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Dickens and Popular Entertainment: From Sketches By Boz *to* Nicholas Nickleby

Dickens's relationship with entertainment began as early as his own childhood. Indeed, not one of his biographers has failed to detect the child's precocious interest in all forms of amusement available at the time. During his happy years in Rochester, he was frequently taken by his father and Dr. Lamert, an ardent producer of amateur theatricals and a friend of the family, to see farces, pantomimes, tragedies, and many other dramatic performances. These visits delighted the child and gave a stimulus to his imagination. Needless to mention that the child had a merry temperament and manifested a strong love for all sources of entertainment. It happened that his father, who was proud of his son's extraordinary accomplishments, lifted him upon a chair to entertain his guests and required him to recite a poem or sing a song. Sometimes, he would take him to the Red Lion or to the Mitre and Clarence, a hotel in Chatham, to sing. He performed also at birthday parties, tea parties, supper parties, punch parties, picnics in the summer and Twelfth Night parties in the winter. On all these occasions, there was always loud applause. At school, he participated actively in the boys' theatre, and even composed a tragedy titled *Misnar, The Sultan of India*.

During his difficult years in London, Dickens's passion for entertainment increased. Alone with no one to take care of him, the child sought refuge and comfort in amusements. In the course of his recollections of this dark period, Dickens does not fail to emphasise that several times after his painful visits to prison to see his unfortunate parents who were locked up for debt, he was "seduced [...] by a show-van at a corner, and [went] in, with a very motley assemblage, to see the Fat Pig, the Wild Indian, and the Little Lady [...]" (Forster, I, 28). Afterwards, he would go to see a pantomime, a Punch-and-

Judy Show, a conjurer, an old gypsy telling fortunes, dwarfs and Giants, or follow a band of strolling players, as Gissing has underlined: Dickens "delighted in the amusements of the people, in fairs and shows, and every sort of humble entertainment. A conjurer, a fortune-teller, a shabby acrobat, a cheap-Jack — one and all were irresistible to him; he could not pass a menagerie, a circus, a strolling troop of players; the squeak of Punch had as much charm for him as for any child" (40).

When he began working as a reporter and earned his living comfortably, he devoted his outings to pleasure. He particularly became a regular visitor to the theatre. In fact, he spent most of his evenings not only in the major theatres which held a monopoly in "legitimate" drama, such as the theatres of Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and Haymarket, but also in the minor theatres of London suburbs, as well as the private theatres of Catherine Street and Gray's Inn Lane. But he remained mainly attached to Astley's, a theatre in Westminster Bridge Road because it offered him a variety of entertainments:

> Astley's [...] presented an extraordinarily diverse fare, including circus clowns, acrobats, sword fights, performing horses, as well as exotic melodramas with an eastern setting, in which, as Mr. George discovered one night, the Emperor of Tartary was quite likely to get up into the cast and 'condescend to bless the united lovers, by hovering over them with the Union Jack' (Hibbert 106).

Dickens did not confine himself to seeing dramatic performances; he began to play in certain private theatres, "where the seats were cheap and the parts were played by amateurs who paid a fee for the privilege of doing so" (Ibid. 103). Moreover, he took lessons and started training himself to become an actor. He applied for an audition at Covent Garden Theatre but as he explains himself: "I was laid up when the day came, with a terrible bad cold and an inflammation of the face [...] I wrote to say so, and added that I would resume my application next season" (Forster, 50).

However, although he ended up by establishing himself in the realm of prose fiction, he never deserted drama. Next to his work as a novelist, he composed a number of plays; and with the help of a

group of friends which included the most outstanding figures of Arts and Letters, he organized manifold theatrical tours in London and the province. In some cases, the main reason was to collect money for charities or to help brother-artists in difficulty; but most often he was motivated by a strong desire for entertainment. He wanted to amuse himself as well as others. He acted in several plays, such as Ben Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour* (September 1844), Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Elder Brother* (January 1846), Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1848), Lytton's *Not So Bad As We Seem* (1851), and his and Wilkie Collins's *The Frozen Deep* (1857). His performances on these occasions were exceptional and warmly applauded. During the rehearsal of Jonson's play, for instance, the master carpenter of the theatre was so much moved by Dickens's extraordinary talent that he confessed to him: "Ah, sir [...] it's a universal observation in the profession [...] that it was a great loss to the public when you took to writing books" (quoted in Pearson 160).

There is no doubt that Dickens did not escape the influence of these frequent visits to the theatre. As many critics have generally agreed, he worked most often as a dramatist or a stage performer and not as a novelist. The settings of his novels are those of the stage. A great number of his famous figures, namely the comic, do come directly from the world of drama, being created after some characters he personally enjoyed (Mathews's characters, for instance) and who remained stored in his memory. Indeed, these creatures do nothing to develop an idea; they are simply performing a part. Most of his wicked characters have a melodramatic touch; their repulsive behaviour and tragic nature are similar to those of theatrical villains. Many of his heroes and heroines behave as though they were designed to attract the sympathy of a stage public, and their language is highly melodramatic. The plots are arranged in a theatrical way; they include all the devices and techniques which were common in Victorian drama such as: lost heirs, discovered fortunes, strange disguises, incredible coincidences, surprising discoveries, mysterious secrets. In a word, as John Ruskin has put it: "Dickens chooses to speak in a circle of stage fire" (in Ford and Lane (eds.) 47).

