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The Function of Language in our Experience of *Oliver Twist* and Nancy

Two characters in Dicken's *Oliver Twist* that make a special impression are Oliver himself, and the thief and prostitute Nancy. They could hardly be more different. Oliver is a pure example of the symbolic character and, as such has haunted the cultural imagination of generations. Nancy is one of Dickens rarely well presented realistic or representational characters, who matures through experience (Oliver never changes), who comes to perceive reality, and who guides her subsequent actions by that perception.

The function of language in the creation of these two characters is clear, Oliver and Nancy can be experienced as symbolic or representational because the matrix of language through which they are presented is different, as stylistic analysis of the novel shows. Since there are so many possible approach to style in the novel I should like to make clear the one which I have adopted here. I shall approach language function in the sense suggested by Richard Ohmann who concluded his paper on "Speech, Action and Style"¹ as follows:

It seems to me that as stylistic critics we have ... held mainly to a view of discourse as static; and we have conceived literature in a spatial metaphor, as consisting in verbal structures. This is a valid perspective but a terribly limited one. There are signs that linguists are broadening their perspective to include the circumstances, that surround utterances and the continual interplay of speech with those circumstances.

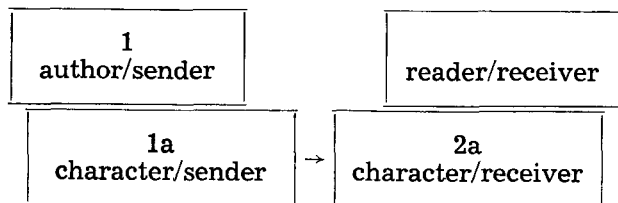
It is from the point of view of interplay between speech and context of situation (i. e. circumstances) as part of the communication relationship between author and reader that I wish to consider the impact of Oliver and Nancy.

¹ Richard Ohmann, "Speech, Action and Style", *Literary Style: A Symposium*, Seymour Chatman (ed.), OUP, 1971, p. 254.

The interplay between speech and context of situation is of course part of the communication relationship of any speech utterance. But in considering the function of language in *Oliver Twist* we must take into account the novel's special form of reality in which we have a partially dual communication relationship. Ultimately, it is true, the sender is always the author and the receiver the reader (or listener), but within this overall situation we have the internal communication relationship of the characters within the novel. This, in great novels, comes to have a force of its own, approximating the communication relationship of real life and influenced by similar contextual and interpersonal features. It is true that dialogue in a novel cannot be compared to that in real life where there is independent interplay between two or more persons, because fictional dialogue is always controlled by the author. However, one of the differences between novelists of the first and those of lesser rank is the extent to which interpersonal exchanges within the novel (and this is by no means confined to the dialogue portions) are a simulcrum of real life. The author of a novel needs therefore to be in control of a dual communication situation.² Sometimes he is directly communicating with the reader and we have the pattern:



At other times he is doing so in an oblique way through the internal communication situation within the novel so that we have the pattern:



This dual communication situation and the novelists' use of it is one of the things that gives the novel density, its absence is one of the things that "jars" when we read what we say are "bad" novels. In "bad" novels it is most often a convincing

² I am indebted to Henry Widdowson for suggesting this dual communication situation during a lecture he gave at the Ministry of Secondary and Higher Education of the Republic of Croatia.

internal communication and context that are missing and we have a one dimensional author → reader pattern throughout.

To consider the interplay between speech and circumstance and the use of the dual communication situation in the case of Oliver Twist and Nancy is immediately to see a difference in Dickens' use of language when presenting the two. Oliver is largely presented by means of direct author-reader communication. It is Dickens talking to the readers of his day and by extension to readers of a later day. Nancy is most consistently presented in interaction with other characters and she is seen to develop through interpersonal relations. Thus for her Dickens' use of the internal communication situation is most important. The communication situation, direct or internal, leads to another specific linguistic feature in the presentation of the two. Nancy uses the real, colloquial speech of argument, of decision and of moral conviction. Oliver surprisingly seldom speaks at all. He is normally spoken of even in the dramatic moments of his life, in the famous soup kitchen scene he only utters his well known six words. When he does speak he mostly expresses himself in lamentation and appeal.

