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DICKENS AND RAGGED SCHOOLS: THE REFORMER VERSUS THE ARTIST

This paper sets out to investigate the relationship between Charles Dickens's personal beliefs and attitudes towards Ragged Schools and his fictional presentation of this particular Victorian educational institution. Education figures prominently in Dickens's fiction, and no Dickens novel is without a teacher, a governess or a school. Generally, his fictional presentation of schools is negative, with such prominent examples as Dotheboys Hall in *Nicholas Nickleby*, Mrs Pipchin's school and Dr Blimber's Academy in *Dombey and Son*, Salem House Academy in *David Copperfield*, or Mr M'Choakumchild's school in *Hard Times*. From the very few positive examples of educational institutions, one may mention Dr Strong's school, in which David Copperfield is educated, or Greenleaf School, where Esther Summerson receives her education. In Dickens's last finished novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, education is represented by what is generally believed to be a portrait of a Ragged School for the poorest where Charley Hexam is initially a pupil.

The frequent recurrence of the theme of education in his fiction shows that Dickens's interest in schools was almost compulsive, and this compulsion is noticeable in his private life. Dickens wrote numerous articles on schools and he often returned to the issue in his speeches. His journalistic output ("Our Parish" in *Sketches by Boz*, "Ignorance and Crime" in *The Examiner*, "Crime and Education" in *The Daily News*, "A Walk in a Workhouse", "Our School", "A Sleep to Startle Us" and "Boys to Mend" in *Household Words*, to mention just a few examples) highlights his commitment to education.

His personal attitude towards Victorian schools was almost invariably negative, as evidenced in his speeches:

I don't like the sort of school to which I once went myself, the respected proprietor of which was by far the most ignorant man I have ever had the pleasure to know, who was one of the worst-tempered men perhaps

that ever lived, whose business it was to make as much out of us and to put as little into us as possible (...).¹

It must be stressed that Dickens tended to over-colour his speeches to increase the impact on his audience, and it seems far-fetched to believe that he was using his novels to exorcise some nightmares of his own schooling. In any case he was much happier in school than out of it.

Dickens believed that his fiction should be didactic. His correspondence clearly reflected this view, and it was particularly noticeable when he refers to the poorest Victorians, pointing to the interventionist function of his fiction:

The neglected children of London have been an interesting subject to me ever since I began to write, and I hope I have never lost an opportunity of impressing their dreadful condition on the public heart.²

He used his novels to draw attention to defective schools and flawed educational methods. The schools he deprecated, and which are mentioned in his 1857 speech, all find their way into his fiction in one way or another:

[...] a ladies' school, that sort of school [...] which was established ages ago by worthy scholars and good men long deceased, whose munificent endowments have been monstrously perverted from their original purpose [...] where the bright childish imagination is utterly discouraged [...] and schools in leather breeches, and with mortified straw baskets for bonnets, which file along the streets to churches in long melancholy rows under the escort of that surprising British monster, a beadle.³

Dickens intended his fiction to be a comment on the Victorian world but he was too much of an artist merely to depict what he saw, as can be clearly seen in his fictional presentation of the Yorkshire Schools in *Nicholas Nickleby*.

Early critics, such as Chesterton, believed that Dickens was set on "destroying" certain institutions, schools among others, "simply by describing them".⁴ Chesterton was confident that Dickens's fiction had such power that it literally destroyed the debtors' prisons and Yorkshire schools, as well as leaving "his mark on parochialism, on nursing, on funerals, on public executions, on workhouses, on the Court of Chancery. These things were altered; they are different".⁵ If Dickens did intend to destroy institutions he

¹ Speech of 5 November 1857 to the Warehousemen and Clerks' Schools, in *The Speeches of Charles Dickens*, ed. by K. J. Fielding, Oxford 1960, Clarendon Press, p. 240. (All subsequent quotations of Dickens's speeches come from this edition, abbreviated as *Speeches*.)

