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OLIVER TWIST: "AN IRRECLAIMABLE WRETCH"

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Oliver Twist appeared inmediately after the *Pickwick Papers* which had established the popularity of its author Boz. *Oliver Twist* or *The parish Boy's Progress* was the first of Dicken's books to be published under his own name and represented a bold departure from the genial tone of the *Pickwick Papers*. Some of the same comic genius is evident in part of *Oliver Twist*, but fundamentally, *Oliver* is Dickens's first serious novel, and the first book in which we encounter the deeply satirical social criticism that was to concern him for so much of his life.

Since the target that clearly comes under attack in this novel is the polemical 1834 Poor Law and the promoters of the said Law, it may be said that Oliver is not, strictly speaking a hero. According to Philip Hobsbawn, Dickens uses his main character as "a means of setting society in perspective"[1]. Or, in Angus Wilson's words: "Oliver is no reality, he is (...) merely an image of humanity worked upon by external forces (...)[2]. Oliver, therefore, is more an emblem than a character. Dickens achieves this distancing effect through a third person narrative and through a continual, pervading Carlylean tupe of irony. The description of the newborn Oliver decidedly recalls professor Teufelsdrockh's Clothes philosophy in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus:*

"What an excellent example of the power of dress young Oliver was! wrapped in a blanket which had hitherto formed his only covering, he might have been a child of a nobleman or a beggar! (...)"[3].

The cold and impersonal "system" immediately takes charge and assigns the child a station in society.

"(...) but now that he was enveloped in the old calico robes that had grown yellow in the same service, he was badged out, ticketed and fell into his place at once"[4].

Oliver embarks upon life from the lowest social strata possible, to be abused and trampled on by a society which the author loses no time in depicting in all its brutal reality:

"A parish child –the orphan of a workhouse– the humble half-starved drudge –to be cuffed and buffeted through the world– despised by all and pitied by none"[5].

The parish- child is put into the care of Mrs Mann, a corrupt and hypocritical woman who, conscientiously followed the famous "greatest happiness principle", but directed solely to herself:

"She knew what was good for children and she had a very accurate perception of what was good for herself. So, she appropriated the greater part of the weekly stipend to her own use, and consigned the rising parochial generation to even a shorter allowance than was originally provided for them. Thereby finding in the lowest depth a deeper still and providing herself a very great experimental philosopher"[6].

In the first chapter, we find several reference to "philosophers" or "philosophy" by which Dickens is obviously designating utilitarian intellectuals such as Jeremy Bentham, Malthus or David Ricardo. These men recommended abstention from all attempts to improve the lot of the workers and their theories had greatly influenced the reform of the poor law system in England. Hence, in the eyes of many Victorians, Utilitarianism appeared as the materialistic creed of those who advocated total subjugation and oppression on the lower classes. And yet, not all the utilitarian measures concerning the poor reflected such a dismally calculated and "scientific" objectivity as the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834. Jeremy Bentham, James Mill and many followers of the creed had long considered Ignorance as a formidable

ally of poverty, unrest, crime and disease. Thus, to their cool and level-headed convictions, can be added a sincere and philanthropic belief that Education would eventually secure the greatest happiness of the greatest number.

However, returning to *Oliver Twist*, we find that not a word is mentioned about any training or activity during the nine years Oliver spent in the branch workhouse. The only domestic education he seems to have received at "the good lady's" is stern discipline and poor feeding. Oliver was correspondingly "a pale thin child, somewhat diminutive in stature and decidedly small in circumference"[7].

On his ninth birthday, Oliver is called up for interview and Mr Bumble therefore conducts him into the presence of the Board. Dickens tactfully insinuates that inflexibility is the only common feature of this workhouse authority by making Oliver uncertain whether to bow to the table or to the gentlemen sitting around it. Dickens manages to use Oliver's innocence and ignorance to point out the fact that his confusion is after all not so meaningless. The Board certainly had all the flexibility and feeling of a "thick plank". The author then combines inflexibility and harshness with the kind of intellect which deals with facts and reason only, thus achieving a sardonic caricature of utilitarian adepts.

"–Boy 'said the gentleman in the high chair, 'listen to me. You know you're an orphan, I suppose?'

'–What's that, sir?' inquired poor Oliver"[8].

