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“Born an item”. Fictional births in Dickens’s Novels.

Abstract

Starting from the well-known circumstances of his birth, the essay offers an appreciation of four novels by Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, *Little Dorrit*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Oliver Twist*, which display an interesting juxtaposition between the protagonists’ birth and their parents’ death. In paying attention to his characters’ birth, Dickens moves along the path traced by eighteenth-century master novelists like Defoe, Fielding and Sterne, who introduced specific biographical data in their works that were meant to respond to the aristocratic idea of lineage. Interestingly, in Dickens’s novels the attention to biography is accompanied by either good-tempered humour or trenchant satire, apt to oppose the materialism of his age, which looked at individuals not as human beings, but as quantifiable entities. “Items” indeed.

Taking my lead from the recent world-wide celebrations of the bicentenary of Dickens’s birth, and from some unique biographical circumstances related to his birth, I should like to focus here on aspects that make his literary representations of similar events in his novels also in many ways unique and memorable, and such as to be part and parcel of his distinctly modern identity.

The word “item”, to mean the new-born protagonist in *Oliver Twist*, is one of the most evident signs of such uniqueness. It makes us aware that then, for the first time in history, individuals were born not as human beings but measurable facts, quantifiable entities, in a world in which the scientific perspective, down to its extreme utilitarian version, Benthamite or Malthusian¹, was going to have an almost unquestioned hegemony all

¹ For an early discussion of Bentham and Malthus’s theories and *Oliver Twist*, see Steven Marcus, *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey*, Chatto, London, 1965, pp. 59 and 64 ff. Marcus finds a tendency to abstraction in that novel, which “is itself, in a sense, genuinely Malthusian—or at least Ricardian. In the society of *Oliver Twist*, relations between men have been reduced to abstract calculations, and men themselves have been transformed

through the nineteenth century. Dickens’s novels, while accepting that perspective in their realistic approach², also oppose and indict it, in good-tempered humour or trenchant satire.

But first of all, it is worthwhile noticing that there is a remarkable number of births in the *corpus* – all the more remarkable with respect to the number of more famous deaths one meets with in the history of the novel at large, due to our «sense of an ending», in Kermode’s phrase. Dickens too has proved death to be of high literary and biographical interest. Most notably – to make just a few examples – in *The Old Curiosity Shop* Little Nell’s impending doom pervades the whole narrative³; in *Dombey and Son*, the same applies to Paul; in *Bleak House*, Jo the crossing-sweeper is another case in point; and even *Oliver Twist* has many death-bed scenes of people «dying very hard»⁴. Against such a background, the number of birth-events stands out, and in some instances they possess peculiar narrative relevance. Thus Dickens appears singularly versatile in the *ars nasciendi* as well as in the *ars moriendi*.

In paying attention to birth, he took the lead from the eighteenth-century masters of the novel who, in shaping the new genre in contrast with the romance tradition, introduced specific biographical data absent in previous narratives ding to the aristocratic idea of lineage. «I was born in the year 1632, in the city of York, of a good family, though not of that country, my father being a foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull», writes Defoe in *Robinson Crusoe*⁵, having bourgeois questions of virtue in mind⁶. And Fielding, who cared about similar birth-data, freed them from *diegesis*, and set them in mimetic scenes. In *Tom Jones*, Squire Allworthy is

into isolated and dehumanized objects”. See also Robert L. Patten, *Capitalism and compassion in Oliver Twist*, in *Studies in the Novel*, 1, 1969, pp 207-20.

² On this subject see George Levine, *Darwin among the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991.

³ John Kucich, *Death Worship among the Victorians: The Old Curiosity Shop*, in “PMLA”, 95.1, 1980, pp. 58-73, *passim*.

⁴ Steven Marcus, *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey* cit., p. 70.

⁵ Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, Dent, London, 1972, p. 5.

⁶ On “questions of virtue” see Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, University of Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, 1987, *passim*.

unconsciously revering the foundling abandoned in his bed. He is saying his prayers on his knees, as usual, «preparing to step into bed, when, opening the cloaths, to his great surprize, he beheld and infant, wrapt up in some coarse linnen, in a sweet and profound sleep, between his sheets»⁷. An epiphany, as it were: where the foundling and «little wretch» is a kind of mystery bound to reveal «how arbitrary social categories can be»⁸.