Character may be realized through four different language functions which reinforce each other and which are given here in no order of importance:

- i. the speech of the character concerned;
- ii. interchange between him and other characters;
- iii. authorial voice as commentator supplying information on tone of voice and physical or psychological accompaniment to action — the kind of information that would be received in real life through paralinguistic perception;
- iv. authorial voice as narrator supplying information which in real life would not be directly or immediately apprehended and making comments on character or situation.

The four functions are variously used and much depends on point of view of narration. In the contemporary novel function iv. is much more sparingly used than in the nineteenth century novel. Their relative importance in the creation of our response to Nancy and Oliver is very different. The case for Nancy is more easily shown for the scenes in which she appears are limited and defined. Oliver is present actually or by implication throughout most of the novel and faces us with the usual difficulty in analysing language in novels, i. e. taking extracts to demonstrate what is actually achieved by the entire work as an extended piece of discourse.

Nancy's first important appearance is after Oliver has been lost by the gang and Fagin and Sykes want to discover what has happened to him (ch. 13). Nancy is appealed to and speaks for the first time. Her speech is in simple, clear, short statements about what she will and more especially what she will not do: "It's no use trying," "It won't do", "It's more no than yes with me", "She [meaning I] won't go". Key episodes for establishing Nancy's character are when she and Sykes are coming back from having captured Oliver (ch. 16), the two interviews she has with Fagin (chs. 19, 21), her reaction to Oliver's disappearance after the theft (ch. 26), her interviews with Rose Maylie (chs. 39, 40, 44).

The first episode in which we begin to apprehend her as having depths of emotion until then unsuspected, and as realizing the pointlessness and danger of her life and that of the gang is when she and Sykes are taking Oliver back to Fagin. Her part in the dialogue alone communicates this, though it is interesting to note that it would do so less clearly if the single underlined word did not make an important phonetic point. Luckily the phonetic significance of underlining, exclamation marks and question marks is sufficiently internalized in habitual readers for them to react almost as easily as they would to phonetic variations of heard speech. The episode comes at the beginning of ch. 16 as Nancy and Bill are passing a prison on their return with Oliver from the house of the benevolent Mr. Brownlow. Nancy's speech i.e. the direct speech of the character concerned is as follows:

"Eight o'clock, Bill..."

"I wonder if *they* can hear it"...

"Poor fellows!... Oh, Bill, such fine young chaps as them..."

"Wait a minute ... I wouldn't hurry by if it was you that was coming out to be hung, the next time eight o'clock struck, Bill. I'd walk round and round the place till I dropped, if the snow was on the ground and I hadn't a shawl to cover me."

Sykes remarks that intersperse with Nancy's (ii) reveal the callous brutality of his nature, and hint for the first time at his relationship with her. An important piece of authorial information (iii) follows the speech of Nancy given above:

Oliver felt her hand tremble and, looking up in her face as they passed a gas-lamp, saw it had turned deadly white.

This is something that in real life would be available through paralinguistic perception. There is only one sentence of omiscent author intervention (iv) in this episode, the remark that Sykes appeared to be repressing a rising tendency to jealousy. Thus Nancy's character is once more mainly expressed through her own straightforward and direct speech. However, constructions such as "if", "I wonder", and "I'd walk" provide

important foregrounding and show the awakening of new feeling in her. The strength of these feelings is underlined by the information conveyed in (iii) and is important for the unfolding of both plot and theme.

Nancy's behaviour after they have got back from Fagin's is governed by the same emotions that had been awakened by the journey home. When Oliver tries to escape she expresses herself in short, terse commands and imperatives: "Keep back the dog", "Stand off from me", "The child shan't be torn by the dog unless you kill me first", "I won't stand by and see it done . . . let him be".