The child's inability to answer, owing either to his nervous state or to an absolute lack of knowledge, leads the member of the Board to pause for reflection and then sweepingly deduce that "the boy is a fool – I thought he was"[9]. Dickens shows with poignant reality the blinding effects of the philosophy in question and the heart-rending consequences of allowing such visionless and practical minded people, so totally devoid of feelings, to direct the lives of defenceless and wretched children.

Ignoring the child's tears, the iron-hearted Board manifests much greater concern for the little boy's Christian behaviour than for his actual well-being. This is where Dickens pointedly remarks:

"It would have been very like a Christian and a marvellously good Christian too, if Oliver had prayed for the people who fed and took care of him, but he hadn't because nobody had taught him"[10].

So, in the hands of the "Benevolent State", Oliver, as emblem of so many other children of the time, had wasted ten years of his life in the almost exclusive endeavour of merely surviving. As we have seen, he had had no type of instruction whatsoever, nor had anyone cared enough for him to devote however little time to stimulating his infant mind in one way or another. It seems that A.J. Marcham's words apply perfectly to the case Dickens is presenting: "The greatest happiness principle, then, was a seductive slogan, but its simplicity was delusive"[11]. But, in all fairness, those who supported the greatest happiness principle, also advocated, as we mentioned before, that the greatest happiness for the greatest number would be achieved through widespread education.

"To provide an appropriate if rudimentary education for pauper children was a major concern of the Poor Law throughout the nineteenth century"[12].

Dickens therefore knew that some instruction was given to the children who were confined to those "Bastilles", and that some sort of work was assigned to each child to help defray the cost of their maintenance. But, at the time Dickens was writing the book, much of the "education" proposed by the recent Poor Law was rather meagre, to say the least, and this, Oliver soon discovered:

"Well, you have come here to be educated and taught a useful trade (...) So you'll begin to pick oakum tomorrow morning at six o'clock"[13].

Education of pauper children would, the utilitarians believed, help their gradual integration into the nation's social and economic life and, thus, make of them knowledgeable and therefore happy citizens. But unscholastic education such as that forced upon Oliver, made the ultimate fate of poor children predictable: "the great majority of boys became labourers, though in a wide variety of trades"[14]. The dismal education provided would not break the poverty circle. In this way

workhouse inmates were doomed to remain paupers all their lives. Pauper education in Cleveland, for instance:

"did not much exceed that which is necessary to make them Christian and to make them useful in their line of life as agricultural labourers"[15].

In pointing out that "picking oakum" was hardly a constructive basis for the moulding of a future citizen, Dickens was in fact fighting the same battle as the Utilitarians – who unlike the Church and the aristocracy were fervent supporters of educating the masses[16]. "Education requires an essential reform" had written Bentham as early as 1802.

"The most neglected class must become the principal object of care. The less parents are able to discharge this duty, the more necessary it is for the Government to fulfill it. It ought not only to watch over orphans left in indigence, but also over the children whose parents no longer deserve the confidence of the law with regard to their important charge"[17].

In his *Tracts on Poor Laws and Pauper Management*, he again insisted on the fact that the "Poor", which represented the bulk of the community, were in fact the classes whose case was most generally overlooked by writers on education – either because the subjects were not worthy of their notice or because they lay out of their reach[18].

But what Dickens was really attacking were such narrow-minded viewpoints as J. Roebuck's who insisted in Parliament that people could not be happy by themselves and had to be taught how to be happy[19]. Dickens therefore hit out at the corresponding utilitarian educational programmes aimed at what they, the utilitarians, thought to be the best happiness-seeking instruments.

Dickens scorns the belief that nobody could be truly liberated into a state of happiness unless his mind had previously been manipulated by utilitarians and sets out to demonstrate that instead of reaching a state of happiness, the workhouse inmates are forced into utter dejection, through systematic oppression on the part of the "conglomeration of church wardens and overseers, the instigators and perpetuators of a bad system"[20], as Philip Hobsbawm denominates the official staff of workhouses.

In the next scene Dickens therefore sets out to dispel any romantic illusions about the benevolence of the state in its treatment of the poor and to expose the cruelty and acquisitiveness behind the official world's masquerade of charity. In the scene where the watery gruel is ladled out of its copper for the expectant boys, the heavy irony used by the author is relevant. Dickens encourages us to laugh at starving children when he remarks that:

"The bowls never wanted washing, the boys polished them with their spoons till they shone again... (which never took very long, the spoons being nearly as large as the bowls)"[21].