All this Dickens takes up and works on, but he is not confined to it. He seems to sum up the whole, much cherished, eighteenth-century tradition, including Lawrence Sterne. Sterne balances death and birth in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, giving them both an unusual, de-familiarizing emphasis. Death looms large but pervasively, and indeed the whole novel shows itself as a life- and time-consuming writing procedure, which progressively narrows the gap that separates the writer from death. Tristram purposes to begin his autobiography from birth but finds this event to be most elusive: ultimately, he doesn't want to be born because he doesn't want to die; if birth is delayed, so death would be too. Thus Sterne has him pursue every possible digression, and in so doing shrouds the birth event in an astonishing mass of scientific and philosophical considerations, of inept, cant language, assigning the forceps a dramatic first entrance. In jocular irony, there follows that many books of Tristram's life have been completed, and the hero be not yet born.

It was Sterne, in other words, who ostensibly set the relationship between milieu and individual being in a more comprehensive frame, beginning, as he says, «ab ovo»⁹ and by describing at some length the surrounding world in which the new-born was due to appear. With respect to this, Dickens's overall organization of the narrative material may well be less blatantly experimental, and most of Sterne's prurient comicality be changed in

⁷ Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973, p. 55.

⁸ Brian McCrea, *Impotent Fathers: Patriarchy and Demographic Crisis in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, Associated University Presses, Cranbery (NJ), 1998, p. 90.

⁹ «Right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on, tracing everything in it, as Horace says, ab Ovo» (Lawrence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy Gentleman*, University of Oxford Press, Oxford, 1971, p. 8).

the prudish one of gender relationships, but it was that lesson he learnt.

However, it all began with a real birth, on the seventh of February 1812, in a small first floor bedroom of a modest but respectful house, outskirts of Portsmouth, the surgeon and the monthly nurse in attendance¹⁰, already testifying to the process whereby birth – Sterne witnessing – though still centred at home, was no longer a physically and symbolically female social space¹¹.

Charles’s mother, Elizabeth, later tried to build up a mythology around the event, since she seems to have claimed that she went to a ball, the night before. It may be an apocryphal story; however Charles – the second born and first male in a family which would grow to 10 between brothers and sisters – was proudly welcomed by his father, John, who had an insertion in the local newspapers, both “The Hampshire Telegraph” and “The Hampshire Courier”, on Monday 10th of February, announcing that «On Friday, at Mile-end Terrace, the Lady of John Dickens Esq., a son»¹².

John tried to hide and forget that his parents were servants, not genteel people: his father, William had been steward at Crewe Hall and his mother a servant in the house of the Marquess of Blandford and housekeeper at Crewe¹³, but it was to little avail, since more painful traumas were in store

¹⁰ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London, 1990, p. 1.

¹¹ See Pamela K. Stone, *A History of Western Medicine, Labour and Birth*, in H. Selin (ed.), *Childbirth Across Cultures: Ideas and Practices of Pregnancy, Childbirth and the Postpartum*, Springer, New York, 2009, p. 45.

¹² Years later there appeared in *Household Words* (the 22nd of February, 1851), the paper: “Birth, Mrs Meek, of a son”, beginning on the same note of pride: «My name is Meek. I am, in fact, Mr. Meek. That son is mine and Mrs. Meek’s. When I saw the announcement in *The Times*, I dropped the paper. I had put it in, myself, and paid for it, but it looked so noble that it overpowered me. [...] We read the review of our child, several times, with feelings of the strongest emotion». In this paper again, initially, the emphasis falls on the waiting for the baby to be born, which begins with Maria Jane’s Mamma, and the hired nurse Mrs. Prodigit, taking «entire possession» of Mr. Meek’s establishment. (Preparations include gathering of a good deal of pins, and securing the exclusion of the father from the proceedings related to birth). After birth, the emphasis shifts to physicality and external constrictions, the child’s limbs fettered and tied with yards of bandages, and Mrs Prodigit’s «forcing Castor oil on my innocent son, from the first hour of his birth» (*Dickens: The Uncommercial Traveller and Reprinted Pieces*, pp. 426-30).