It is worth mentioning that besides the stage, there exist other forms of entertainment closely related to the theatre which attracted

Dickens and affected his writings. This is, in fact, the case of the Punch-and-Judy show, *Commedia dell' arte*, but particularly pantomime, a type of popular amusement which was in his time a "curious amalgam of fantasy, realism, topicality, anachronism, grotesquery, burlesque, spectacle, music, verse, dance, and a serious story" (Axton 20). Dickens discovered the wonderful universe of pantomime and its fascinating characters during his cheerful years in Rochester and continued to admire it even later: "Dickens's fascination with pantomime was as great, perhaps, as his general interest in the theatre and equally long-lasting" (Eigner 3-4). In his Introduction to *The Memoirs of Joseph Grimaldi* (1838), he not only displays his first visions of pantomime but also emphasises his strong faithfulness to and admiration for this kind of amusement even though it existed no more:

> Each successive Boxing Day finds us in the same state of high excitement and expectation. On that eventful day when new pantomimes are played for the first time at the two great theatres, and at twenty or thirty of the little ones, we still gloat as formerly upon the bills which set forth tempting descriptions of the scenery in staring red and black letters, and still fall down upon our knees, with other men and boys, upon the pavement by shop-doors, to read them down to the very last line. Nay, we still pursue with all eagerness and avidity the exclusive accounts of the coming wonders in the theatrical newspapers of the Sunday before, and still believe them as devoutly as we did before twenty years' experience had shown us that they are always wrong. (*Miscellaneous Papers*, 132)

Earlier, in *The Pantomime of Life* (1837), he had taken the opportunity to express the same feelings:

> Before we plunge headlong into this paper, let us at once confess to a fondness for pantomimes — to a gentle sympathy with clowns and pantaloons — to an unqualified admiration of harlequins and columbines — to a chaste delight in every action of their brief existence, varied and many-coloured as those actions are, and inconsistent though they occasionally be with those rigid and formal rules of propriety which regulate the proceedings of meaner and less

> comprehensive minds. We revel in pantomimes. (*Bentley's Miscellany* 1, 291)

It is well to recall that pantomime along with several forms of popular entertainment was receiving a shower of stinging criticism in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Dickens who felt the danger of such attacks did not hesitate to come to their defence both in his novels and his journals. *Bentley's Miscellany*, *Household Words*, and *All The Year Round* contain a huge number of essays dealing with the subject; some were his own, others were composed by his collaborators.

That Dickens was deeply influenced as a writer by pantomime is undeniable. His rich, flowing humour and his tendency to exaggeration owe a great deal to this form of entertainment: "Dickens was very often exaggerative and pantomimic. He saw things in so very comical a light that we of sober brains and less extensive experience were quite behind him in perceptiveness. But the humour was the humour of a pantomime, full of fun which delights children and hurts nobody" (quoted in Kitton 150). His art of characterisation seems to have been seriously affected, too. His characters, asserts Oliphant, "go tumbling about the world as the clown and pantaloon do in the midst of those immemorial immoralities of the pantomime — the ever-successful tricks and cheats in which we all find once-a-year an unsophisticated pleasure" (quoted in Collins 561). Take, for instance, the figures of *Sketches By Boz*, they are no more than "stereotypes borrowed from the playhouse: elderly lechers and gormandizers in the mould of Pantaloon; swaggering military types like Grimaldi's hussar; slightly tarnished ladies patterned after Columbine; and palpably extravagant frauds in the broad, gestic manner of pantomime clowns" (Axton 47-48). The atmosphere of his novels is reminiscent of pantomime. The world of *Pickwick,* to give but one example, is "more like that of a pantomime than of any other region we know [...] Never was there such a big, full, crowded pantomime stage — never so many lively changes of scene and character" (Collins Ibid.). It is a universe "in which people mechanically perform gestic absurdities of external action, gesture, speech, and posture in impersonation of functionaries, but without coherence or relevance to underlying character or function: they approach the status of

marionettes, automata, or the figures of *commedia dell' arte*" (Axton 62). Besides, Dickens's tendency to animate objects is a device which seems, in Hollington's view, to have been taken from pantomime (10).[1] In short, from "*Pickwick Papers* to *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, pantomimists perform and pantomimes are acted" (Eigner 5). Dickens, argues Axton, seems to have reproduced with fidelity in his *oeuvre* "all the machinery of clown, Harlequin, and Pantaloon" (108).

* * *

Dickens's interest in popular entertainment is made manifest even in his earliest works, namely *Sketches By Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*.[2] In all these productions, amusement is presented as a central element which is closely related to his main preoccupations. Indeed, in his first published volume which consists of a series of short and unsophisticated pieces titled *Sketches By Boz* (1836), he puts entertainment and entertainers at the heart of his work. He does not in fact content himself with hasty allusions or brief references to the subject, as we shall see in other works, but devotes substantial space to the wide range of possibilities of pleasure, recreation, amusement with which everyday life teems. To illustrate his thesis, Dickens invites his readers to different places which abound with various scenes of delight and curiosity, such as: the circus in "Astley's," the theatre in "Private Theatres," "The Misplaced Attachment of Mr. John Dounce" and "Making a Night of It", the tavern saloon in "Miss Evans and The Eagle", and, finally, public gardens in "Vauxhall Gardens by Day" and "London Recreations".

Moreover, he celebrates the enjoyment which can be derived from certain occasions, namely family meetings ("A Christmas Dinner"), festivities ("The New Year"), ceremonial gatherings ("Public Dinners"), or simply in the course of a short excursion at sea in "Steam Excursion." He also brilliantly relates the amusing stories of

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1 See Dorothy Van Ghent, "The Dickens World," in The Dickens Critics, eds. G. H. Ford And Lauriat Lane, Jr.

2 Quotations from Dickens's novels are from *The Works of Charles Dickens*, 16 vols. (London: Hazell, Watson and Viney, 1969).

some people who wish to establish themselves in the world of entertainment but completely fail ("'Private Theatres", "The Mistaken Milliner", and "Mrs. Joseph Porter"). Most important, he does not miss the opportunity to deride some cynic figures who stubbornly and steadfastly refuse gaiety, as is the case of Augustus Minns and Nicodemus Dumps in "Mr. Minns and His Cousin."