The lack of proportion between the spoons and the bowls is unexpected, but the result of the irony is to make social criticism more bitter. The picture of slow starvation is pungent, and this episode serves as a direct attack on Malthus's principles of rationalizing population control[22]. In desperation, the hungy boys cast lots to see who would have the temerity to ask the master for more, and the lot fell to Oliver: "Please sir, I want some more"[23]. Oliver's simple and understandable request is treated as a major insurrection and the little boy is consequently hustled into immediate confinement and offered as an apprentice to anyone who will take him off the hands of the Beadle for five pounds. However, before we are permitted to leave Oliver's experiences at the hand of the State, we are given another glimpse of him as he is about to be apprenticed to a villainous master as a chimney-sweep. The inadequacy of the law is again craftily insinuated by the author.

The law stated as the only safeguard for the apprentice-to-be, that the feasible employer should secure the child's consent before the indentures were signed. Dickens meaningfully ridicules this formality:

"–Well', said the old gentleman, 'I suppose he's fond of chimney sweeping'.
'–He dotes on it, your worship', replied Bumble, giving Oliver a sly pinch to intimate that he had better not say he didn't"[24].

Again, not the slightest allusion to any type of instruction for the apprentice is made during the negotiation; although Dickens must have known that, as stated in a foot-note of J. Manning's *Dickens on Education:*

"From the standpoint of the educational historian, it may be noted that by this date (1837-9, when Oliver Twist was published) the earlier legal right of Poor Law Authorities, to bind out apprentices without compulsory instruction had been modified by such statutes as those of 1802 and 1834"[25].

When Oliver is informed that he is to go that night "as general house lad to a coffin maker's"[26], he shows singularly little emotion. Dickens sarcastically notes the "virtuous astonishment and horror" of the Board at the tokens of want of feeling on the part of the little boy[27]. The truth was simply that:

"Oliver (...) was in a fair way of being reduced to life, to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness by the ill-usage he had received"[28].

The child's state of "brutal stupidity" is quite plainly clarified by Alexander Pope's lines:

"Say, first of God above or man below what can we reason, but from what we know?"[29].

As Oliver had been taught nothing, he could in no way have developed any power of reasoning. His "sullenness", on the other hand, is very understandable, if we take into account Goldwin's definition of Man as quoted by Malthus, who was refuting the former's objections to his principle of population.

"Man, according to Mr. Goldwin, is a creature formed what he is by the successive impressions which he has received"[30].

Goldwin's words correspond to what James Mill denominated "Domestic education", which denotes:

"All the child hears and sees, more especially all that it is made to suffer and enjoy at the hands of others (...) it is most important because "the primary habits form the fundamental character of the man"[31].

As we have seen, from this first difficult breath onwards, Oliver had come up against nothing but corruption brutality, injustice, oppression and scorn. Even Noah Claypole, the charity boy who is servant to

Mr. Sowerberry despises and taunts him in his delight of having encountered someone in a situation of life even lower than himself.

Oliver's lifelong "impressions" then, could hardly be described as positive formation for an honest, industrious and happy citizen. If we call to mind the large number of children who spent their childhood in workhouse institutions, we begin to appreciate the utilitarians' scepticism about the future generations that would spring from the alarming depth of ignorance existing in the lower ranks. As we know, the utilitarians believed, from their eminently practical point of view, that ignorance or "brutal stupidity" inevitably fomented crime. Oliver was therefore, in the eyes of utilitarians, an incipient criminal – and we find several references of that conception of the poor boy.

Oliver's temerarious request for more food leads a member of the Board to have recurrent premonitions: "The boy will be hung, I know this boy will be hung"[32]. Again, after the wrangle at the Sowerberrys's:

"I knew it! I felt a strange presentiment from the very first, that that audacious young savage would come to be hung"[33].

The workhouse boys, at prayer time, recited a special clause in which they entreated to be "guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist"[34].

When Oliver pleads the magistrate not to send him away with the chimney sweep, Mr. Bumble is scandalized:

"Well! of all the artful and designing orphans that I ever see, Oliver, you are one of the most barefacedest"[35].