¹³ Edgar Johnson, *Charles Dickens: His Tragedy and Triumph*, (revised and abridged) Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 13.

for him, for his child, and family. The family had to move two times in a year, to more modest abodes. Then to London, then to Chatham. Most dramatically, the five years in Chatham, the happiest of times, in Charles's infancy, came abruptly to an end when John was commanded back to London, and there imprisoned for debt. Much like Pip, who has his «first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things [...] on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening» (GE 1)¹⁴, Charles had quite a new baptism in humiliation, shame, poverty, separation and hard work.

I am mentioning again this well-known story, because it is meaningful to us not as pertaining to Charles only, but as a general identity frame. And towards such a cultural and historical construct Dickens conspicuously contributed. It was, in a way, his invention of infancy, in tune with Wordsworth's dictum, that «the Child is father of the Man»¹⁵.

Dickens removed from his conscious life many scathing memories. But when they suddenly resurfaced, and he felt again the deep shame of that past, he felt also compelled to write an autobiography, to go back as far as he could – precisely to come to terms with that past which so forcefully haunted him. In so doing he admits that «even now, famous and caressed and happy, I often forget in my dreams that I have a dear wife and children; even that I am a man; and wander desolately back to that time of my life»¹⁶.

He started in 1847, already the most renowned and influential English writer of his time, went on laboriously, but as he got to the most heart-rending particulars of his early life, stopped altogether. Later on, his need to know, to be in control of, rather than threatened by events, prompted him to write, instead, a fictional autobiography, *David Copperfield*.

It strikes us that his fictional autobiography – unlike many others, concentrating on the more or less “grown up” experiences of the world – deals extensively with the hero's actual coming into this world. The title of the

¹⁴ Quotations from Dickens's novels and works are from *The New Oxford Illustrated Dickens* edition, Oxford University Press, London, 1947-58. The conventional shortened form will be used, followed by page number, in parentheses. For *Oliver Twist* references will be to “The Clarendon Dickens” (Oxford University Press, London, 1966).

¹⁵ William Wordsworth, “My heart leaps up when I behold”, *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*, Wordsworth Editions Ltd, Ware, 1998, p. 91.

¹⁶ Steven Marcus, *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey* cit., p. 83.

first chapter of *David Copperfield* – “I am born” – is in the present tense, which extends the relevance of the circumstances there narrated to all the subsequent chapters of David’s life, and remains the grammatical verb tense of other chapter titles (II- “I observe”, III- “I have a change”, IV- “I fall into disgrace”...). Consequently, the very first words of the narration, in disconcerting tautology, read: «To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o’ clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry, simultaneously» (DC 1).

Friday, midnight: in folklore belief, it portends an unhappy life, peculiar to the unlucky, one reads. However, having offered such an unpromising horoscope, Dickens reverts to the physical uniqueness of being born, adding a very strange detail, foreboding good luck: «I was born with a caul». And indeed we soon follow not so much the life of the hero as the life of his caul: it «was advertised for sale, in the newspapers, at the low price of fifteen guineas». No one making fair offers, ten years afterwards (a lapse of time which broadly reminds of Dickens’s, or Oliver’s age when undergoing crucial events of their early life), «the caul was put up in a raffle, down in our part of the country, to fifty members, at a half-a-crown a head. I was present myself, and I remember to have felt quite uncomfortable and confused, at a part of myself being disposed of in that way» (DC 1-2).

In conjunction to which, there follows a sketchy, spin-off biography of the «old lady with a hand-basket, who, very reluctantly, produced from it the stipulated five shillings» (DC 2) and who, because of that, «was never drowned, but died triumphantly in bed, at ninety two» – the fact that she «never had been on the water in her life, except upon a bridge», helping (DC 2).

