

23. Charles Dickens

Charles Dickens *Oliver Twist* (1837-1839)

Crime and punishment 82

Oliver has violated the harsh rules of the workhouse where he lives by asking for more food. He is therefore punished and shut in a dark room all alone.

He only cried bitterly all day; and, when the long, dismal¹ night came on, spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching² in the corner, tried to sleep: ever and anon³ waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a
5 protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him.

Let it not be supposed by the enemies of 'the system,' that, during the period of his solitary incarceration, Oliver was denied the benefit of exercise, the pleasure of society, or the advantages of religious consolation. As for exercise, it was nice cold weather, and he was allowed to perform his ablutions⁴ every morning under the
10 pump, in a stone yard, in the presence of Mr. Bumble, who prevented his catching cold, and caused a tingling⁵ sensation to pervade his frame, by repeated applications of the cane⁶. As for society, he was carried every other day into the hall where the boys dined, and there sociably flogged⁷ as a public warning and example. And so far from being denied the advantages of religious consolation, he was kicked into
15 the same apartment every evening at prayer-time, and there permitted to listen to, and console his mind with, a general supplication of the boys, containing a special clause, therein inserted by authority of the board, in which they entreated⁸ to be made good, virtuous, contented, and obedient, and to be guarded from the sins and vices of *Oliver Twist*: whom the supplication distinctly set forth⁹ to be under the
20 exclusive patronage and protection of the powers of wickedness¹⁰, and an article direct from the manufactory of the very Devil himself.

1. **dismal**: miserable

2. **crouching**: bending his knees and keeping his body close to them in fear

3. **ever and anon**: every now and then

4. **to perform his ablutions**: to wash himself

5. **tingling**: it. *formicolio*

6. **cane**: a stick that was used in schools as a tool for punishment

7. **flogged**: beaten with a stick

8. **entreated**: beg, ask someone

9. **set forth**: declared

10. **wickedness**: evil

Giovanni Verga

Vita dei campi (1880)

Rosso Malpelo 83

Rosso Malpelo is a boy who is considered evil because of the prejudice against his red hair and is precociously initiated into hard work, as was often the case in late 19th-century Sicily.

Presentation

Malpelo si chiamava così perché aveva i capelli rossi; ed aveva i capelli rossi perché era un ragazzo malizioso e cattivo, che prometteva di riescire un fior di birbone. Sicché tutti alla cava della rena rossa lo chiamavano *Malpelo*; e persino sua madre, col sentirgli dir sempre a quel modo, aveva quasi dimenticato il suo nome di battesimo.

- 5 Del resto, ella lo vedeva soltanto il sabato sera, quando tornava a casa con quei pochi soldi della settimana; e siccome era *malpelo* c'era anche a temere che ne sottraesse un paio, di quei soldi: nel dubbio, per non sbagliare, la sorella maggiore gli faceva la ricevuta a scapaccioni. Però il padrone della cava aveva confermato che i soldi erano tanti e non più; e in coscienza erano anche troppi per *Malpelo*, un monellaccio che nessuno avrebbe voluto vederselo davanti, e
- 10 che tutti schivavano come un can rognoso, e lo accarezzavano coi piedi, allorché se lo trovavano a tiro. Egli era davvero un brutto ceffo, torvo, ringhioso, e selvatico. Al mezzogiorno, mentre tutti gli altri operai della cava si mangiavano in crocchio la loro minestra, e facevano un po' di
- 15 ricreazione, egli andava a rincantucciarsi col suo corbello fra le gambe, per rosicchiarsi quel po' di pane bigio, come fanno le bestie sue pari, e ciascuno gli diceva la sua, motteggiandolo, e gli tiravan dei sassi, finché il soprastante lo rimandava al lavoro con una pedata. Ei c'ingrassava, fra i calci, e si lasciava caricare meglio dell'asino grigio, senza osar di lagnarsi. Era sempre cencioso e sporco di rena rossa, che la sua sorella s'era fatta sposa, e aveva altro pel capo che pensare a ripulirlo la domenica. Nondimeno era conosciuto come la bettonica per tutto *Monserrato* e la *Caverna*, tanto che la cava dove lavorava la chiamavano «la cava di *Malpelo*», e cotesto al padrone
- 20 gli seccava assai. Insomma lo tenevano addirittura per carità e perché mastro Misciu, suo padre, era morto in quella stessa cava. [...]

