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CLIMBING DOWN A FAMILY TREE: REJECTED FATHERS IN SAMUEL BUTLER'S *THE WAY OF ALL FLESH*

*He that spareth his rod hateth his son:
but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes.*

Proverbs, 13:24 (King James Version)²

1. Introduction

At the end of chapter LXVI in *The Way of All Flesh* (1903)³ we read: “The greater part of every family is always odious; if there are one or two good ones in a very large family, it is as much as can be expected.” (*TWAF* 313) The statement hardly leaves any room for doubt that Butler's overall purpose in his posthumous novel is to observe and criticize the typical idea of family. Nevertheless, it must be said that this fictional attack constantly maintains an ironic tone and, above all, never aims at destroying it as a social institution. Standing back from the text, we perceive a double movement of emerging rebellion against restraints and self-imposed respect for patriarchal moral education, which depicts the protagonist Ernest as a weak-willed person, incapable to escape his parents' influence. Moreover, Butler's sharp eye for paradox and linguistic reversal is the engine of a complex texture providing us with laughter and serious reflections at the same time, so to expose the main unsolved contradictions in the late nineteenth-century lifestyle.

In this essay I will try to discuss on the one hand the challenges posed by the shifting narrator, both personified by the adult point of view of Mr. Overton and the innocent look of little Ernest, and on the other hand the reaction to traditional values with respect to parental, religious and literary models, all conceived as a whole category of overwhelming fathers.

2. Tradition and change in family structures

In order to understand the set of values at the heart of the novel, it may be useful to refer to the framework of the Victorian household hierarchy. Based on the sacredness of marriage, this pyramidal structure lays the greatest importance on the role of the father, entrusted with children's moral and religious education, besides the management of all family properties. Such a widespread acceptance of paternal authority in the nineteenth century seems, at least to some extent, to be related to the development of protestant values and the decline of outdated models based on loyalty bonds to lineage over the previous three centuries. In particular, we can see a gradual change from the old extended family to the rising conjugal family, as Ian Watt makes clear:

The relatively great freedom of women in England had existed at least as far back as the Elizabethan period, but it was reinforced in the eighteenth century by some aspects of the rise of individualism. Economic individualism, we have seen, tended to weaken the ties between parents and children: and its spread was associated with the development of a new kind of family system which has since become the standard one in most modern societies. This system can be described as the 'elementary' family, (...) or as the 'conjugal' family (...). [T]his elementary or conjugal group alone is what constitutes the family in our society; it is an entity formed by the voluntary union of two individuals. This kind of family

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² All quotations of the Bible refer to King James Version (abbreviated as *KJV*), taken from: www.biblegateway.com

³ All quotations of the novel (title abbreviated as *TWAF*) are taken from: Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*, ed. by James Cochrane, London: Penguin Books, 1966.



(...) is different from those of other societies and other periods in many respects, among which may be mentioned the following: on marriage the couple immediately sets up as a new family, wholly separate from their own parents and often far away from them; there is no established priority between the male and female lines of descent as regards property or authority (...). [O]nce set up, the conjugal family typically becomes an autonomous unit in economic as well as in social affairs (Watt 137-8)

Watt draws attention on the unprecedented autonomy of newly-wed couples, and at the same time he hints at a growing female emancipation. Both these phenomena find an explanation in the peculiar cultural attitudes of the time: traditional family structures collapse under the weight of individualism, fostered by the reigning puritan ethic; in addition to this, women start claiming their freedom of choice in sexual and social behaviours. Though likely to encourage personal achievements, this new state of things ends up reflecting the image of political and religious hierarchies, since the paternal control of the king over the population passes down to biological fathers on a small scale, and the figures of unmarried catholic priests are replaced by protestant ministers who preach the Gospel to their own children, so as to combine two educational functions.

We find early formulations of these principles in literary works such as Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (published posthumously in 1680) or James I's *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1597), in which the ideal status of the king is associated to the father taking care of the moral and intellectual growth of his children. This social common place gains further strength among English people thanks to the authority of the Sunday catechism, as S. D. Amussen points out: "(...) it asserted that the family was the fundamental social institution, and that order in families was both necessary for, and parallel to, order in the state." (Amussen 35)

As to the division of household affairs, one last point of discussion concerns the role of wives' contribution in the process of decision-making. There is an evident contradiction in the depiction of women from the eighteenth century on, a gap between that optimistic lack of "priority between male and female lines of descent" described by Watt, and several accounts about early novel readers. In Lawrence Stone's words:

Wives of the middle and upper classes increasingly became idle drones. They turned household management over to stewards, reduced their reproductive responsibilities by contraceptive measures, and passed their time in such occupations as novel-reading, theatre-going, card-playing, and formal visits (...). [T]he custom of turning wives into ladies "languishing in listlessness" as ornamental status objects spread downwards through the social scale (Stone 396-7)

The author here presents the seed of a double construction of the female world. The devotion to daily chores is increasingly swept away by lazy pleasures, which are, no doubt, signs of wealth, but also lead to a sort of mental drowsiness; hence, women are given the responsibility of preserving harmony in family affairs while, at the same time, habits such as novel-reading turn them into potentially revolutionary individuals, filling their minds with romantic thoughts about unattainable objects of desire.