In retrospect, though, and along a different line, we move to the months of the gestation when the nurse and some «sage women in the neighbourhood [...] had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted» (DC 1); or to when his «father’s eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months when mine opened to it» (DC 2). Furthermore, Aunt Betsey’s character and history in outline concur to defining the context: she «had been

married to a husband younger than herself», and her husband's too, who, a separation by mutual consent effected, «went to India with his capital» (DC 3).

Repeatedly, after several lines of such parenthetical side narrations, the reader is brought back to the hours immediately preceding David's birth, in quasi-Shandean tone, with: «not to meander myself, at present, I'll go back to my birth» (DC 2), or with: «This was the state of matters on the afternoon of, what *I* may be excused for calling, that eventful and important Friday» (DC 3). Thus, much relevance is given to the specific time-space context, closing up on that parlour, that same, windy, March afternoon, where his mother, already a widower, is waiting by the fireside to be delivered, «desponding heavily about herself and the fatherless little stranger, – the world not at all excited on the subject of his arrival» (DC 3). Something else happens instead, with Betsey's sudden arrival, and both have to come to terms with their past misunderstandings, with remembrances of the late Mr Copperfield, and with anticipating the sex of the infant to be, both seemingly permeable, during silent stretches, to the voice of the old elm-trees «bent to one another, like giants who were whispering secrets» (DC 5).

When the signs of impending delivery become unequivocal, Pegotty «conveyed her up-stairs to her own room with all speed» (DC 9); at which point a professional sort of people get involved in the event, since the same Pegotty «immediately despatched her nephew, who had been for some days past secreted in the house, unknown to my mother, as a special messenger in case of emergency, to fetch the nurse and the doctor», the last two needed according to a custom that, begun in bourgeois domesticity, gradually spread through lower sections of society in the course of the eighteenth century¹⁷. The time of waiting, and the tension, become thus perceptible in the parlour where Betsey is anxiously waiting, and to where the meek, good-hearted doctor Chillip keeps reappearing, going up-stairs and descending again, a messenger of what is going on in the parturient's bedroom. What is also at stake in the verbal skirmishes between the doctor and

¹⁷ Adrian Wilson, *The Making of Man-Midwifery: Childbirth in England, 1660-1770*, UCL Press, London, 1995, *passim*.

that proto-feminist, aunt Betsey Trotwood, one of the chief custodians of female right to marshal law in the space around birth, is the male, professional invasion of that space. Chillip versus Trotwood: by the very names we are left in no doubt as to where the gender balance of power inclines in this specific instance, even if we hadn't known that the doctor «carried his head on one side, partly in modest depreciation of himself, partly in modest propitiation of everybody else» (DC 9); however it's just because doctors' supervision was going to be taken for granted that such a comedy of unequal confrontation is possible.

The doctor's presence, then, posits birth as subject to a scientific perspective. As such, a remarkable connection between a new life and the surrounding world is made with the first chapter's concluding words. Apparently, the new David – and by no chance he bears his father's name – can come to existence only at the expense of an old David who is dead, and who has died while the new baby was growing in the mother's womb. Finally, the narrator recollects how «I lay in my basket, and my mother lay in bed; and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the mound above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been» (DC 12). The grown-up David sees, and feels, his father's tomb just outside his house, detached from, and next to his cradle. Rhetorically, a womb/tomb coincidence is staged in a pattern which is to be seen repeated more clearly: here, the birth of the child means somebody else's death, an idea the novel markedly conveys not only at the closure of the first chapter, but at its beginning too, with David sensing again «the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle» (DC 2).

In *Little Dorrit* too, when the fictional biography of Amy begins, the reader is waiting for her to be born. And again, almost an entire chapter is needed – although not the first of the novel – for the event to be completed. For added emphasis, Amy's father is under arrest and lives in the Marshalsea, a prison which is a powerful symbol particularly in this novel, as

Edmund Wilson ground-breakingly argued in 1941¹⁸. As the case is also for Oliver, in such an institution, symbolizing all pressures of outward circumstance, Amy is born.

The birth scene begins when the helpless William rushes to the turnkey, saying his wife is ill. The turnkey leads to a room, where two people are disclosed, «hoarse, puffy, red-faced personages, seated at a rickety table, playing at all-fours, smoking pipes and drinking brandy. “Doctor” said the turnkey, “here’s a gentleman’s wife in want of you without a minute’s loss of time!”» (LD 60).