Another important episode is her first meeting with Rose Maylie. This has two parts³ — her arrival at the respectable middle class hotel in Park Lane and her actual interview with Rose. I give below the whole of Nancy's speech during the first part of the episode, omitting the speech of others and authorial intervention except where these are necessary to make what Nancy says understandable. On arrival she is met with the rude question, "Now, young woman-! . . . What do you want here?":

"A lady who is stopping in this house,"

"A lady! What Lady?" . . .

[a man is summoned and to him Nancy repeats her request]

"What name am I to say?"

"It's no use saying any"

"Nor business?"

"No, nor that neither . . . I must see the lady."

"Come, none of this. Take yourself off."

"I shall be carried out, if I go! . . . and I can make that a job two of you won't like to do. Isn't there anybody here who will see a simple message carried for a poor wretch like me?"

A man-cook stepped forward, "Take it up for her, Joe; can't you?"

"What's the good . . . You don't suppose the young lady will see such as her do you?"

"Do what you like with me . . . but do what I ask you first and I ask you to give this message for God Almighty's sake."

"What's it to be?"

"That a young woman earnestly asks to speak to Miss Maylie alone . . . and the if the lady will hear the first word she has to say, she will know whether to hear her business or to have her turned out of doors as an imposter."

"I say . . . you're coming it strong!"

"You give the message and let me hear the answer."

This like all Nancy's speech is vigorous with simple verbs of action and command: "I want a lady", "I must see her", "I shall be carried out . . .", "Do what I ask", "Give her the message and let me hear the answer." The dialogue and behaviour of other persons in the episode: the female receptionist, the

³ These two parts in modern editions come at the end of ch. 39 and the beginning of ch. 40. In the original MS and serial issue they followed one another directly with no break.

porter, the cook and the maids serve two purposes. Some remarks (i. e. that of the sympathetic man-cook) are within the function of interpersonal exchange. Others, however: "Now then young woman", "Brass can do better than gold, what's stood the fire", "Shameful" are on the borderline of direct authorial communication since they are designed to make a social point — the attitude of the virtuous and chaste servants of a middle-class establishment to a person such as Nancy. Thus although cast in the form of dialogue they are a kind of direct author-reader communication.

The two parts of the episode, that in the lobby, and that of the interview with Rose, are separated by two brief passages of direct authorial voice of a kind very sparingly used for Nancy, but when Rose finally appears we have the terse "It's a hard matter to get to see you, lady. If I'd taken offence and gone away, as many would have done, you'd have been sorry for it one day, and not without reason". In both her interviews with Rose very strong elements of Nancy's character that are made explicit are first her class pride — she is debased because of the way things are but she does not feel herself as a lesser human being, second her sense of loyalty to her own world and more especially her emotional loyalty to Sikes. The first of these is underlined by authorial comment — the emotional and sexual bond with Sikes is something that comes out very strongly in Nancy's speech, but could not have been underlined by authorial comment even had Dickens so wished, it was a daring innovation enough for the Victorian novel to include it at all as a positive merit in a character, and the point is made through direct speech alone.

The total impression built up of Nancy is of a tough, intelligent girl, in whom emotion and sensitivity are just awakening. This impression is primarily created through her own speech and the interplay between her and other characters. Thus she is presented through the interaction between speech and context of situation within the internal communication situation of the novel. Direct author-reader communication is restrained or absent, and is far the least important of the four language functions. In her Dickens created a living, feeling, developing individual, realistically drawn from the same direct experience of London underworld life that had gone into his recently completed *Sketches of London Life*. She is articulate in this world, and articulated into it. She does not belong to any other. Not so Oliver.