It is interesting to underline that Dickens's major concern in *Sketches By Boz* is to show that entertainment is an integral part of everyday life; it is present everywhere and not only in theatres and fairs. Even such common places as omnibuses, public houses, and wharves can offer delight and amusement. One has only to keep his eyes open to the world around him and be ready to respond and react positively to the various scenes when he comes across them, as Paul Schlicke has argued: "Pleasure is thus dependent on the disposition of the beholder; whether he be participant, spectator, or entertainer himself, a person's enjoyment arises from his own readiness to respond to the abundance and variety of stimuli available" (40). Dickens's conception is strongly consolidated by the air of reality with which he presents the different scenes of the book. As critics have generally agreed, they are indeed described with accuracy, vividness, and truthfulness. Dickens himself wrote in the preface to the sketches that his intention was to introduce "little pictures of life and manners as they really are" (Ibid.).

Beside this quest for realism, Dickens uses another technique in order that his enthusiastic treatment and optimistic vision of entertainment will not be interpreted as naïve, frivolous or shallow. He presents a number of sketches which involve scenes of sufferings, disgrace, despair, and death. "A Visit to Newgate," "The Black Veil," and "The Drunkard's Death," embrace tragic situations which are not at all amusing. They are in stark opposition to the sunny, jocose episodes which dominate the book. They serve, among other things, to emphasise that life is not only full of amusements; it does also comprise hardships and misfortunes.

Dickens's concern for entertainment reappears more successfully in his next novel, *Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), which he began to compose only a few days after having finished the sketches. The novelty is that he chose to write a continuous story and not a series of

scattered episodes as before. From the very beginning, he puts the quest for entertainment as the vehicle for the progress of his story. He takes an honest gentleman, Mr. Pickwick, and sends him along with the members of his club on a long pilgrimage throughout the English countryside, involving them in a multitude of amusing misadventures. To ensure the development of the action in the book, he introduces the Pickwick/Bardell case, and immediately *Pickwick* begins to develop its own thesis — the injustice of the law — and its mood becomes serious and its tone less amusing.

It is well to recall that it was Robert Seymour, a humorist artist who was famous for his fine drawings of sporting scenes, who was behind the conception of *Pickwick*. He proposed to Chapman and Hall, who had already published a book entitled *Squib Annual* with illustrations from his pencil, to succeed *Sketches By Boz* with a series of sketches composed monthly to act as a "vehicle for certain plates" which he would execute himself. He originally wanted Dickens to produce a series of amusing pieces describing a private club, "a Nimrod Club, the members of which were to go out shooting, fishing, and so forth, and getting themselves into difficulties through their want of dexterity"(Forster, I, 58), after the fashion of the Combe-Rowlandson in *The Doctor Syntax Books* (1817-22) or the Egan-Cruickshank brothers' collaboration on *Life in London* (1821). Encouraged by Dickens's achievement in *Sketches By Boz*, the famous publishers found the idea attractive and decided to make amusement, the guiding purpose as well as the theme of *Pickwick Papers*.

However, Dickens did not see things in the same light as Seymour and Chapman and Hall. He refused, protesting that his knowledge of sport was poor, as he explains in the preface to the book:

> I objected, on consideration, that although born and partly bred in the country I was no great sportsman, except in regard of all kinds of locomotion; that the idea was not novel, and had been already much used; that it would be infinitely better for the plates to arise naturally out of the text; and that I would like to take my own way, with a freer range of English scenes and people, and was afraid I should ultimately do so in any case, whatever course I might prescribe to myself at starting (Ibid. 59).

His relationship with Seymour was far from being friendly, for Seymour could not stand the twenty-four-year-old upstart being the dominant figure in the publishing enterprise. It finally deteriorated, especially when Dickens protested against the plate which would accompany "The Stroller's Tale" on the ground that it was in total disharmony with his text. Seymour committed suicide out of pique and a young artist, Hablôt Knight Browne, was engaged to occupy the vacant post. Dickens's views of his hero changed; but he did not cease providing the book with entertaining scenes. He even went as far as to declare that his aim was to supply the public with as much entertainment as he could. Most important, in a note which he introduced at the end of number ten, he described himself as "Mr. Pickwick's Stage Manager," and emphasised that his situation as a writer was perfectly similar to that of the famous showman, John Richardson. Furthermore, once the book completed, he elegantly and gracefully commented on it, and did not hesitate to make references to the masters of the English novel to justify the diversity of its events. He also firmly maintained that amusement was his subject-matter. In the preface to the book, he wrote that his aim had been to describe figures and events which were vivid, credible, and entertaining.

In *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens does closely relate entertainment with activity and conviviality. Throughout their hilarious misadventures, Pickwick and his friends do not only enjoy pastimes; they also participate in them willingly or not. In chapter IV when the Pickwickians go to watch a military exhibition in Rochester, they are not described as mere spectators; they immediately become the centre of the amusing scene when they are nearly shot by the soldiers. The episode is highly entertaining, and culminates in a jocose scene with Mr. Pickwick breathlessly running after his hat:

> There was a fine gentle wind, and Mr. Pickwick's hat rolled sportively before it. The wind puffed, Mr. Pickwick puffed, and the hat rolled over and over as merrily as a lively porpoise in a strong tide; and on it might have rolled, far beyond Mr. Pickwick's reach, had not its course been providentially stopped, just as that gentleman was on the point of resigning it to its fate.