² Letter to George Russell of 14 December 1866, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 11, p. 283. (All subsequent letters are quoted from the Clarendon Press edition, abbreviated as *Letters*.)

³ Speech of 5 November 1857, *Speeches*, p. 241.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens*, London 1975 (1906), Burns & Oates, p. 199.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 193.

disliked, it would seem natural for him to include a grim vision of them in his fiction. The question, however, is how does one know which institutions Dickens indeed disapproved of, or to what extent: whether the answer is in his fiction and the reader should judge the man on the basis of his creation, or whether the answer is in the biography and the reader should judge the literary work as influenced by the creator's personal opinion. The case of Ragged Schools proves to be an interesting example.

Dickens's fiction shows the shifting focus of his interest in education as, chronologically, his cynosure moves from physical to mental cruelty. He is not concerned solely with abuse of pupils but also charts the effect of schools, teachers and their methods on the formation of personality. Dickens sometimes pre-destines his fictional characters' fates irrespective of any influences but often he sensed that childhood exerts a profound influence on the evolution of the individual and that from the earliest moments the development of human beings is influenced by external factors, firstly parents and then by the teachers, their methods and by the school environment.

In his private life, Dickens's interest in education translated into direct involvement in a wide range of educational and charitable activities, ranging from Urania Cottage, which stressed the importance of educational methods in reforming former prostitutes, to his concern for Ragged Schools and a national system of popular education which he shared with James Kay-Shuttleworth (1804–77), who was the first secretary of the committee of the Privy Council on education from 1839. The Ragged Schools movement began in London in the mid-1830s, initially to arrest the increasing crime rate among the youth by providing the children with the knowledge of the gospel, and later to educate destitute children. The movement developed largely through the patronage of Lord Ashley, who became the president of the Ragged School Union in 1844, and was aimed at providing rudimentary knowledge to those children who lived literally on the streets and did not attend religious day or Sunday schools. The name for the schools was derived from the prospective pupils' attire: children raggedly clothed. The objective of the Ragged Schools movement was:

[...] to introduce among the most miserable and neglected outcasts in London, some knowledge of the commonest principles of morality and religion; to commence their recognition as immortal human creatures, before the Gaol Chaplain becomes their schoolmaster.⁶

Dickens was fascinated by crime and its origins and so Ragged Schools became a common denominator of his two social interests. As early as 1843 Dickens investigated Ragged Schools and later he would establish his own model Ragged School. His initial reaction to the newly founded institutions was ambivalent. He admired the teaching but was appalled by their physical condition:

⁶ P. Horn, *Children's Work and Welfare 1780–1880s*, London 1994, Macmillan, p. 65.

On Thursday night, I went to the Ragged School; and an awful sight it is. [...] The school is held in three most wretched rooms on the first floor of the rotten house; [...] I have very seldom seen, in all the strange and dreadful things I have seen in London and elsewhere, anything so shocking as the dire neglect of soul and body exhibited in these children. [...]

Shocked by the physical state of the school, which was indeed extremely grim, he continues with admiration for the teachers, their devotion and skills:

The Masters are extremely quiet, honest, good men. You may suppose they are, to be there at all. It is enough to break one's heart to get at the place: to say nothing of getting at the children's minds afterwards. They are well-grounded in the Scotch – the Glasgow – system of elementary instruction, which is an excellent one; and they try to reach the boys by kindness. To gain their attention in any way, is a difficulty, quite gigantic. To impress them, even with the idea of a God, when their condition is so desolate, becomes a monstrous task. To find anything within them – who know nothing of affection, care, love, or kindness of any sort – to which it is possible to appeal, is, at first, like a search for the philosopher's stone.⁷

His supportive attitude becomes more evident as he comes to understand the circumstances of the educators and the poorest children for whom the filthy school was the only available opportunity to become literate and not fall into the vicious circle of poverty-inflicted crime:

The school is miserably poor [...] and is almost entirely supported by the teachers themselves. If they could get a better room (the house they are in, is like an ugly dream); above all, if they could provide some convenience for washing; it would be an immense advantage. The moral courage of the teachers is beyond all praise. They are surrounded by every possible adversity, and very disheartening circumstances that can be imagined. Their office is worthy of the apostles.⁸

Dickens also approved of the educational methods employed:

The Masters examined them, however, on these points [religious matters], and they answered very well – sometimes in a shout all at once, sometimes only one boy, sometimes half a dozen. I put a great many questions to them upon their answers, which they also answered very well. There was one boy (...) who gave some excellent replies, though, of course, in language that would be very strange in your ears. Hardly any of them can read yet. For the masters think it most important to impress them at first with some distinction (communicated in dialogue) between right and wrong. And I quite agree with them.⁹

Dickens did extensive research, in his investigations asking Samuel Roberts Starey, treasurer of Field Lane Ragged School, for specific informa-

⁷ Letter to Miss Burdett Coutts of 16 September 1843, in *Letters*, vol. 3, p. 562–563.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 564.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 563.

tion on numbers of pupils, attendance records and the reasons for non-attendance.¹⁰ Eventually, after many school visits he decided:

What I want to do, before moving legislatively in the matter, is, to try an experimental Normal Ragged School, on a system. [...] Then the boys would not be wearied to death, and driven away, by long Pulpit discourses, which is out of the question that they can understand, and which is equally out of the question to expect them to receive with interest and patience if they could. They might be amused, instructed, and in some sort reformed, with much greater hopefulness and visibility of effect.¹¹

These letters demonstrate both Dickens's personal interest in the Ragged School movement and his concern for the pupils and teachers whose methods and perseverance were effective against all the odds. His own attempts to set up a model school were not fruitful, and in time he became somewhat disappointed about the entire issue to the point of starting to criticise the movement as inadequate to the enormous challenge set for the schools, as reflected in one of his speeches of 1851:

Or, if I be a miserable child, born and nurtured in the same wretched place [Saint Giles's], and tempted, in these better times, to the Ragged School, what can the few hours' teaching that I get there do for me, against the noxious, constant, ever-renewed lesson of my whole existence.¹²

His criticism, however, was never hostile. He would have preferred better measures to be taken to prevent delinquency among the young poorest, yet he never ceased to admire the devotion of teachers in those schools and to understand the desperate economic situation in such institutions, as is clearly seen in the article he wrote in 1853:

Admitting the full merit of the ragged schools; rendering the highest praise to those disinterested and devoted teachers, of both sexes, who labour in them; [...] we still must not disguise the plain fact that they are, at best, a slight and ineffectual palliative of an enormous evil. They want system, power, means, authority, experienced and thoroughly trained teachers.¹³

By the time of the publication of *Our Mutual Friend* between 1864 and 1865, Dickens became disillusioned about the actual efficiency of the schools and "he was clearly dismayed by the excessive attention to religious dogma and by the general evangelical spirit which seemed at work in these establishments".¹⁴ He came to attack Ragged Schools mostly because "He disliked creeds, religious forms, and sectarianism of every kind"¹⁵ and not because of

¹⁰ Letter to Samuel Roberts Starey of 1 February 1844, in *Letters*, vol. 4, pp. 37–38.

¹¹ Letter to Dr James Kay-Shuttleworth of 28 March 1846, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 527.

¹² Speech of 10 May, 1851 to Metropolitan Sanitary Association, *Speeches*, p. 129.

¹³ C. Dickens with H. Morley, *Boys to Mend*, in Harry Stone (editor), *Uncollected Writings from "Household Words" 1850–1859*, Vol. II, London 1969, Penguin Press, p. 422.