Oliver Twist oscillates between two worlds, the world of darkness and the world of light. The nightmare world of Fagin and Sykes and the dream world of the Brownlows and the Maylies. Both are exaggerated, but when Dickens was

writing this early novel he had not yet discovered what the world of the Brownlows and Maylies was really like, and therefore when describing that world he gave an exaggerated presentation of unreality. The Fagin world he knew to the fibres, and therefore the world of darkness that he presents is a magnification and a deepening of reality. In the creation of both these worlds the author addressing the reader is directly and continuously present. Sometimes he is there in his technical role — linking the narrative and arranging events; sometimes he plays his omniscient role — commenting and explaining; but most often and most important he is there in the role of poet, of creative writer working at high pressure and providing the powerful, imaginative verbal construct which gives the novel its emotional reality and force. Here Dickens is most convincing in the Fagin world. Hillis Miller has traced in *Oliver Twist* Dicken's images of smothering, crushing, suffocation of isolation, darkness and confinement: "At the deepest imaginative level the London of *Oliver Twist* is no longer a realistic description of the unsanitary London of the thirties but is the dream or poetic symbol of an infernal labyrinth inhabited by the devil himself." Fagin at its centre is often referred to as the devil and he is as much a terrible dream as a terrible reality. From this world, as Miller says "there is apparently no escape. No novel could be more completely dominated by an imaginative complex of claustrophobia".³

Dickens creates this world through continual direct communication with the reader — by his projection of the rooms in which Oliver is confined, the foully dark and labyrinthine streets through which he is taken, the helpless misery of body and soul which he must endure. This is direct author-reader communication of a very different kind from that which we find in the bridge passage linking the two parts of Nancy's interview with Rose, or in the sentimentalized descriptions of, and comments on, the Maylie world. It is communication direct within the context of readers' imaginative life, and to the extent that that context and imaginative life are the same today as they were 130 years ago it is direct communication with the context of situation of the readers of today. It is language used with the force that poetic language achieves.

Within this world Oliver is presented as a helpless object. Unlike Nancy he does not actively oppose it — he only endures it and finally endures in spite of it. To present Oliver thus Dickens uses all the functions of language. The paralinguistic description that accompanies Oliver's speech (again much more

³ J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens. The World of His Novels*, Harvard U. P. 1968, pp. 58 and 43.

frequent than with Nancy) is one method. Oliver weeps bitterly, is pale, small, speaks in a low trembling voice, replies with a piteous helpless look, clasps his hands together passionately, raises his eyes beseechingly, asks timidly, looks up piteously. He is at the mercy of the world. In fact Nancy too is at its mercy, but she never seems so because she actively opposes it and what she sees it leading to. In all the episodes in which she figures she is always the strongest person in all but physical strength and finally she is killed because of her opposition, a more probable outcome than Oliver's salvation.

Another great difference in language function in the presentation of the two characters is the actual speech of each. The main extended pieces of dialogue in which Oliver takes part are in the world of light.⁴ Typical of these is his conversation with Mrs. Bedwin when he first regains consciousness after being brought from the magistrate's court. The old lady sitting by his bed is musing aloud wondering what his mother would say if she could see him:

"Perhaps she does see me... perhaps she has sat by me. I almost feel as if she had."

"That was the fever my dear,"

"I suppose it was for heaven is a long way off and they are too happy there to come down to the bedside of a poor boy. But, if she knew I was ill, she must have pitied me, even there, for she was very ill herself before she died. She can't know anything about me, though... If she had seen me hurt it would have made her sorrowful; and her face has always looked sweet and happy when I have dreamed of her."

Later on in the same episode when Oliver is asked if he likes pictures, his eyes having been fastened on a certain one so much his reply is:

"I don't quite know, ma'am... I have seen so few that I hardly know. What a beautiful, mild face that lady's is... but the eyes seem sorrowful, and where I sit they seem fixed upon me... as if she was alive and wanted to speak to me."