> Mr. Pickwick [...] was completely exhausted, and about to give up the chase, when the hat was blown with some violence against the wheel of a carriage, which was drawn up in a line with half-a-dozen other vehicles on the spot to which his steps had been directed. Mr. Pickwick, perceiving his advantage, darted briskly forward, secured his property, planted it on his head, and paused to take breath. (50-51)

Similarly in chapter VII, when Mr. Pickwick and his comrades go to see a cricket match in company of their host, Mr. Wardle, they are depicted as eating, drinking, chatting, as well as enjoying the game. Indeed, the Pickwickians, especially their leader, do not remain passive; they observe, comment on the talent of the players, and participate actively and abundantly during this sportive manifestation. It should be noted that at the end of the match, the players of the two teams share with their spectators a banquet at the Blue Lion Inn in an atmosphere of pleasure, joviality, cosiness, and friendship:

> There was a vast deal of talking and rattling of knives and forks, and plates: a great running about of three ponderous headed waiters, and a rapid disappearance of the substantial viands on the table; to each and every of which item of confusion, the facetious Mr. Jingle lent the aid of half-a-dozen ordinary men at least. When everybody had eaten as much as possible, the cloth was removed, bottles, glasses, and dessert were placed on the table; and the waiters withdrew to "clear away," or in other words, to appropriate to their own private use and emolument whatever remnants of the eatables and drinkables they could contrive to lay their hands on. (84)

Dickens does not see cricket here in terms of hostile competition with unfortunate losers and triumphant winners. His conception is very deep; he considers the game in the same light as a religious celebration or a common tradition. Like Christmas, it is introduced as a merry occasion in which joy, love, and sharing prevail, and which is meant to awaken the affection of human beings, dissipate their differences, and consolidate their relationships. Like the cricket match, the shooting expeditions, in chapters VII and XIX which relate the ridiculous lack of professionalism of Pickwick's

companions, Mr. Tupman and Mr. Winkle, are intended to lay the stress on the strong feeling of kindness which Mr. Wardle shows to his guests.

As the reader can notice, the Pickwickians are perpetually in search of amusements during their wanderings. They habitually find them in such cosy places as inns and public-houses. Wherever they stop for a halt, they go to parties, receptions, soirées, dancing-balls to enjoy themselves. When the opportunities of pleasure become temporarily scarce, Dickens intervenes and comes to their rescue by involving them in discussions with strange characters who act as narrators relating a number of tales.

Besides Pickwick and his friends, Jingle represents another mine of merriment in the book. The strolling actor sees the society through which he tries to make his way as a stage; and he brilliantly uses his natural talent for duplicity and native wit to cheat anyone who comes across his way. As J. Hillis Miller has rightly explained, it is with the skill of a professional actor that he keeps changing identity, past and all to fit the situations in which he finds himself.[3] On his first appearance, he presents himself to Mr. Pickwick as "Alfred Jingle, Esq., of No Hall, Nowhere" (VII, 83), and in the course of their journey to Rochester, he craftily succeeded in impressing them by painting a false portrait of himself. At Etansville, he takes another identity; he becomes Captain Charles Fitz-Marshall, "a gentleman of fortune" (XV, 174), "a man of very engaging manners" (XXV, 281). His bright performances made several victims. In addition to the Pickwickians whom he manipulated on numerous occasions, he played upon the feelings of Miss Rachael Wardle, the old spinster, and eloped with her, and Mr. Wardle had to pay him in order to leave her. He also deceived Mrs. Leo Hunter, the poetess and hostess of the *Fêtes Champêtres* given at the Den, Etansville, and Mr. Nupkins, the Mayor and magistrate of Ipswich. It is well to note that Jingle's amusing speech which consists of breathless phrases is a technique Dickens borrowed from Charles Mathews's one-man performance "At Home" (Davis 44). Dickens was in fact fascinated by his immense talent; he went to see his performances for at least three years

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[3] Miller provides a brilliant analysis of Jingle in his *Charles Dickens : the World of His Novels*, (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press), 1969.

(Forster I, 373). This is indeed confirmed by Jingle himself as he once informs Dr. Slammer that he will not be "at home."

Jingle contributes largely to the conviviality of *Pickwick Papers*; but as his dishonest behaviour stands in stark opposition to the values which Mr. Pickwick incarnates, Dickens throws him in the Fleet prison and abandons him to decay and starvation. This tragic situation offers the writer the possibility to emphasise once more Mr. Pickwick's generosity, for the benevolent gentleman does not only forgive the stroller and his servant, Job, but he also extricates them from disgrace and helps them financially to emigrate and settle in Demerara.

Dickens's decision to punish Jingle and exile him is also meant to consolidate the moral purpose of the book in which he clearly relates entertainment with human affection. His aim is to show that real and authentic pleasure is free of selfish and parasitic views. It stems from common joys and amusements and, therefore, leaves no space to those monsters who unscrupulously manipulate people seeking recreation. In his preface to the first edition, Dickens expressed his wish that his book would incite and motivate his readers "to think better of [their fellowmen] and to look upon the brighter and more kindly side of human nature." As the reader might have probably noticed, Dickens's conception of pleasure here is archaic. It recalls a primitive society in which diversion represents an important element of unity and harmony. His nostalgia for the past with its golden traditions and precious values is displayed in the beginning of the book. He was uneasy about the rapid change which was affecting England at the time he wrote *Pickwick Papers*, and wanted to stress that popular amusements — which were seriously in danger — were necessary for man's existence.