This multifaceted background helps accounting for the narrow-mindedness and authoritarianism of the kind of household presented by Samuel Butler in *The Way of All Flesh*. In the next part I will attempt to carry out an analysis of both the positions towards all spirit-oriented teachings and the protagonist's ambiguous adherence to some of these doctrines.

3. The Pontifex family: from father to son

In reading *The Way of All Flesh*, we may have quite a hard time trying to separate autobiographical materials from narrative invention. It is not supposed to be a truthful report of episodes in the author's early and adult life, though we clearly detect references to people and situations drawn from actual memories. It is a fact that the historical reliability of the novel is still a subject of critical debate, as Massimo Verzella underlines in his study on Butler's fictional world:

Recentemente è stato Anthony Daniels a insistere sulla natura artificiosa e menzognera



della scrittura autobiografica butleriana, puntando l'indice sulle distorsioni, esagerazioni e deformazioni (...). Daniels non risparmia critiche a quelli che definisce sfoghi adolescenziali di un *angry young man* ante litteram, evidenziando come i moti di contestazione butleriani raramente nascano da riflessioni approfondite sulle storture socio-culturali che producevano le ortodossie nelle quali restava impigliato il soggetto vittoriano, essendo più che altro alimentati da semplici interessi egoistici. La teoria non è certo priva di fondamento (...). È il metodo critico che non convince. Daniels parte dal presupposto che i materiali biografici possano costituire strumenti ermeneutici utili a cogliere il contenuto di verità del testo letterario. Forte di questa convinzione, Daniels legge Butler come Theobald⁴ legge le Scritture, alla lettera, confrontando sequenze narrative e documenti biografici per cercare di ricostruire una presunta verità ufficiale sulla natura dei rapporti tra Samuel e i vari membri della sua famiglia (Verzella 70-1)

The objections raised by Verzella to Daniels' method lead us to the key theme of literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and its consequences on the development of the storyline.

In meeting the characters of Theobald and Christina Pontifex, we soon perceive them to be respectively a hard-headed clergyman and a slightly disturbed daydreamer, who will irrationally compel their son Ernest to blind obedience and christian faith. This basic divergence between parental love and harsh attempts to brainwash him supports the wide use of ironic, paradoxical and iconoclastic strategies in the plot. But before proceeding any further into the text, a brief examination of the moral connotations in the characters' names is useful to set the ground for the main argument. First of all, the surname Pontifex highlights the cultural debt to the Latin language, both recalling the typical honour bestowed on Roman emperors and the epithet for the popes: its literal meaning being "bridge maker" or "path-maker"⁵, it alludes to the opposite roles of "tradition preserver" and "tradition breaker", played respectively by Ernest and Theobald. *Omen nomen* seems to be the most suitable formula for the name of the father, since its original Latin form "Theobaldus", followed by the Old High German form "Theudobald" which stands for "the bald among people", is slowly replaced during the Middle Ages by the current version that means "the brave of God", thus turning into a great ironic weapon in Butler's hands. Christina may embody a feminine double of the Saviour, which appears to foreshadow a paradox: the most rigid representative of all orthodoxies runs the risk to identify the son of God with a woman. Ernest shows the clearest similarity to the adjective "earnest" (honest), and voices the Wildean absolute "importance of being earnest", as we read in chapter XVIII:

Theobald had proposed to call him George after old Mr. Pontifex, but strange to say, Mr. Pontifex over-ruled him in favour of the name Ernest. The word "earnest" was just beginning to come into fashion, and he thought the possession of such a name might, like his having been baptised in water from the Jordan, have a permanent effect upon the boy's character, and influence him for good during the more critical periods of his life (*TWAF* 106)

Even Overton, the narrator's surname, may be interpreted as a part of these behavioural descriptions. Based on the adjective "overt", it conveys a sort of intrinsic attitude to report events and, above all, his empathy towards little Ernest.