Charlotte, seizing Oliver to protect Noah Claypole from the little boy's wrath, screams out to him that he is a wretch and "an ungrateful, murderous, horrid villain!"[36]. Finally, Mr. Bumble's report to Mr. Brownlow rounds off the general apprehension of the child:

"That he had, from his birth, displayed no better qualities than treachery, ingratitude or malice"[37].

Adam Smith had earlier pointed out that::

"This is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of people, must necessarily fall, unless Government makes some pains to prevent it"[38].

Although utilitarian educational theories did not always coincide among the adherents to the philosophy, they were all united at least in one aspect, in what E.G. West calls: "negative utilitarianism"[39], that is, in the idea that education could reduce or prevent crime.

In his usual cold calculations of profit and loss, Bentham, according to E.G. West:

"estimated that Government funds spent on education would probably be more than offset by the reduction of expenditure on prisons, and that therefore State investment on education was socially profitable"[40].

The utilitarian point of view was therefore that State education would help to remove widespread ignorance and, thus, provide people with the means of pursuing happiness.

Dickens, in *Oliver Twist*, seems to reverse the whole theory. He presents the State as responsible, through its officials, of making Oliver a miserable, wretched and ignorant subject: "The boy looked the quiet, mild, dejected creature that harsh treatment had made him"[41].

Oliver, raised to indignation by Noah's disparaging comments about his mother, finally tackles him and knocks him down. Mr. Bumble is informed that the child had turned vicious and had attempted to murder the whole family. The reason for such behaviour, he considered, was:

"You've overfed him ma'am. You've raised an artificial soul and spirit in him ma'am, unbecoming a person of his condition: as the Board, Mrs. Sowerberry, who are practical philosophers, will tell you. What have paupers to do with soul and spirit? It's quite enough that we let them have live bodies"[42].

We find in Dicken's words another subtle jibe at Malthus's theory of population, but the author is also alloting to Malthus, and through Malthus to the utilitarians, a theory that was not theirs: If a pauper has a full stomach, ,he will subsequently have a less immediate and animal necessity for more food, and will therefore have more time for thought.

A "thinking" population is precisely what the Utilitarians wished to develop. James Mill in his article on "Education" emphasizes the fact that certain qualities are essential in all classes:

"... the qualities of intelligence, temperance and benevolence are desirable for all and should be the main business of education (....)".

And he adds:

"Till recently, it was denied that intelligence was a desirable quality in the great body of the people; and as intelligence is power, such is an unavoidable opinion in the breasts of those who think that the human race ought to consist of two classes – one that of the oppressors, another, that of the oppressed"[43].

Mr. Bumble's words recall much more the deep suspicion of that class of people, described by James Mill, who regarded intelligent lower ranks as a threat to the social order and who therefore preferred the lower classes to be kept in their station (of subordination), as the proprietor of a large firm who, when asked if he could take on a man as a porter, answered:

"I don't want one of your intellectuals (...) I want a man that will work and take his glass of ale. I'll think for him"[44].

Hence, what we have noticed and pointed out is that right up to and including his apprenticeship, Oliver has neither been fed or instructed. Evidently the official world has failed him through. After the altercation with the Sowerberrys, the child's indurance had reached its limits and he decides to run away. Thus, in the eighth chapter of the novel, Oliver comes into contact with the underworld – a world of thieves, prostitutes and murderers.

Dickens's parody is plain. His biting criticism of the times is rendered through his clear inversion of the roles of society as such, and those rejected by society. His hero escapes from the world that has treated him harshly and taught him nothing while the underwold takes him in, feeds him and begins the process of his "education".

NOTES

1 Philip Hobsbawm, *A reader's Guide to Charles Dickens* (1972) (London, Thames and Hudson, 1981), p. 138.

2 Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens* (1970) (London, Granada publishing, 1983), p. 106.

3 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1976), p. 37.

4 Ibidem.

5 Ibidem.

6 Idem., p. 48.

7 Idem., p. 49.

8 Idem., p. 54.

9 Ibidem.

10 Ibidem.

11 A.J. Marcham, "The 'Myth' of Benthamism, the Second Reform Act and the Extension of Popular Education", *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 1970, vol. 2, nº 2, p. 22.

12 James Walvin, *A Child's World, Social History of English Childhood 1800-1914* (1982) (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1984), p. 117.

13 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 54.