Ill-treatment

- Dopo la morte del babbo pareva che gli fosse entrato il diavolo in corpo, e lavorava al pari di quei bufali feroci che si tengono coll'anello di ferro al naso. Sapendo che era *malpelo*, ei si acconciava ad esserlo il peggio che fosse possibile, e se accadeva una disgrazia, o che un operaio
- 25 smarriva i ferri, o che un asino si rompeva una gamba, o che crollava un tratto di galleria, si sapeva sempre che era stato lui; e infatti ei si pigliava le busse senza protestare, proprio come se le pigliano gli asini che curvano la schiena, ma seguitano a fare a modo loro. Cogli altri ragazzi poi era addirittura crudele, e sembrava che si volesse vendicare sui deboli di tutto il male che s'immaginava gli avessero fatto gli altri, a lui e al suo babbo. Certo ei provava uno strano diletto
- 30 a rammentare ad uno ad uno tutti i maltrattamenti ed i soprusi che avevano fatto subire a suo padre, e del modo in cui l'avevano lasciato crepare. E quando era solo borbottava: – Anche con me fanno così! e a mio padre gli dicevano *Bestia*, perché egli non faceva così! – E una volta che passava il padrone, accompagnandolo con un'occhiata torva: – È stato lui! per trentacinque tari! – E un'altra volta, dietro allo *Sciancato*: – E anche lui! e si metteva a ridere!

35 Io l'ho udito, quella sera! – [...]

Era avvezzo a tutto lui, agli scapaccioni, alle pedate, ai colpi di manico di badile, o di cinghia da basto, a vedersi ingiuriato e beffato da tutti, a dormire sui sassi colle braccia e la schiena rotta da quattordici ore di lavoro; anche a digiunare era avvezzo, allorché il padrone lo puniva levandogli il pane o la minestra. Ei diceva che la razione di busse non gliel'aveva levata mai, il padrone; ma

40 le busse non costavano nulla. Non si lamentava però, e si vendicava di soppiatto, a tradimento, con qualche tiro di quelli che sembrava ci avesse messo la coda il diavolo: perciò ei si pigliava sempre i castighi, anche quando il colpevole non era stato lui. Già se non era stato lui sarebbe stato capace di esserlo, e non si giustificava mai: per altro sarebbe stato inutile. E qualche volta, come *Ranocchio* spaventato lo scongiurava piangendo di dire la verità, e di scolparsi, ei ripeteva:

45 – A che giova? Sono *malpelo*! [...]

Verso quell'epoca venne a lavorare nella cava uno che non s'era mai visto, e si teneva nascosto il più che poteva. Gli altri operai dicevano fra di loro che era scappato dalla prigione, e se lo pigliavano ce lo tornavano a chiudere per anni ed anni. *Malpelo* seppe in quell'occasione che la prigione era un luogo dove si mettevano i ladri, e i malarnesi come lui, e si tenevano sempre

50 chiusi là dentro e guardati a vista.

Epilogue

Da quel momento provò una malsana curiosità per quell'uomo che aveva provata la prigione e ne era scappato. Dopo poche settimane però il fuggitivo dichiarò chiaro e tondo che era stanco di quella vitaccia da talpa, e piuttosto si contentava di stare in galera tutta la vita, ché la prigione, in confronto, era un paradiso, e preferiva tornarci coi suoi piedi.

55 – Allora perché tutti quelli che lavorano nella cava non si fanno mettere in prigione? – domandò *Malpelo*.

– Perché non sono *malpelo* come te! – rispose lo *Sciancato*. – Ma non temere, che tu ci andrai! e ci lascerai le ossa! –

Invece le ossa le lasciò nella cava, *Malpelo* come suo padre, ma in modo diverso. Una volta si doveva esplorare un passaggio che doveva comunicare col pozzo grande a sinistra, verso la valle, e se la cosa andava bene, si sarebbe risparmiata una buona metà di mano d'opera nel cavar fuori la rena. Ma a ogni modo, però, c'era il pericolo di smarrirsi e di non tornare mai più. Sicché nessun padre di famiglia voleva avventurarcisi, né avrebbe permesso che si arrischiasse il sangue suo, per tutto l'oro del mondo.