Unlike the rather sunny atmosphere of *Pickwick Papers*, with its cheerfulness and merrymaking, *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) depicts a society of vice and corruption, a grim world in which mischief and evil flourish and prosper, leaving no place to the pleasure of pastimes. Indeed, if we look closely at the novel, it becomes clear that it offers no real possibility of genuine amusement. The Three Cripples, a rotten den which serves as a meeting place for criminals and ruffi-

ans, is terribly deprived of the warmth and joviality which generally characterise public-houses in Dickens's fiction:

> The room was illuminated by two gas-lights; the glare of which was prevented by the barred shutters, and closely-drawn curtains of faded red, from being visible outside. The ceiling was blackened, to prevent its colour from being injured by the flaring of the lamps; and the place was full of dense tobacco smoke, that at first it was scarcely possible to discern anything more. By degrees, however, as some of it cleared through the open door, an assemblage of heads, as confused as the noises that greeted the ear, might be made out; and as the eye grew more accustomed to the scene, the spectator gradually became aware of the presence of a numerous company, male and female, crowded round a long table; at the upper end of which, sat a chairman with a hammer of office in his hand; while a professional gentleman, with a bluish nose, and his face tied up for the benefit of a toothache, presided at a *jingling piano in a remote corner*. (XXVI, 158; italics mine)

Its "entertainers" have a strange notion of pleasure; they do nothing to lessen the intensity of horrors which are committed under its roof. The scene is of so much interest that it is worth quoting it in full:

> As Fagin stepped softly in, the professional gentleman, running over the keys by way of prelude, occasioned a general cry of order for a song; which, having subsided, a young lady proceeded to entertain the company with a ballad in four verses, between each of which the accompanyist played the melody all through, as loud as he could. When this was over, the chairman gave a sentiment, after which, the professional gentlemen on the chairman's right and left volunteered a duet, and sang it, with great applause.
> It was curious to observe some faces which stood out prominently from among the group. There was the chairman himself [...] a coarse, rough, heavy built fellow, who, while the songs were proceeding, rolled his eyes hither and thither, and, seeming to give himself up to joviality, had an eye for everything that was done, and an ear for everything that was said — and sharp ones, too. Near him were the singers: receiving, with professional *indifference*, the compliments of the company, and applying themselves,

> in turn, to a dozen proffered glasses of spirits and water, tendered by their more boisterous admirers; whose countenances, expressive of almost every vice in almost every grade, irresistibly attracted the attention, by their very repulsiveness. Cunning, ferocity, and drunkenness in all its stages, were there, in their strongest aspects... (158-59, italics mine)

In *Oliver Twist*, entertainment does not represent Dickens's preoccupation. Instead, as he makes it clear in his preface as well as through Oliver's tale, his main target is to reveal the painful sores of his society and condemn the abuses and injustices of its institutions. It is a burning satire on Victorian society, a startling cry of indignation, and a serious warning to the authorities who stubbornly refused to open their eyes to the bitter reality of the English populace.

We may wonder therefore about this change in mood and the reason behind it. Kathleen Tillotson has argued that although *Oliver Twist* was written after *Pickwick Papers*, it was Dickens's first novel to be thought, organized and built around a theme (87-105). The project had been in his mind when he was still twenty-one years old and the young artist wished to compose a novel with great significance and a perpetual subject-matter, after the fashion of the masters of English fiction, namely Henry Fielding for whom he manifested a strong fascination. As we saw previously, *Sketches By Boz* and *Pickwick Papers* originated as a series of sketches and the incorporation of entertainment scenes was fully justified, for these fulfil the main concern of both works — the amusement of readers. *Oliver Twist*, however, does not follow the same pattern; it was conceived differently, and any attempt at involving pastime episodes would have no doubt affected the social purpose of the novel and led to ambiguities and misinterpretations, as had already happened with Jingle in *Pickwick Papers*.

However, as the critics who have investigated Dickens's artistry have underlined, he does not entirely neglect popular entertainment in *Oliver Twist*. Throughout the novel, he has recourse to the techniques of the theatre for his own aim. This can be seen not only in his handling of scenes and action but also in his art of characterization. Most of his characters are presented with a stagy touch; their

language and gestures are instances of his faithfulness to the conventions of Victorian melodrama.

Like the other novels of Dickens's first period, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39) reveals serious shortcomings in plot construction, characterization, style as well as tone. Nevertheless, it is one of the few books by Dickens which has not fallen into oblivion. It does still attract readers and interest critics in our time. The reason for this longevity is the profound significance which the theatre holds in the novel. According to Bernard Bergonzi, the stage "represents the nearest equivalent to a central unifying metaphor that *Nicholas Nickleby* has to offer" (69). Recently, in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel, Michael Slater has referred to theatricality as "the living heart" of *Nicholas Nickleby*, and observed that almost all the characters are engaged in role-playing (15-16).

The theatricality of *Nicholas Nickleby* encouraged several stage producers in Dickens's lifetime to try to adapt it for the theatre. The most famous attempt is Edward Stirling's production; it succeeded in attracting wide audiences at the Adelphi for several months, while the majority of contemporary plays were unable to hold for more than a couple of weeks. This huge triumph enchanted Dickens and incited Stirling to provide other dramatisations of the same work, namely *The Fortunes of Smike*, a well-known sequel to the novel.

Recently, David Edgar proposed an adaptation of *Nicholas Nickleby* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Many professionals of drama, including critics and experts of the theatre regarded the play with reserve and even scepticism. However, wherever it was played, it was warmly received; the London and New York publics, for instance, gave it a hearty ovation. The production was actually worthy of praise; its liveliness, richness, humour, and pathos make of it a cheerful dramatic adventure. Bernard Levin's comment in the columns of the *Times* (8th July 1980) gives it its due value, and it is worth quoting:

> ... not for many years has London's theatre seen anything so richly joyous, so immoderately rife with pleasure, drama, colour and entertainment, so life-enhancing, yea-saying, and fecund, so — in the one word which embraces all these and more — so Dickensian.