¹⁴ P. Ackroyd, *Dickens*, London 1991, Minerva, p. 429.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

their aims. Yet, to emphasise it once more, his attacks were never inimical. Despite all his reservations (which, as well as his more positive attitudes, were most fully expressed in the early "Crime and Education") he never wanted to "destroy" the schools. Rather, he wanted them reformed, based on a better system, improved economically (through financial support by the Church) and in methodology. He believed the worst Ragged School better than prison. He called the teachers quixotic and retained a kind of rough respect for them and their intention.

However, in his fiction, he mentioned Ragged Schools twice and both schools produce villainous characters: Uriah Heep and Charley Hexam, and provide background for a new kind of villain: Bradley Headstone. The description of Charley's school is notably powerful:

The school at which young Charley Hexam had first learned from a book – the streets being, for pupils of his degree, the great Preparatory Establishment in which very much that is never unlearned is learned without and before book – was a miserable loft in an unsavoury yard. Its atmosphere was oppressive and disagreeable; it was crowded, noisy, and confusing; half the pupils dropped asleep, or fell into a sate waking stupefaction; the other half kept them in either condition by maintaining a monotonous droning noise, as if they were performing, out of time and tune, on a ruder sort of bagpipe. The teachers, animated solely by good intentions, had no idea of execution, and a lamentable jumble was the upshot of their kind endeavours.

It was a school for all ages, and for both sexes. The latter were kept apart, and the former were partitioned off into square assortments. But, all the place was pervaded by a grimly ludicrous pretence that every pupil was childish and innocent. This pretence, much favoured by the lady-visitors, led to the ghastliest absurdities. [...] the whole hot-bed of flushed and exhausted infants exchanging measles, rashes, whooping-cough, fever, and stomach disorders, as if they were assembled in High Market for the purpose.

Even in this temple of good intentions, an exceptionally sharp boy exceptionally determined to learn, could learn something, and, having learned it, could impart it much better than the teachers; as being more knowing than they [...].¹⁶

It seems that the description matches perfectly Dickens's experience of Ragged Schools and his reformist urge. Dickens is overwhelmingly critical: the building, ambience, pupils, and especially the teachers and their methods, are all dire. In the light of the letters written 20 years earlier and even his changed opinions of later years any assessment of Dickens's opinions on Ragged Schools, which he once called "humane Institutions"¹⁷, taken solely from his fiction would be distorted. The fictional passage is sarcastic in tone, ironic in describing the school as the "temple of good

¹⁶ C. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, London 1997, Penguin Books, pp. 215–216. (All subsequent quotations come from this edition.)

¹⁷ Letter to William Locke of 2 March 1846, in *Letters*, vol. 4, p. 512.

intentions" and the negative impact is overwhelmingly powerful. Given Dickens's earnest interest in the aims of the Ragged School movement and his concern for the poor, uneducated children and their plight, it would seem a gross oversimplification to claim that he included that type of school solely to dismiss it as a thoroughly foul and inadequate institution. Key points in the description of the school in *Our Mutual Friend* do reflect grim reality – the poor conditions, uninspired teaching and religious indoctrination – which Dickens always disliked. Yet to assess the difference between Dickens the reformer and the artist, the function of the school in the novel must be considered.

Privately, Dickens respected the efforts of the teachers who devoted their time, money and skills to save poor children, even if on occasion he was bitter about the inefficiency of Ragged Schools in curbing delinquency among the poor youth. In his fiction he creates the school that becomes an inversion of the credo of such institutions. The school which in real Victorian London was to serve as an antidote to crime through education, becomes in *Our Mutual Friend* one of the centres of crime. Crime may be here understood in two ways: as literal crime, represented by Headstone, and as private crime against the family, embodied in the selfishness of Charley Hexam. The chapter which introduces the school serves also as an introduction of one of the most villainous characters – Bradley Headstone, who is, in fact, a psychotic murderer.