65 *Malpelo*, invece, non aveva nemmeno chi si prendesse tutto l'oro del mondo per la sua pelle, se pure la sua pelle valeva tanto: sicché pensarono a lui. Allora, nel partire, si risovvenne del minatore, il quale si era smarrito, da anni ed anni, e cammina e cammina ancora al buio, gridando aiuto, senza che nessuno possa udirlo. Ma non disse nulla. Del resto a che sarebbe giovato? Prese gli arnesi di suo padre, il piccone, la zappa, la lanterna, il sacco col pane, il fiasco del vino, e se ne andò: né più si seppe nulla di lui.

70 Così si persero persin le ossa di *Malpelo*, e i ragazzi della cava abbassano la voce quando parlano di lui nel sotterraneo, ché hanno paura di vederselo comparire dinanzi, coi capelli rossi e gli occhiacci grigi.

Charles Dickens

David Copperfield (1849-1850)

I am born 84

The beginning of the novel shows our hero at the moment of his birth.

- Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show. To begin my life with the beginning of my life, I record that I was born (as I have been informed and believe) on a Friday, at twelve o'clock at night. It was remarked that the clock began to strike, and I began to cry,
- 5 simultaneously.
- In consideration of the day and hour of my birth, it was declared by the nurse, and by some sage women in the neighbourhood who had taken a lively interest in me several months before there was any possibility of our becoming personally acquainted¹, first, that I was destined to be unlucky in life; and secondly, that I was privileged to see ghosts
- 10 and spirits; both these gifts inevitably attaching, as they believed, to all unlucky infants of either gender, born towards the small hours on a Friday night.
- I need say nothing here, on the first head, because nothing can show better than my history whether that prediction was verified or falsified by the result. On the second branch of the question, I will only remark, that unless I ran through that part of my
- 15 inheritance while I was still a baby, I have not come into it yet.
- ...
- Not to meander myself², at present, I will go back to my birth.
- I was born at Blunderstone, in Suffolk, or 'there by', as they say in Scotland. I was a posthumous child. My father's eyes had closed upon the light of this world six months, when mine opened on it. There is something strange to me, even now, in the reflection
- 20 that he never saw me; and something stranger yet in the shadowy remembrance that I have of my first childish associations with his white grave-stone in the churchyard, and of the indefinable compassion I used to feel for it lying out alone there in the dark night, when our little parlour was warm and bright with fire and candle, and the doors of our house were – almost cruelly, it seemed to me sometimes – bolted³ and locked against it.
- 25 An aunt of my father's, and consequently a great-aunt of mine, of whom I shall have more to relate by and by⁴, was the principal magnate of our family. Miss Trotwood, or Miss Betsey, as my poor mother always called her...

1. **acquainted:** to know each other personally

2. **meander myself:** to proceed casually (it. *divagare*)

3. **bolted:** it. *sprangata*

4. **by and by:** *arch.* for soon

Charles Dickens

Hard Times (1854)

Nothing but facts 85

This is the beginning of the novel, in which one of the main characters, Superintendent Thomas Gradgrind, is introduced while addressing a group of students and expressing his rationalist philosophy.

‘NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out¹ everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the

5 principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!’

The scene was a plain, bare, monotonous vault of a schoolroom, and the speaker’s square forefinger² emphasized his observations by underscoring³ every sentence with a line on the schoolmaster’s sleeve. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s square wall of a forehead⁴, which had his eyebrows for its base, while his eyes found commodious

10 cellarage⁵ in two dark caves, overshadowed⁶ by the wall. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s mouth, which was wide, thin, and hard set. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s voice, which was inflexible, dry, and dictatorial. The emphasis was helped by the speaker’s hair, which bristled⁷ on the skirts of his bald head, a plantation of firs⁸ to keep the wind from its shining surface, all covered with knobs⁹, like the crust of a plum

15 pie, as if the head had scarcely warehouse-room for the hard facts stored inside. The speaker’s obstinate carriage¹⁰, square coat, square legs, square shoulders, – nay, his very neckcloth¹¹, trained to take him by the throat with an unaccommodating¹² grasp, like a stubborn fact, as it was, – all helped the emphasis.