14 James Walvin, op. cit. p. 117.

15 Ibidem.

16 According to J. Steintrager, Jeremy Bentham had shown a lifelong and deep seated hostility to religion in general. Religion was for him the great enemy of reason and was to be feared as it held such a powerful hold on gobernors and governed alike.

J. Steintrager, *Bentham* (1977) (Political Thinkers nº 5 London, George Allen and Unwin, 1977) p. 97.

James Mill goes further in his article on "Ecclesiastical Establishments of 1826, as quoted by a friend of his family: "In our opinion, there is not one of the great interests of humanity, on which it (the Church) does not exercise baneful influence". The general argument in support of this is that organized religion soon gains power and priviledge and becomes pre-occupied with its preservation. When, in addition to being organized, it is "established" and "aided by the magistrate, it becomes almost wholly concerned to increase its power without limit".

A Bain, *James Mill, a Biography* (London, Longmans, pp. 295-297.

In wishing to preserve their interests, therefore, education for the poor was bitterly resisted by the Church which sensed itself threatened by developments not under its control, and by the Tories, farmers or anyone else afraid that an educated poor would undermine the social order.

17 N. Hans, "Bentham and the Utilitarians", Judges, Pioneers of English Educational Journal, 1952, 4, p. 94.

18 Ibidem.

19 E.G. West, "The Role of Education in Nineteenth Century. Doctrines of Political Economy". *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 12, 1963, p. 165.

20 Philip Hobsbawm, op. cit. p. 39.

21 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 56.

22 The main reason for the original impact of Robert Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* and the author's subsequent "fame" was his presentation of his striking ratios which show, on the one hand, the powers of man of multiplying the number of the species by reproduction, and, on the other hand, the possibilities of the resources available for the support of these numbers. According to Malthus, there must always be some check or checks operating against the force of population increase, so that the two powers may be kept in balance. One of the most "positive" checks he alludes to, which works naturally against the unrestrictive multiplication of numbers, is Hunger or Famine.

Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798 and 1830) (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1982) pp. 72-75.

23 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 56.

24 Idem., p. 65.

25 John Manning, *Dickens on Education* (1959) (London, Oxford University Press, 1959) p. 55.

26 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 71.

27 Idem p. 72.

28 Ibidem.

29 Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Man", *Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, vol. VIII Epistle I, lines 17-18, p. 327.

30 Thomas Robert Malthus, op. cit., p. 169.

31 N. Hans, op. cit., p. 98.

32 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 58.

33 Idem. p. 92.

34 Idem. p. 60.

35 Idem., p. 66.

36 Idem., p. 88.

37 Idem., p. 175.

38 E.G. West, op. cit., p. 166.

39 Idem., p. 161.

40 Idem., p. 162.

41 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, op. cit. p. 88.

42 Idem., p. 93.

43 N. Hans, op. cit., p. 99.

44 Harold Silver, *English Education and the Radicals 1780-1850* (1975) (London, Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1975), p. 36.

EL USO DE LA MEMORIA EN EL GUION DE *ACCIDENT*

Celestino DELEYTO ALCALA

Uno de los lugares comunes en la crítica de Harold Pinter es el papel jugado por la memoria en la evolución experimentada por las obras del dramaturgo en la segunda mitad de la década de los sesenta. De ser un elemento secundario, aunque significativo, en obras como *The Birthday Party* (las digresiones de Goldberg sobre su niñez), *The Caretaker* (el famoso monólogo de Aston al final del segundo acto) o *The Dumb Waiter* (los recuerdos contradictorios de Ben y Gus a propósito de un partido de fútbol que vieron hace tiempo), la memoria pasa a ser la clave estructural y temática en *Landscape, Silence, Night, Old Times* y, en menor medida, en *No Man's Land* y *Betrayal*.

No tan estudiados como las obras de teatro, los guiones cinematográficos escritos por Pinter durante esta época, expresan la misma preocupación y la misma consistencia en la utilización de la memoria como hilo conductor de sus estructuras. Este estudio se propone analizar, desde esta perspectiva, uno de estos guiones –*Accident*–, buscando las técnicas concretas con que los diversos aspectos relacionados con la memoria son plasmados por Pinter en el cine.

En la novela de Nicholas Mosley (1965) en la que se basa el guión de Pinter se refieren los acontecimientos de la historia o, más bien, los