The suitability of *Nicholas Nickleby* to stage adaptation is essentially due to the text itself; it embraces almost all the conventional ingredients which represented the stuff of nineteenth-century melodrama, including contrasting scenes, "larger-than-life characters" (Bergonzi 66), mawkish sentimentality and hilarious comicality. Like *Oliver Twist*, it is a melodrama of knaves and braves, with good rewarded and evil vanquished. To develop his action, Dickens relies heavily on melodramatic situations such as: the old man who listens secretly to a private conversation, the hero who intervenes as he hears the name of the young lady insulted, and the poor child who is tortured by monstrous creatures.

Theatricality is not confined to Mr. Vincent Crummles and his strolling troupe of professional players; it dominates the whole novel. In addition to such theatrical villains as the businessman Ralph Nickleby, the aristocratic Sir Mulberry Hawk, the miser Arthur Gride, the hypocrite pedagogue Squeers, it affects the stock heroines Kate Nickleby and Madeline Bray, as well as the picaresque hero, Nicholas. He is described to be "more at home in the rôle of juvenile lead than of a wandering hero" (Ibid. 69). His theatricality is emphasised more than once. When Mr. Crummles meets him for the first time, he cannot help observing: "There's genteel comedy in your walk and manner, juvenile tragedy in your eye, and touch-and-go farce in your laugh" (XXII, 255). And when Nicholas decides to leave the company, the downcast manager remarks: "if he only acted like that, what a deal of money he'd draw!" (XXX 349). There is also that scene in which he warns Squeers against beating Smike; he becomes melodramatic and staged:

> "Wretch [...] touch him at your peril! I will not stand by, and see it done. My blood is up, and I have the strength of ten such men as you. Look to yourself, for by Heaven I will not spare you, if you drive me on !" (XIII, 142)

Theatricality goes beyond the above-mentioned central characters; it affects minor figures as well. Mr. Mantalini grows melodramatic whenever his wife rebels against his way of spending

money. Mrs. Wittitterly is no exception; when she meets Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk in company of Mrs. Nickleby at the theatre, she says: "I take such an interest in drama [...] such an interest in drama" and adds that she finds Shakespeare "a delicious creature" (XXVII, 312). In the following chapter, we are told that "by dint of lying on the sofa for three years and a half," she had "got up a little pantomime of graceful attitudes, and now threw herself into the most striking of series, to astonish the visitors" (319). Newman Noggs is also a theatrical personage; he prefers to express himself in gestures all through the novel. On his first meeting with Nicholas, he "went on shrugging his shoulders and cracking his finger-joints; smiling horribly all the time, and looking steadfastly at nothing out of the tops of his eyes, in a most ghastly manner" (IV, 46). Nicholas thinks that the man is drunk. When Kate has quarrelled with her uncle as he refuses to protect her from his vicious friends and leaves the office, the narrator states:

> As the usurer turned for consolation to his books and papers, a performance was going on outside his office-door, which would have occasioned him no small surprise, if he could by any means have become acquainted with it.
> Newman Noggs was the sole actor. He stood at a little distance from the door, with his face towards it; and with the sleeves of his coat turned back at the wrists, was occupied in bestowing the most vigorous, scientific, and straightforward blows upon the empty air. (XXVIII, 329)

Sir Mulberry Hawk's toadies Mr. Pyke and Mr. Pluck conduct themselves in a stagy way in the course of their visit to see Mrs. Nickleby on their friend's behalf: '"Ha!" cried Mr. Pyke, at this juncture, snatching something from the chimney-piece with a theatrical way. "What is this! what do I behold!"' (XXVII, 308). The Kenwigses are not spared, too; they know an actress called Miss Petowker, and they have full pride in their dancing daughter, Morleena: '"If I was blessed with a — a child — said Miss Petowker, blushing, "of such genius as that, I would have her out at the Opera instantly"' (XIV, 157).

Undoubtedly, theatricality has caused great damage to both the artistry and issues of the novel; it has seriously affected its central characters rendering them insignificant and weakened its major concern. Yet, it is largely responsible for its flowing humour and provides exhilarating enjoyment, thanks to Dickens's brilliant handling of the prevailing devices with which he was fully acquainted and for which he had a boundless admiration. Many years after the publication of *Nicholas Nickleby*, on the occasion of a banquet held at the Royal General Theatrical Fund, Dickens went as far as to declare that "every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the stage" (Fielding 262). This is exactly what he did in *Nicholas Nickleby*; he seems to have composed it for the stage. It stands as a "theatre novel" or, to borrow a part of the title of a book by Mrs. Sadrin, a "*roman-théatre*." [4]

Mr. Vincent Crummles and his travelling actors are the major source of entertainment in *Nicholas Nickleby*. Whether in London or in the province, they present a rich and diversified programme of amusements. They do not limit their performances to role-playing; they offer a varied spectacle with songs, dancing, sword play and acrobatics, as is underlined in Miss Snevellicci's "great" bespeak: "it included among other trifles, four pieces, divers songs, a few combats, and several dances" (XXIV, 279). This is not in the least exaggerated, for historically nineteenth-century theatre derived its success and established its reputation on the concept of spectacle and variety. Schlicke, who has provided an elaborate and interesting discussion on the subject, argues:

> The stage was not restricted to impersonation of characters in plays and, a quarter of a century before Stanislavsky was born, acting certainly did not consist of the identification of the player with his part. Rather, the actor gave a performance of his role, with stylised gesture and inflated rhetoric, in a theatre which was the setting for song, dance, acrobatics and elaborate stage effects as well as for dramatic presentation (50).

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[4] See also Angus Wilson, *The World of Charles Dickens*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), 134.