A rather lengthy description of the doctor follows, emphasizing his shabbiness, and unprofessional character, «hoarser, puffier, more red-faced, more all-fourey, tobaccoer, dirtier and brandier» than his companion, and «amazingly shabby, in a torn and darned rough-weather sea-jackett, out at elbows and eminently short of buttons [...], a ghastly medical crow» (LD 60). In the parturient’s room, where labours are under way, the atmosphere of physical constraint is then heightened by the hot weather, and the flies, which add torment to pain: «Mrs. Bangham, charwoman and messenger [...] the popular means of communication with the outer world, had volunteered her services as fly-catcher and general attendant», and «expert in sudden device, with one hand fans with a leaf of cabbage» (LD 61). Besides expressing «sentiments of an encouraging [...] nature, adapted to the occasion» (LD 61), yet again, balancing things in terms of physicality, she forewarns the patient that she is to feel pain, and should expect to get worse, before getting better.

Given such dexterity, signifying an empirical perception of relations and trust in nature’s benign course on her part, she ironically, Betsey-like, comments on doctor Haggage’s arrival: «And now indeed we *are* complete, I *think!*» (LD 61). As it turns out, the doctor cannot but drink the time away, so to speak, his potations measuring time as a clock.

So the actual birth takes place, not quite uneventfully: «The flies fell into the traps by the hundred, and at length one little life, hardly stronger than theirs, appeared among the multitude of lesser deaths» (LD 62). A

¹⁸ Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1941, *passim*.

rhetoric of balance is enacted again, as in *David Copperfield*, but this time events are juxtaposed, taking place in synchronism; and it is enacted between forms of life that, of different animal species, are nonetheless similar (had Dickens not sensed or prefigured a basic Darwin, or the first law of thermodynamics, he couldn't have written this, signifying: nothing is created and nothing destroyed)¹⁹.

In *Dombey and Son*, the birth of Paul Dombey takes again the whole first chapter. You have the scene arrange itself: between the room where Fanny, Paul's mother, lies in bed; the antechamber; and the to-and-fro movement between the two rooms. Many characters are present, almost suffocating with their several interests and expectations the poor new-born: Paul Dombey senior, his sister Louisa Chick and her friend Miss Tox, the nurse Mrs Blockitt. Among them two doctors (one family consultant and one em-

¹⁹ «Not only was Dickens well attuned to the attitude and tendencies of science, but society as a whole was creating the conditions that made both Darwinism and thermodynamics conceptually possible» (George Levine, *Little Dorrit and three kinds of science*, in *Darwin among the Novelists: Patterns of Science in Victorian Fiction* cit., p. 155). It's worthwhile remarking that Dickens took a very early interest in science and in natural sciences in particular. In the light of Wordsworth's close association of the work of the writer to that of a scientist (*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*), one might read *Sketches by Boz* as if the narrator were scouting the new metropolis, London, bothanizing and classifying the human types engendered by, and striving for life in, that peculiar environment. Furthermore, in *The Pickwick Papers* the protagonist and the correspondent members of the club set on errands in order that their observations might be communicated to the club, and so contribute «to the advancement of knowledge, and the diffusion of learning» (PP 1). In particular, Kathleen Tillotson (*Pickwick and Edward Jesse*, in “Times Literary Supplement”, April 1, 1960, p. 214) has shown the relationship between *The Pickwick Papers* and Edward Jesse's *Gleanings in Natural History (1832–1835)*, with special reference to Jingle's anecdote of the sagacious dog Ponto (Cit. Robert Patten, *Serialized Retrospection in The Pickwick Papers*, in J.O. Jordan and R. Patten (eds), *Literature in the Market-Place*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 140; see also Roberto Patten, *Charles Dickens and Boz: The Birth of the Industrial-Age Author*, University of Cambridge Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp. 96, 349 n.). An original note to the text, later removed, made this clear: «Although we find this circumstance recorded as a “singular” one, in Mr. Pickwick note-books, we cannot refrain from humbly expressing our dissent from that learned authority. The stranger's anecdote is not one quarter so wonderful as some of Mr. Jesse's “Gleanings”. Ponto sinks into utter insignificance before the dogs whose actions he records. – ED» (Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, Cosimo, New York, 2009, p. 12).

inent physician). Quite apart from the rest, there couches subdued little Florence.

