

The point at hand was that, while the endless hubbub about the educational needs of the middle classes was taking place, thousands of children like Oliver were becoming delinquents through neglect of society. By ridiculing the utilitarian educational



project for the middle classes, Dickens was in fact alluding to society's failing in preventing crime. Like many of his contemporaries, the author was exaggerating the efficacy of education -but sarcastically, for the REVERSE PURPOSE: The Jew was using "practical useful instruction" for his "domestic economy and personal comfort" and that of his pupils or would-be thieves. In other words, by having Fagin "educate" Oliver in order to confine him for ever to the underworld, Dickens was actually adopting a vaguely Rousseauesque notion of the innocent warped and made evil by institutions- "what human nature may be made to be". This was the real and objective social terror the author wished to bring into focus for his readers.

It is noticeable that over and over again, Oliver's relationship with Fagin and the thieves is presented in educational terms. After Oliver's first "lesson", Fagin encouragingly tells the boy:

> "If you go on, in this way, you'll be the greatest man of the time".

He then proceeds to instruct him in another aspect of the trade:

> "and now come here, and I'll show you how to take the marks out of handkerchiefs". (1976: 112)

Oliver's innocence makes him wonder:

> "What picking the old gentleman's pocket in play, had to do with the chances of being a great man. But thinking that the Jew, being so much his senior, must know best, he followed him quietly to the table and was soon deeply involved in his new study." (1976: 112)

When Oliver is kidnapped and dragged back to the old Jew's den:

> "Mr. Fagin took the opportunity of reading Oliver a long lecture on the crying sin of ingratitude". (1976: 117)

The Dodger, trying to break down Oliver's refractory attitude to them, tells him:

> "you've been brought up bad (...) Fagin will make something of you though, or you'll be the first he ever had that turned out unprofitable." (1976: 183)

Fagin was determined to make of Oliver a good and profitable thief:

> "Oliver was seldom left alone; but was placed in almost constant communication with the two boys, who played the old game with the Jew every day, whether for their own improvement or Oliver's. Mr. Fagin knew best. In short, the wily old Jew (...) was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever." (1976: 185)

It was the hue of Oliver's life that was to change when in the "joint guardianship" (1976: 113) of his scholar-monitors, Oliver was sent out on his first "excursion" which was to prove so disastrous and yet, parallely, so positive for the young child.

When fingered out as the depredator, Oliver is at loss, and Dickens wryly remarks:

> "Although Oliver had been brought up by philosophers, he was not theoretically acquainted with the beautiful axiom that self-preservation is the first law of Nature." (1976: 116)

The author, thus, recalls the fact that in the hands of utilitarian officials, the child had not even been taught what opponents of the philosophy considered to be the practical basis of the pleasure and



pain doctrine. Such dispariging opinions as Dickens's led John Stuart Mill to complain later that:

> "To suppose that life has no higher end than pleasure - no better and nobler object of desire and pursuit - they designate as utterly mean and grovelling; as a doctrine only worthy of swine". (1972: 7)

From the moment Mr. Brownlow, the benevolent old gentleman, takes Oliver to his house (which occurs in chapter eleven) there is a drastic change of direction in the whole theme of the book. As Arnold Kettle explains:

> "Until Oliver wakes up in Mr. Brownlow's house he is a poor boy struggling against the inhumanity of the State. After he has slept himself in to the Brownlow world he is a bourgeois who has been done out of his property". (Hobsbawn, 1981: 45)

We therefore lose the topic of Oliver's domestic and scholastic education as the initial plot gradually disintegrates into a mere Victorian success story. However, the keynote is struck when Oliver's idyllic life with Mr Brownlow is suddenly ended; he has gone on an errand, and is recaptured by Sikes and Nancy:

> "(...) over-powered by the conviction of the by-standers that he really was the hardened little wretch he was described to be; what could one poor child do? darkness had set in; it was a low neighbourhood; no help was near; resistance was useless." (1976: 158)

"What could one poor child do?" -this, is essentially the world of Oliver Twist. The author's vivid account of the criminal underworld into which Oliver (as the representative of neglected children) could have been swallowed up and lost for ever, was

meant to be instructive not only to such sheltered readers as Queen Victoria but also to the spirited utilitarian reformists of the time.