Indeed, Mr. Vincent Crummles's recollection of his would-be wife when he saw her for the first time illustrates the sort of amusement which the theatre of the day had to offer:

> « ...she stood upon her head on the butt-end of a spear, surrounded with blazing fireworks."
>
> "You astonish me!" said Nicholas.
>
> "*She* astonished *me*!" returned Mr. Crummles, with a very serious countenance. "Such grace, coupled with such dignity! I adored her from that moment!" (XXV, 283).

It is worth noting that it has been suggested that Mr. Vincent Crummles has his original in T. D. Davenport, the actor-manager of the Westminster Subscription Theatre which Dickens frequently attended as it was close to his office; Davenport is described by *Figaro in London*, a satirical journal of the day, as "a man of about 20 stone with lungs *en suite* and a face of alarming fatness which he screwed into the most distorted shape, presenting a series of grimaces equally unmeaning and horrible." [5] By dint of assuming such an attitude, he was sure to attract the attention of people whenever he went to church with his young daughter, Jean. In James Ollé's view, Miss Davenport was the most appreciated and distinguished young man of the time; she would be seen playing with a gigantic doll in an attempt to captivate the attention of potential stage-goers. All these documented facts are reminiscent of Mr. Vincent Crummles and his daughter, the Infant Phenomenon.[6]

Through Mr. Vincent Crummles and his troupe, Dickens associates entertainment with order, harmony and organization; the company is presented as delightful with numerous merits. Each actor has his own role, and he plays it nearly every time he appears on the stage. Mrs. Crummles, who is always very theatrical in her manners,

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[5] Malcom Morley, "Where the Crummles Played," *The Dickensian*, vol. 58 (1962), 23.

[6] James G. Ollé, "Where Crummles Played," *Dickensian*, vol. 47 (1951), 143-47. In a letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Dec. 1904, Jean Davenport's adopted son, Charles Lander, declared that his mother was the model of the Infant Phenomenon; quoted by S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald, *Dickens and the Drama*, (London, 1910), 118.

is the tragic character with a dismal, melancholic voice. Mr. Lenville is the tragedian of the troupe. Mr. Folair, a dancer and pantomimist, has always to dance with the Infant Phenomenon; he takes the part of the savage with her in the ballet, "The Indian Savage and the Maiden." Tommy acts as the unfortunate character desperately in love. A drunken old man plays the peaceful and honest old men; a second plays the impatient aged fathers who attempt to oblige their obstinate sons to marry prosperous young ladies; and a third plays the arrogant hero. As to Miss Snevellicci, she could do anything from a medley dance to Lady Macbeth, and always plays some part in blue silk knee-smalls, at her benefit — glancing from the depths of her coal-scuttle bonnet.

Moreover, with Mr. Crummles and his company, Dickens once more links entertainment with human affection. Mr. Crummles is introduced as a "representative of the positive values of the novel" (Bergonzi 75), a good-hearted manager endowed with generous feelings. When he finds Nicholas in difficulty, he does not hesitate to come to his help by engaging him in his troupe. In his world, the young man is no longer alone; he has a large family of players who provide him with human warmth and kindness. Most important, he is allowed to exploit his education in the reconstruction of Smike and in the composition of a play. He was unable to do so in Mr. Squeers's bleak universe. Truly enough, as a number of critics have suggested, sometimes one may find Mr. Crummles's behaviour with his children, especially the Infant Phenomenon who had had her growth stunted by gin and late nights, excessive and even revolting; yet, he remains by far a correct father in comparison with such monstrous parents as Mr. Ralph Nickleby and Mr. Squeers. Unlike the schoolmaster and his wife who torture children and starve them to death, Mr. Crummles feeds them generously and teaches them their trade.

In fact, the strolling players belong to a series of entertainments in Dickens from Astley's in *Sketches By Boz* to Sleary's horseriding in *Hard Times*. They are common folks, modest, simple of heart and noble of mind. They represent relief from the austere world of Mr. Ralph Nickleby and Mr. Squeers, the antithesis of the industrial world where everybody is imprisoned. They are tender-hearted

and have tight links between them. Their violence is completely different from that of Mr. Squeers; it is simply make-believe and arouses the public's feeling of sympathy. Their environment is fanciful and life-enhancing. However, they are no solution; all they can do is to offer temporary escape from bitter reality.

Nevertheless, in *Nickolas Nickleby* amusement is not restricted to the itinerant actors; throughout the novel Dickens gives brief accounts of several different characters, namely street people who belong to the trade of entertainment. In Manchester Buildings, Westminster, a dirty and rotten "sanctuary for small members of Parliament," "all the livelong day, there is a grinding of organs and clashing and clanging of little boxes of music" (XVI, 174). Golden Square, where Mr. Ralph Nickleby lives in his spacious house, weaving devilish schemes, is full of lodging-houses for musicians:

> It is a great resort of foreigners. The dark-complexioned men who wear large rings, and heavy watch-guards, and bushy whiskers, and who congregate under the Opera colonnade, and about the box-office in the season, between four and five in the afternoon, when they give away the orders, — all live in Golden Square, or within a street of it. Two or three violins and a wind instrument from the Opera band reside within its precincts. Its boarding-houses are musical, and the notes of pianos and harps float in the evening time round the head of the mournful statue, the guardian genius of a little wilderness of shrubs, in the centre of the square. On a summer's night, windows are thrown open, and groups of swarthy moustachioed men are seen by the passer-by, lounging at the casements and smoking fearfully. Sounds of gruff voices practising vocal music invade the evening's silence; and the fumes of choice tobacco scent the air. There, snuff and cigars, and German pipes and flutes, and violins, and violincellos divide the supremacy between them. It is the region of song and smoke. Street bands are on their mettle in Golden Square; and itinerant glee-singers quaver involuntarily as they raise their voices within its boundaries. (II, 16-17)

The so-called artists have nothing to do with music; all they are able to produce is mere cacophony. There is nothing wrong about them but the place is far from being a decent dwelling for an honourable gentleman. Its inadaptation to business is intended to reveal Mr.