Many elements just seen recur here, if varied: space and time data, the enfeebled mother, the waiting, the role of the nurse; and, the now two doctors, somewhat working as status symbol for the house of Dombey, and performing little else than the comedy of their social role and mutual relationship: «Doctor Parker Peps, one of the Court Physicians, and a man of immense reputation for assisting at the increase of great families», is the object of the unspeakable admiration of Mr Pilkins, «the family surgeon, who had regularly puffed the case for the last six weeks, among all his patients, friend and acquaintances as one to which he was in hourly expectation day and night of being summoned, in conjunction with Doctor Parker Peps» (DS 4).

Professionally, however, they are quite inept in preventing the mother dying as a consequence of delivery²⁰:

“We must not disguise from you, Sir,” said Doctor Parker Peps, “that there is a want of power in Her Grace the Duchess -- I beg your pardon; I confound names; I should say, in your amiable lady. That there is a certain degree of languor, and a general absence of elasticity, which we would rather – not --”

“See,” interposed the family practitioner with another inclination of the head (DS 4).

Thus, in the narrative movement before and after the birth, a more articulated balancing of life and death occurs. We begin the chapter with a new life, and end it with a death, while life and death are mixed throughout. Indeed, there are sombre premonitions in the darkened and silent room where little Paul is, in a «little basket bedstead, in front of the fire and close to it, as if his constitution were analogous to that of a muffin, and it was essential to toast him brown, while he was very new» (DS 1).

The eight and forty minutes of Paul’s life are contrasted also with his father’s forty-eight years of age, and so are the creases on the infant’s brow,

²⁰ On women as patients and victims of male professional power, with respect to delivery, see Mary Carpenter Wilson, *Victorian Women as Obstetrics Patients*, in *Health, Medicine and Society in Victorian England*, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2010, pp. 157ff.

«which the same deceitful Time would take delight in smoothing out and wearing away with the flat part of his scythe, as a preparation of the surface for his deeper operations» (DS 1).

But this rhetoric climaxes when the life of the new-born demands in direct and almost immediate compensation the life of the mother, who is even unsympathetically scolded by her sister-in-law Louisa for not being up to the toughness of the world: «It’s necessary for you to make an effort, and perhaps a very great and painful effort which you are not disposed to make; but this is a world of effort, you know, Fanny, and we must never yield, when so much depends on us» (DS 10). The argument is strongly reminiscent of the necessity of a Malthusian «struggle for life», against which – as against similar verbal solicitations – Fanny never utters a word. She dies in this same chapter, «drifted out upon the dark and unknown sea that rolls round all the world» (DS 10).

Finally, *Oliver Twist*, written when Dickens was about 25 – arguably his first novel, in that its pattern is not preordained as the case is with *The Pickwick Papers*. It voices Dickens’s innermost interests, in specifically attacking the degenerative outcomes of the scientific epistemology and ethos of the new “philosophers”. Notwithstanding the fact that their theories and systems of thought strongly articulated new social concerns, inspired progressive legislation and reform movements (one of which was the new poor-law), the evil that Dickens saw at the root of them was that, in such “scientific” perspectives, human beings were going to be regarded as utilities right from their birth.

No wonder, then, that the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist*, as has been observed, «are quite unlike anything that had ever before been known in English prose, including the prose of Dickens himself. Written in abrupt, truncated chapters, in a style utterly unlike the playful, graceful fluency of the narrative pages of the *The Pickwick Papers*, the early scenes of Oliver’s life seem bitten off rather than composed»²¹.