## NOTES

1.As a young man, Dickens was determined to better his position in life. He decided that journalism would secure him a more lucrative and exciting mode of living than his duties as clerk to the sollicitors Messrs. Ellis and Blackmore. For this reason he began to study short-hand with great vigour and, on mastering that accomplishment, he became a free-lance reporter. His constant and meticulous work soon won him an appointment as parliamentary reporter for the *Mirror of Parliament*. He threrefore reached the gallery just in time to witness the final stages of the struggle over the Reform Bill of 1832 and, in the following months:

> "(...) he certainly heard the legislators debating the labouring conditions in the factories and the operations of the Poor Law." (Johnson, 1952, 1: 88)
>
> In other words, as reported by Robert Langton:
>
> "In this time Charles Dickens must have listened to and taken down the words of the speeches of nearly every public man of the last generation." (1883: 104)

including Brougham's educational bills.

Whatever hopes the young reporter might have entertained about the Reform Bill, he must have noticed that there still existed in the main, a determined effort to defeat the very measures for which he felt most sympathy, that is, the measures or bills designed to better the lives of the poor and their children.

Dickens was therefore not very impressed with the parliamentary sessions he witnessed. Edgar Johnson describes how the young man steadily grew more sceptical about the ultimate benefits of all the legislative proceedings and that he even came close to abhorrence of the whole parliamentary system (1952: 88)

> Dickens has David Copperfield say:
>
> "Night after night I record predictions that never came to pass, professions that are never fulfilled, explanations that are only meant to mistify (...) I am sufficiently behind the scenes to know the worth of political life. I am quite an Infidel about it, and shall never be converted." (1975: 692)



It must have been during these long sessions that Dickens perceived how reform could be more easily achieved by appealing to men's emotions, humour and imagination, rather than to their intellects through heavy-going and long-winded debates.

The fact is that he managed to secure a post on the staff of the *Morning Chronicle*, which was then actively supporting the whig party. We may point out here that John Black, the editor of "The Chronicle", was a philosophical radical, a close friend of James Mill and a disciple of Jeremy Bentham. He was, John Stuart Mill said:

> "The first journalist who carried criticism and the spirit of reform into the details of English institutions." (Johnson, 1952: 94)

2. Although, at the time, the public authorities did not yet contemplate the managing and administering of a national system of education, much was being done outside parliament to promote easier access to education for the lower classes. The Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge is only one of the many devices which materialized during that period to facilitate literacy to a wider range of people. This society. based on the utilitarian philosophy, was founded in 1826 and had Jeremy Bentham, Brougham and James Mill on its London committee. It was self-supporting and the chief aim of its cheap publications was to foment the acquirement -not of "knowledge" as such, too close in meaning to erudition and culture -but of "useful knowledge", that is, a restricted and controlled accumulation of data, best suited to the interests of the recipients.

James Mill believed that wider diffusion of knowledge would ultimately lead to a loosening of the extremely rigid class divisions. He remarked:

> "All the difference which exists, or can be made to exist,between one body or class of men and another is wholly owing to education. Those peculiarities which sink one man below, or elevate him above the ordinary state of aptitude (...) is undeniably the effect of education." (1824: 19)

In his opinion, the "ingredients of intelligence" were two: knowledge and sagacity. "The one affording the material upon which the other could be exerted" (1824: 17). Education was therefore a sure means of getting on in life and "useful" knowledge an effective short-cut to the attainment of happiness.

The Society for the Diffusion of useful Knowledge was therefore preoccupied with the contents as well as the cost of its publications. This duality of purpose was to be a constant theme throughout the Society's lifetime (1826-1846).

3. Harriet Martineau agreed to write six tales for the Society. In the first place: *Weal and Woe in Garveloch*, which illustrated Thomas Malthus's theory

on population and *Cousin Marshall* , which explained Malthus's arguments against charity. The contents of the remaining four are best outlined by the author herself:

> "I adopt as the ground work of the four tales the four leading queries used by the Poor Law Commissioners as guides in their enquiries. My first tale will be found to exhibit: The persons to whom parochial relief is given. The second: The forms in which relief is given . The third: The persons by whom it is awarded. The fourth: The persons at whose expense it is given." (1833: letter to S.D.U.K.)

4. "Oliver Twist: An Irreclaimable Wretch." *Miscelánea* vol.8, 1987. Departamento de Filología Inglesa y Alemana, Universidad de Zaragoza, 123-134.

5. It is interesting to note here that James Mill used the monitorial system within his own family in an undiscriminating way. His system was to instruct John Stuart Mill and then to set John to teach his sisters and later his brothers, then James Mill would hear the lessons of all of them. (1965: 12)

6. If there were to be only denominational schools, the utilitarians argued, then each town or village would need one for each denomination, and the result would be a large number of small schools, hopelessly uneconomic to run, and which would rob the monitorial system of its cheapness and of its immediate practicability. This led John Stuart Mill to say:

> "Education provided by this public must be education for all, and to be education for all it must be purely secular education." (Gregg, 1973: 249)

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