Dickens makes the school background a centre of villainy which is inextricably bound with respectability. Criminality is not only connected with the slums (so often associated with base villainy represented by Rogue Riderhood) or high life (typified by the Lammles) but with lower middle-class striving to achieve a higher position in the social hierarchy. Headstone took advantage of the national system of education to change from a poor youth to a respected headmaster, an ambition parroted by his pupil, Charley Hexam. Dickens, ever interested in the influence the institutions and environment exert on the individual, creates a school environment which transforms the young. Headstone becomes Charley's role model and eventually the boy grows up to resemble his mentor in his desire to forget his background and achieve social status. Yet his strive to cast off his social circumstances already began in his first school.

Initially, Charley Hexam is a well-meaning young man, who wants to improve his station not only for his own sake but also for his sister. The symbiotic relationship with his teacher, however, evident in his treatment of Lizzie when she declines the marriage offer from Headstone, gradually changes him. Charley's private crime is his unlimited selfishness and cruelty towards those who have helped him to become someone out of no-one. At first, his baseness is directed towards Lizzie who sent him to school and his father who comes from a low background, and eventually towards Headstone himself who, as a murderer, no longer acts as someone who can help Charley to achieve a higher position in society.

Interestingly, Dickens pursues the development of Charley's egoism as parallel to Bradley's psychosis, thus equalling the two types of crime. Headstone shows his murderous inclinations for the first time by threatening to kill Wrayburn in the same scene in which Charley intimidates Lizzie by, initially, trying to force her to marry Headstone and then abandoning her. The more obsessed his headmaster becomes with his love and jealousy, the more selfish the pupil becomes. Eventually, in his self-possession the pupil outscores his master and in a heated quarrel after the murder has been committed he severs the relationship that has shaped him:

"[...] Mr. Headstone, you are in all your passions so selfish, and so concentrated upon yourself, that you have not bestowed one proper thought upon me." [...] "However, I have made up my mind that I will become respectable in the scale of society, and that I will not be dragged down by others. I have done with my sister as well as with you. Since she cares so little for me as to care nothing for undermining my respectability, she shall go her way and I will go mine. My prospects are very good, and I mean to follow them alone. Mr. Headstone, I don't say what you have got upon your conscience, for I don't know. Whatever lies upon it, I hope you will see the justice of keeping wide and clear of me, and will find a consolation in completely exonerating all but yourself. [...]"¹⁸

In his fiction Dickens, who privately was a social reformer and especially interested in introducing and developing the principle of mass education, repeatedly presented schools as potentially evil. Beginning with *Dombey and Son*, those characters who are spared institutionalised education become more fully developed individuals. Paul Dombey dies partly because of his sterile school experience, whilst his sister Florence, not educated at schools, grows up to be a mature person. In *Hard Times* it is the uneducated Sissy who leads a fully happy life at the end of the novel, whilst all the pupils of the School of Fact are somehow scarred by their schooling. Similarly, it is better to be Lizzie Hexam who does not know how to read and write than to be her brother who cannot appreciate any human element in her or in anybody else. Paradoxically, Lizzie knows the value of education very well:

"You are father's favourite, and can make him believe anything."

"I wish I could, Charley! For I could make him believe that learning was a good thing, and that we might lead better lives, I should be a'most content to die. [...] I should be very glad to be able to read real books, I feel my want of learning very much, Charley."¹⁹

Nevertheless, despite the lack of formal education, she is the one who grows up to be a fully developed, compassionate human being, not her sterile but educated brother:

¹⁸ C. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, p. 694.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36, 39.

"There are you, Charley, working your way [...] at the school; and you get prizes; and you go on better and better; and you come to be a – what was it you called it when you told me about that?"

"Ha, ha! Fortune-telling not know the name!" cried the boy [...] "Pupil-teacher."

"You come to be a pupil-teacher, and you still go on better and better, and you rise to be a master full of learning and respect."²⁰

For Dickens, any education that does not care for the human element will produce corrupt individuals. Prizes and knowledge will not make one a valuable human being if education is devoid of the development of the soul in the humanitarian spirit. It was one of the dangers which Dickens presented repeatedly in his fiction, irrespective of whether it really existed in Victorian schools in general, and in Ragged Schools in particular.