It has often been remarked that this is not the way that someone of Oliver's background would be likely to speak, and as such is less realistic than most of Nancy's speech. "What a beautiful mild face that lady's is" is formal and has a literary inversion of the natural world order. His speech here shows another trait that is constant for him throughout — a frequent use of "if" forms and various kinds of structures expressing conjecture and uncertainty: "Perhaps she does see

⁴ A rare exception is when he attacks Noah Claypole for having slighted his dead mother. In that episode real vigorous speech breaks through and for a moment projects a different Oliver.

me", "Perhaps she has sat by me", "I almost feel...", "I suppose...", "If she knew...", "If she had seen...", "I hardly know...", "The eyes seem...". These forms constantly express Oliver's uncertainty in face of an incomprehensible world, an uncertainty and lack of security that follow him even into the world of light.

It is, however, the Oliver of the world of darkness that haunts the imagination most, and in this world he amazingly seldom speaks directly at all. In the whole of the first eleven chapters (i. e. down to the Brownlow episode), although he is constantly in the centre of our attention his direct speech is insignificant. Even then most of his remarks are of the "Yes, sir", "No, sir", "I will, sir" variety. He seldom speaks at length and when he does his speech is not really an interchange between individuals, as Nancy's is. His main form of address is passionate appeal and lamentation directed less to individual persons within the novel than to humanity in general. The very first extended utterance he makes (ch. 4) as he is hurried along by implacable and inscrutable power in the guise of Bumble is:

"No, no, sir,"... "no, no, sir!" "I will be good indeed; indeed, indeed I will, sir! I am a very little boy, sir, and it is so — so —... So lonely, sir! So very lonely! Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don't pray be cross with me!"

Similar desperate appeals in direct and indirect speech punctuate the whole novel (ch. 3).

Oliver fell on his knees, and clasping his hands together, prayed that they would order him back to the dark room — that they would starve him — beat him — kill him if they pleased — rather than send him away with that dreadful man.

To Mr. Brownlow (ch. 14):

Oh, don't tell me that you are going to send me away, sir, pray!... Don't turn me out of doors to wander the streets again. Let me stay here, and be a servant. Don't send me back to the wretched place I came from. Have mercy upon a poor, boy, sir".

After he has read the history of the lives of criminals, thoughtfully provided by Fagin as bedside reading he falls on his knees in a paroxym of fear and prays (ch. 20):

Heaven to spare him from such deeds; and rather to will that he should die at once, than be reserved for crimes so fearful and appalling... that he might be rescued from his present danger and that if any aid were to be raised up for a poor, outcast boy, who had never known the love of friends or kindred, it might come to him now, when, desolate and deserted, he stood alone in the midst of wickedness and guilt.

And just before the Maylie burglary he implores Sikes (ch. 22):

"Oh! For God's sake let me go!... Let me run away and die in the fields, I will never come near London; never, never! Oh! pray have mercy upon me!"

These passages of supplication, the limited active exchanges with other people and the copious paralinguistic information all combine with the direct authorial voice to create a communication situation in which Oliver is constantly being projected beyond the immediate context of the novel. The famous asking for more scene is only an outstanding example of this. Within the context of the novel Oliver is asking for more gruel, and is impelled to do this not by courageous and conscious choice but because the lot by chance fell to him to do so. Once more he is the helpless tool of the situation in which he finds himself. But by implication of total context it is not just more gruel that Oliver wants, it is just "more", more of all the things which the deprived do not have something made abundantly clear by the extreme and horrified over-reaction of all the establishment figures that he galvanizes by his request.

We may return for a moment to the quotation from Ohmann concerning "the circumstances that surround utterances and the continual interplay of speech with those circumstances". The context of situation within which Nancy is set is that of the novel, and she remains convincing and realistic within that context when we read or reread the work. Oliver is throughout set in a general human context and by a cumulation and reiteration of all the functions of language comes to have the force of a symbol through which Dickens appealed to the conscience of readers of his own day and has continued to do those of later ones.