Ralph Nickleby's personality. In Camberwell, the boy engaged to bring the cap of Tim Linkinwater's sister to the Cherrybles's house is delayed by Punch and Judy showmen and stilt dancers ("He had followed two Punches [...] and had seen the stilts home to their own door" (XXXVII, 416)). Finally, when Nicholas reaches London after an anxious journey from Portsmouth, his eye is attracted by a multitude of curiosities, particularly by a "squalid ballad singer" whose rags "fluttered in the rich light that showed the goldsmith's treasures" (XXXII, 361).

Furthermore, Dickens invokes other forms of amusement through the characters themselves, mainly Mrs. Nickleby, the comic figure of the novel who has an extraordinary power of free-association which produces grotesques. In a funny conversation with Lord Frederick Verisopht, she recollects to have been dreadfully frightened by an Italian image boy in Stratford soon before Nicholas was born: "In fact, it was quite a mercy [...] that my son didn't turn out to be a Shakespeare, and what a dreadful thing that would have been" (XXVII, 313). Later in the novel, while talking about the poor Smike, she cites the names of strange creatures: the Thirsty Woman of Tutbury, the Cock Lane Ghost, and the pig-faced lady (XLIX, 559). These curiosities, as Schlicke has demonstrated, were known to be fake:

> ... around the time Dickens was born Mrs. Ann Moore of Tutbury attracted attention for her extended fasts, which were discovered to have been secretly broken to keep her alive; the Cock Lane Ghost was an eighteenth-century sensation mentioned by Boswell; in which mysterious rappings were found to emanate not from a spirit but from an 11-year-old daughter of the house's owner; the pig-faced lady was a common fairground exhibit, created by shaving a bear, tying it upright in a chair and dressing it in women's clothing (69-70).

Dickens's references to strange shows in Mrs. Nickleby's speech contribute widely to her humour and make her shallow, stupid discussions more entertaining and less boring.

Dickens makes several references to entertainment when he resorts to the technique of comparison in order to depict a place or to

present a character. Mrs. Wittitterly's mansion in Codogan Place is compared to a curiosity; and Codogan Place itself is likened to "the ligament which unites the Siamese twins; it contains something of the life and essence of two distinct bodies, and yet belongs to neither" (XXI, 237). Dickens may have had in mind Eng and Chang, the united twins who were exposed at the Egyptian Hall in London in 1829.[7] Kenwigs' and Noggs's shabby house teems with a herd of children and a mess of all sorts of articles. To emphasise how cramped the place was, he remarks that it "would have been beyond the power of a calculating boy" to find where "a vacant room could be" (XIV, 150) — even a child of high mathematical capacities which allowed him to be exposed as a curiosity would be unable to solve the problem. According to M. Slater, Dickens probably makes allusion to George Parker Bidder whose arithmetical skills were so extraordinary that he was the object of public exhibition.[8] Elsewhere, as Mr. Squeers thinks that his plan to take away Smike from Nicholas will succeed, he celebrates his victory by throwing himself triumphantly into a "dance of war," "cutting some dozen capers with various wry faces and hideous grimaces" (XLV, 520). His performance calls to mind stage warriors like the Savage played by Mr. Folair with the Infant Phenomenon in the ballet, "The Indian Savage and The Maiden." And at the United Metropolitan Improved Hot Muffin and Crumpet Baking and Punctual Delivery Company, the policemen wield their truncheon "after the manner of that ingenious actor, Mr. Punch, whose brilliant example, both in the fashion of his weapons and their use, this branch of the executive occasionally follows" (II, 21). However numerous and pertinent, these references remain too inadequate to convey the full meaning of popular entertainment.

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[7] *The Times* featured many reports on the Siamese twins from 17 November 1829 to 9 January 1830. Kay Hunter, *Duet for a Lifetime* (London, 1964), is a modern study of Eng and Chang.

8 Daniel Lyson, *Collectanea*, vol. 1, p. 170, includes clippings from 1814-15 for Bidder and Zerah Colburn, an American contemporary rival, who besides his extraordinary calculating powers, had six fingers on each hand and six toes on each foot, undoubtedly the reason for his exceptional capacity for counting. There is a paper on Bidder who became a distinguished civil engineer, in *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers with Other Selected and Abstracted Papers*, vol. 57, n° 3 (1878-9), 294-309.

Dickens's decision to limit himself to mere allusions, with no elaborate and profound analysis of entertainers and their social life — as he would do in his next novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop* — deprives the subject of complexity and depth.

Before closing this analysis, let it be mentioned that in addition to the theatre to which Dickens devotes substantial space in *Nicholas Nickleby*, there is the race course at which the dispute between Lord Frederick Verisopht and Sir Mulberry Hawk results in a duel and culminates, at last, in the death of the young Lord. The place, which is described as the stage of various showmen, provides no innocent, healthy recreations. It is the setting of gambling, dishonesty, violence, vice, and corruption. For Sir Mulberry Hawk, the dissipated aristocrat, the racing grounds represent the opportunity to show his class superiority and to humiliate others by his injurious attitudes. Earlier in the novel, he disrespectfully speaks of Kate Nickleby and Nicholas gives him a thrashing; and here his challenge of Lord Frederick Verisopht conduces to inebriety, dishonour and murder. Similarly, for the modest, humble folks, the race meeting is the occasion of deceit and malice, as Dickens suggests through the thimble-ring man who is ready to dupe the gullible. In short, the races are in polar opposition to the spirit of innocent and joyful amusement provided by Mr. Crummles and his strolling actors.

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