‘In this life, we want nothing but Facts, sir; nothing but Facts!’

20 The speaker, and the schoolmaster, and the third grown person present, all backed a little, and swept with their eyes¹³ the inclined plane of little vessels then and there arranged in order, ready to have imperial gallons¹⁴ of facts poured into them until they were full to the brim.

1. **root out:** it. *sradica*

2. **forefinger:** it. *dito indice*

3. **underscoring:** emphasising

4. **forehead:** it. *fronte*

5. **commodious cellarage:** wide and comfortable accommodation

6. **overshadowed:** obscured

7. **bristled:** stood up stiff

8. **firs:** trees similar to pine trees (it. *abeti*)

9. **knobs:** it. *protuberanze, bitorzoli*

10. **carriage:** (dated) the way he moved his head and body

11. **neckcloth:** tie

12. **unaccommodating:** not easy to deal with

13. **swept with their eyes:** examined

14. **imperial gallons:** unit of measure for liquids

Roald Dahl

Boy: Tales of Childhood (1984)

Corkers 86

In his autobiography Roald Dahl gives us a portrait of a very unique Maths teacher.

There were about thirty or more masters at Repton and most of them were amazingly dull and totally colourless and completely uninterested in boys. But Corkers, an eccentric old bachelor, was neither dull nor colourless. Corkers was a charmer, a vast ungainly man with drooping bloodhound cheeks and filthy clothes. He wore creaseless flannel trousers and a brown tweed jacket with patches all over it and bits of dried food on the lapels. He was meant to teach us mathematics, but in truth he taught us nothing at all and that was the way he meant it to be. His lessons consisted of an endless series of distractions all invented by him so that the subject of mathematics would never have to be discussed. He would come lumbering into the classroom and sit down at his desk and glare at the class. We would wait expectantly, wondering what was coming next.

‘Let’s have a look at the crossword puzzle in today’s Times,’ he would say, fishing a crumpled newspaper out of his jacket pocket. ‘That’ll be a lot more fun than fiddling around with figures. I hate figures. Figures are probably the dreariest things on this earth.’

‘Then why do you teach mathematics, sir?’ somebody asked him.
‘I don’t,’ he said, smiling slyly. ‘I only pretend to teach it.’

Corkers would proceed to draw the framework of the crossword on the blackboard and we would all spend the rest of the lesson trying to solve it while he read out the clues. We enjoyed that. The only time I can remember him vaguely touching upon mathematics was when he whisked a square of tissue-paper out of his pocket and waved it around. ‘Look at this,’ he said. ‘This tissue-paper is one-hundredth of an inch thick. I fold it once, making it double. I fold it again, making it four thicknesses. Now then, I will give a large bar of Cadbury’s Fruit and Nut Milk Chocolate to any boy who can tell me, to the nearest twelve inches, how thick it will be if I fold it fifty times.’ We all stuck up our hands and started guessing. ‘Twenty-four inches, sir’... ‘Three feet, sir’... ‘Five yards, sir’... ‘Three inches, sir.’

‘You’re not very clever, are you,’ Corkers said. ‘The answer is the distance from the earth to the sun. That’s how thick it would be.’ We were enthralled by this piece of intelligence and asked him to prove it on the blackboard, which he did.

Another time, he brought a two-foot-long grass-snake into class and insisted that every boy should handle it in order to cure us for ever, as cannot remember all the other thousands of splendid things that old Corkers cooked up to keep his class happy, but there was one that I shall never forget which was repeated at intervals of about three weeks throughout each term. He would be talking to us about this or that when suddenly he would stop in mid-sentence and a look of intense pain would cloud his ancient countenance. Then his head would come up and his great nose would begin to sniff the air and he would cry aloud, ‘By God! This is too much! This is going too far! This is intolerable!’