The dialectic between rupture and preservation in *The Way of All Flesh* sets up the main tension. The four Pontifexes presented in the novel are inseparable links in a family chain that unfortunately proves to be broken somewhere in between the first two generations. The opening chapters inform us of the substantial harmony in the daily life of old John Pontifex and his wife: a naive attachment to nature and a hard work ethic are leading principles to this couple, held in high regard by the whole community. The most striking thing is, if compared to the total lack of aesthetic refinement in Theobald, the way old John loves music and art. Carpenter, self-taught organ player and painter, he becomes a living example of self-made man, so that many years later, from an adult point of view, Mr. Overton still remembers his father's words of appreciation

⁴ Father of Ernest Pontifex, protagonist of *The Way of All Flesh*.

⁵ See www.etymonline.com



for John:

My father's face would always brighten when old Pontifex's name was mentioned. "I tell you, Edward," he would say to me, "old Pontifex was not only an able man, but he was one of the very ablest men that ever I knew." This was more than I as a young man was prepared to stand. "My dear father," I answered, "what did he do?" (...) "My boy," returned my father, "you must not judge by the work, but by the work in connection with the surroundings." (...) "Phew!" continued he, waxing warm, "if old Pontifex had had Cromwell's chances he would have done all that Cromwell did, and have done it better. (...) "I tell you, Edward," said my father with some severity, "we must judge men not so much by what they do, as by what they make us feel that they have it in them to do. If a man has done enough either in painting, music or the affairs of life, to make me feel that I might trust him in an emergency he has done enough." (...) Against this there was no more to be said, and my sisters eyed me to silence (*TWAF* 36-37)

This excerpt from the dialogue is very telling and displays unconditioned trust in John's good qualities. All the more so because we soon after get introduced to George Pontifex, the second generation, a pivotal character whose materialist and aggressive outlook accounts for a large part of Theobald's distorted vision of reality. Following is the last passage from the conversation:

"Talk of his successful son," snorted my father, whom I had fairly roused. "He is not fit to black his father's boots. He has his thousands of pounds a year, while his father had perhaps three thousand shillings a year towards the end of his life. He is a successful man; but his father, hobbling about Paleham Street in his grey worsted stockings, broad brimmed hat and brown swallow-tailed coat was worth a hundred of George Pontifexes, for all his carriages and horses and the airs he gives himself." "But yet," he added, "George Pontifex is no fool either." And this brings us to the second generation of the Pontifex family with whom we need concern ourselves (*TWAF* 37)

Mr. Overton's father's speech serves, in the space of few words, as a narrative expedient to anticipate two fundamental concepts underlying the whole novel: the insurmountable inferiority of children towards their own fathers and the never-ending sense of debt. The man implicitly compares George, who "is not fit to black his father's boots", to Saint John the Baptist in his words: "He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." (*KJV* John 1:27) The latent tragic irony lies in that the biblical passage shows John's humility towards the Son of God, who will redeem us from our sinful nature, whereas old Pontifex, a sort of reversal of the Baptist, is the last positive character before the disturbing coming of George, who is to turn into the breaking point of a flawless family chain. Taking the reference to Saint John even further, not only is George denied a symbolic power to baptise by fire, as Christ did, but he is not even allowed to use the water from the Jordan, as a sudden accident ruins his plans:

"Gelstrap," he said solemnly, "I want to go down into the cellar." Then Gelstrap preceded him with a candle, and he went into the inner vault where he kept his choicest wines. (...) A bin (...) was now found to contain a single pint bottle. (...) It had been placed there by Mr. Pontifex himself about a dozen years previously, on his return from a visit to his friend the celebrated traveller Dr. Jones. (...) Then came a catastrophe. He stumbled over an empty hamper (...) and in an instant the cellar floor was covered with the liquid that had been preserved so carefully for so many years. (...) "It's water from the Jordan," he exclaimed furiously, "which I have been saving for the baptism of my eldest grandson. Damn you, Gelstrap, how dare you be so infernally careless as to leave that hamper littering about the cellar?" (...) "I'll filter it, Sir," said Gelstrap meekly. "It'll come quite clean." (...) [In a letter to Theobald] "You will agree with me that though the efficacy of the sacrament does not depend upon the source of the baptismal waters, yet, *ceteris paribus*, there is a sentiment



attaching to the waters of the Jordan which should not be despised. (...) Small matters like this sometimes influence a child's whole future career." (TWAF 103-104-105)

Butler's masterful use of different linguistic registers meets the needs of a debunking scene, shifting from mild oaths to Gelstrap to such a Latin expression as "ceteris paribus". Moreover, the closing sentence about the child's future career further suggests his utilitarian perspective on religion, within a system of reciprocal rewards between divine Providence and pious men.