In creating the image of the school in *Our Mutual Friend* Dickens was far from criticising the entire Ragged School movement as evil. He was rather commenting on a new type of mentality created by the pupil-teacher scheme, which produced a young generation struggling desperately to rise out of their lower class origins, alienating itself from it, while at the same time doing their best to serve the children of that class. And yet by starting the school theme in the novel with the Ragged School he clearly links the institution with evil represented by Charlie. If in reality the schools were meant to curb down crime among the poor, Dickens seems to be stressing that the private crime of selfishness may be equal with literal crime, and that school is promoting selfish attitudes.

Dickens's ambivalent position on Ragged Schools and their fictional presentation encapsulate this writer's view that Dickens's fiction does not mirror his definitive vision of Victorian reality. The utterly negative and critical tone of the description of the fictional Ragged School is consistent with his adverse attitude only to certain aspects of real institutions; yet, it is difficult to detect such overall hostility towards them in his private views. It is possible to draw a conclusion that Dickens produces a fictional world that resembles Victorian England rather than replicates it faithfully. Dickens's position as a creative writer is always slightly ambivalent. On the one hand, he is the artist. On the other, he insists that his work as a writer is his duty, his fiction serving to open people's eyes and hearts to the potential harm in Victorian society. In a letter to his wife-to-be, unhappy that she does not see enough of the busy young writer whose career was just beginning, he makes this clear:

If the representations I have so often made to you, about my working as a duty, and not as a pleasure, be not sufficient to keep you in the good humour, which you, of all the people in the World should preserve – why then, my dear, you must be out of temper, and there is no help for it.²¹

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 38.

²¹ Letter to Miss Catherine Hogarth of 21 February 1836, in *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 133.

He frequently said that he had much more influence as a writer criticising the abuses of Victorian society than had he followed any other profession, and he rejected a suggestion that he enter Parliament to correct the ills he criticised in his fiction:

I have however thoroughly satisfied myself, having often had occasion to the question, that I can be far more usefully and independently employed in my chosen sphere of action than could hope to be in the House of Commons, and I believe that no consideration would induce me to become a member of that extraordinary assembly.²²

However, he never forgot that he was writing fiction, even though through it he urged action against the ills of Victorian society. There is a clear disparity in imaginative treatment in his journalistic pieces and his novels, and he reminded Snow that "there is a great difference between the writing of a plain letter or treatise on a social question, and the writing of a long work of fiction".²³ Dickens's novels betray this constant tension between his position as social commentator and as artist, and this is especially apparent in his handling of institutions. This can be seen in his fictional treatment of the Ragged School. As a social commentator he decides to include this institution in his fiction to highlight its negative aspects, yet the presentation of it in solely negative terms is somewhat exaggerated. As an artist, he disregards reality and chooses the institution which was to help to protect the poor children from the life of crime as a background for the development of two characters who become the two centres of crime in the novel. Consistently with his overall vision of educational establishments in his fiction, attending a school (a Ragged School in Charlie's case) is the first step to degradation as a human being. The choice of the school is in accordance with Charlie's social background, yet this particular school encourages his selfish drive to change his station in life and thus leads to his moral debasement. And in this, rather than in the neglected ambience of the school or religious indoctrination, lies its evil influence. Thus Dickens the reformer criticises certain aspects of the school and Dickens the artist links the school with the overall scheme of evil permeating the novel, even if such kind of evil was absent from the real institutions.

²² Letter to Unknown Correspondent of 17 March 1857, in *Letters*, vol. 8, p. 391. The same argument is presented in almost exact wording in a letter to Charles de la Pryme of 14 March.

²³ Letter to W. P. Snow of 10 September 1847, in *Letters*, vol. 5, pp. 163–164.

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