The physical details of birth we have been considering so far, in relation both to child and mother, are here stressed for the first time. Besides,

²¹ Steven Marcus, *Dickens: from Pickwick to Dombey* cit., p. 55.

doctors seem already in control of the female body of the mother (a position underlined by the surgeon's reproachful comments on Oliver's mother's fate: «“The old story,” he said, shaking his head: “no wedding-ring, I see. Ah!”» OT 3). But furthermore, the peculiar note of *Oliver Twist* is in its denouncing how birth, as many other aspects of life, was undergoing a process of bureaucratization. In other words, the novel questions not only the medicalization, but also the hospitalization of birth, since the surgeon, as in the Marshalsea, acts for, and is part of, an institution.

In contrast to this, the not yet named mother has an exceptional relevance as an individual, even in her labour pains, which almost immediately shift in death-agony. Body details are accumulated in one sentence: her arms, in which Oliver is deposited by the surgeon, «her cold, white lips», Oliver's forehead, her hands, her face, her wild gaze, her shudder; and the people who try to revive her, as soon as she falls back dying: «They chafed her breast, hands, and temples; but the blood had stopped forever» (OT 2).

Oliver's body too has foreground relevance, and his physiological functions are remarked:

there was considerable difficulty in inducing Oliver to take upon himself the office of respiration, - a troublesome practice, but one which custom has rendered necessary to our easy existence; and for some time he lay gasping on a little flock mattress, rather unequally poised between this world and the next [...]. Oliver and Nature fought out the point between them. The result was that after a few struggles, Oliver breathed, sneezed, and proceeded to advertise to the inmates of the workhouse the fact of a new burden having been imposed upon the parish (OT 2).

The irony in words that define Oliver as a “fact”, and “burden”, or that – in climax – define him as an “item of mortality”, with the religious and traditional overtones of the second term (mortality) all but annihilated by the first, can hardly be overstressed. In a rich polysemy, “item” means – primarily, given the whole narrative context – «an article or unit of any kind»; more specifically, «an entry in an account, a clause of a document»²². It has then strong, economic, legal, and bureaucratic connotations.

This notion is engrained in the novel. Oliver «enveloped in the old cali-

²² *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1959, p. 1053.

co robes, which had grown yellow in the same service», was «badged and ticketed» – merchandise, commodity like. Later on, he is literally advertised for sale at 5 guineas, and made the object of shrewd negotiations between the workhouse authorities who want to get rid of such an unprofitable nuisance, and the stone hearted chimney-sweeper Gamfield. It is also evident when Oliver – now nine – is summoned before the Board through reference to a file number, or when, shortly before, the reader is informed of the mechanic contrivance according to which he has been named by the Parish Beadle. The Beadle proudly discloses his method to a ravished Mrs Corney: «We name our fondlins in alphabetical order. The last was a S, – Swubble, I named him. This was a T, --Twist, I named *him*. The next one as comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z» (OT 7). «Quite a poet», Mrs Corney comments, proving herself instead «such a very great experimental philosopher» as to shrink the parochial «sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week» to the «smallest possible portion of the weakest possible food» (OT 4).

No wonder, these babies don’t seem particularly happy to have come to life. Paul Dombey, who is denied name and almost identity, simply and repeatedly referred to as “Son” – «with his little fists curled up and clenched, seemed, in his feeble way, to be squaring at existence for having come upon him so unexpectedly» (DS 1); while Oliver: «cried lustily. If he could have known that he was an orphan, left to the tender mercies of churchwardens and overseers, perhaps he would have cried the louder» (OT 3).

So much for the overwhelming world surrounding birth. However, *Oliver Twist* is a great novel also because the young protagonist, be it in a fairy-tale strain, is made to overcome all the reifying pressures of the social and physical milieu. More acted upon than acting, but through an incorruptible innocence of character, Oliver embodies a myth of resistance and resilience, and of «wanting some more». Significantly this phrase lacks specifications, thus implying that the «some more» applies to everything, including, though besides gruel. Oliver remains what he is to the end, escaping, literally, the hardships and dehumanizing sides of a utilitarian world, the dangers and evils of which are much more subtle and insidious – if only because

hidden in ideologies of progress – than those, easily recognizable, represented by Fagin and his crew.

Walter Benjamin once said that no one has lived his life fully if, as an adolescent, has never tried to escape from home. David and Oliver do so, vicariously, for Dickens.

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