Throughout *The Way of All Flesh*, Christian beliefs and dogmatic behaviours are evidently pervasive. A large number of intertextual references to the Bible provides theoretical justifications for all important decisions, and most of all for that severe stick and carrot education adopted by George and Theobald. In particular, the Pauline doctrine plays a prominent part; suffice it to consider the novel title as a definition of the destiny all material aspirations and personal talents have to follow: "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit." (KJV Galatians 5:24-25). The children's private routine and social interactions must be inspired by righteousness, especially towards their father, as Christina reminds them in her letter/last will: "Let him find you obedient, affectionate and attentive to his wishes, upright, self-denying and diligent (...)." (TWAF 133)

The very representation of marriage or the related ideas of conjugal devotion and self-denial are shaped in light of the Holy Scriptures. Therefore, in order to grasp this point, I will draw some helpful example from the novel of strict adherence to doctrine and satirical rewritings of biblical episodes. The closing sentences of Chapter II are worth citing: "Two years later he [George] married a lady about seven years younger than himself, who brought him a handsome dowry. She died in 1805, when her youngest child Alethea was born, and her husband did not marry again." (TWAF 41) In other cases, such a small detail is likely to remain in the background, whereas it can here reveal a slight hint of irony when compared to Paul's words:

But I speak this by permission, and not of commandment. For I would that all men were even as I myself. But every man hath his proper gift of God, one after this manner, and another after that. I say therefore to the unmarried and widows, it is good for them if they abide even as I. But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. (KJV Corinthians, 7:1-9)

If we consider George's situation, his insatiable economic ambitions and the burden of five little children, his life as a widower is not so convincing. It rather signals literal compliance with an authoritative message, and his choice takes a still more paradoxical turn as Paul underlines that he "speak[s] this by permission, and not of commandment". Hence, Mr Pontifex will end up following the word of a common man, and not at all the word of God: once more, social status only mirrors the result of short-sighted interpretations of the Bible.

This set of self-constraints and paradoxical situations extends to all the generations in the novel, as the narrator shows with the courtship between Theobald and Christina Allaby and the arrangements for their marriage. Interestingly enough, at the beginning Theobald does not appear to be as much involved in this transaction as he should be, so that he is mainly referred to in terms of ignorance and unawareness. Step by step he is caught in a trap:

The interview, like all other good things had to come to an end. (...) When she [Christina] was muffled up and had taken her seat, Mr. Allaby's factotum, James, could perceive no change in her appearance, and little knew what a series of delightful visions he was driving home along with his mistress. Professor Cowey had published works through Theobald's father, and Theobald had on this account been taken in tow by Mrs. Cowey from the beginning of his University career. She had had her eye upon him for some time past, and almost as much felt it her *duty to get him off her list of young men for whom wives had to be provided, as poor Mrs. Allaby did to try and get a husband for one of her daughters*. She now wrote and asked him to come and see her, in terms that awakened his curiosity. When he came she broached the subject of Mr. Allaby's failing health, and after the smoothing away of such difficulties as were only Mrs. Cowey's due, considering the interest she had



taken, it was allowed to come to pass that Theobald should go to Crampsford for six successive Sundays. (...) *Ignorant of the plots which were being prepared for his peace of mind and with no idea beyond that of earning his three guineas (...)* (TWAF 70-71, italics mine)

Theobald is here treated as the object of some forced affection from Christina, and at a certain point of their exceptionally long engagement, the situation takes a rather different turn when the focus shifts to marriage:

[W]hen his father gave formal consent to his marriage things began to look more serious; when the college living had fallen vacant and been accepted they looked more serious still; but when Christina actually named the day, then Theobald's heart fainted within him. The engagement had gone on so long that he had got into a groove, and the prospect of change was disconcerting. Christina and he had got on, he thought to himself, very nicely for a great number of years; why-why-why should they not continue to go on as they were doing now for the rest of their lives? But there was no more chance of escape for him than for the sheep which is being driven to the butcher's back premises, and like the sheep he felt that there was nothing to be gained by resistance, so he made none (TWAF 85-86)

In the previous passage, Butler typically deploys his ironic method to the amount of miming a feeling of astonishment through the rhythm of the narrator's faltering words. Moreover, a further reading of the letter to the Corinthians shows how Paul ideally makes fun of Theobald's wishes for unmarried life; in particular, we come across another mocking situation in which the biblical message itself seems to encourage a more light-hearted attitude than the inescapable fatalism hovering over the whole scene: "Art thou bound unto a wife? seek not to be loosed. Art thou loosed from a wife? Seek not a wife. But and if thou marry, thou hast not sinned; and if a virgin marry, she hath not sinned. Nevertheless such shall have trouble in the flesh: but I spare you." (KJV Corinthians 7:27-28) It is interesting to notice how this Pauline reminder of the trouble in the flesh looks back to the novel title and remarks once again the spiritual purpose in everybody's life. However, still he advises, with a sort of Wildean touch, to guard against the risks of falling prey to marriage, if not strictly needed:

[L]et him do what he will, he sinneth not: let them marry. Nevertheless he that standeth stedfast in his heart, having no necessity, but hath power over his own will, and hath so decreed in his heart that he will keep his virgin, doeth well. *So then he that giveth her in marriage doeth well; but he that giveth her not in marriage doeth better* (KJV Corinthians 7:36-38, italics mine)

Besides the previous examples, the novel undermines the credibility of the family institution going back to moving biblical narrations: the last moments of Christ's life and the creation myth.

The satire of the contradictions behind priggish behaviours is now specifically directed to Christina. She is invariably considered a blurred counterpart of her husband and irretrievably lost in mystical reveries; this woman's condition is best outlined by Butler himself in a portrait of his own family dating back to 1864, as Verzella explains:

Il dipinto naïf *Family Prayers* (...) raffigurante la famiglia Butler riunita per le preghiere serali, getta luce sulle complesse dinamiche psicologiche e comportamentali che stanno all'origine della paralisi affettiva ed emotiva denunciata nei romanzi butleriani. Si scorgono nove persone, il capofamiglia è seduto a capotavola, intento a leggere un passo della *Bibbia* (...); di fronte al marito, seduta con una postura rigida, le gambe unite, le spalle allo schienale e le mani sui braccioli, è ritratta Christina Pontifex, al solito persa in una delle sue tante fantasticherie mistiche. (...) Qualche anno più tardi, la scena ritratta nel dipinto trova una sua transcodificazione testuale nel cap. XXIII di *The Way of All Flesh*, sempre incentrato sulla descrizione delle preghiere serali dirette da Theobald Pontifex (Verzella 63-4)



Butler's mother/Christina is sinking into her armchair where all active roles in the evening ritual seem to be denied, she is just depicted as one of the passive spectators of a dull play. But in spite of the static image of the character, she is able to take the role of the puppeteer when her social placement and chances to get married are at stake. Therefore, Theobald is the potential husband the three Allaby sisters bet on:

As soon as he was gone, the harmony of the establishment was broken by a storm which arose upon the question which of them it should be who should become Mrs. Pontifex. "My dears," said their father, when he saw that they did not seem likely to settle the matter among themselves, "Wait till to-morrow, and then play at cards for him." (...) The next morning saw Theobald in his rooms coaching a pupil, and the Miss Allabys in the eldest Miss Allaby's bedroom playing at cards with Theobald for the stakes. The winner was Christina (...). (TWAF 73)

The excessive shallowness in making such a serious decision is really striking and casts them in a very bad light. Christina reveals the doubleness of her public and private behaviours, which are but a small portion of a more widespread social hypocrisy. This scene bears a curious resemblance to a well-known passage from the Bible, in a way that allows Butler to create a brand-new everyday mythology while recalling some outstanding narrations in our western culture:

Then the soldiers, when they had crucified Jesus, took his garments, and made four parts, to every soldier a part; and also his coat: now the coat was without seam, woven from the top throughout. They said therefore among themselves, Let us not rend it, but cast lots for it, whose it shall be: that the scripture might be fulfilled, which saith, They parted my raiment among them, and for my vesture they did cast lots. (KJV John 19:23-24)

One more passage in the novel appears noteworthy to shed light on Butler's satirical method. In chapter XII, the narrator describes Theobald still trying to get a living as a clergyman and we discover the cynical and almost unutterable thoughts in Christina's mind. So great is her impatience to climb the social ladder, that she even wishes other rectors dead to foster his career advancement: "So certain was she of the great results which would then ensue that she wondered at times at the blindness shown by Providence towards its own truest interests in not killing off the rectors who stood between Theobald and his living a little faster." (TWAF 81) Here we find out all possible signs of irrationality and self-interest in this woman: firstly, she turns the meaning of Providence upside down and attempts to reduce it to a personal privilege; secondly, her words serve as introduction to one of the most ridiculous and demystifying scene in the novel. Actually, Butler strikes a decisive blow against the traditional parental status and downplays the importance of such social binarisms as father-mother or husband-wife. He obviously achieves this effect through his solid narrative technique of mocking comparisons to biblical episodes, in particular a rewriting of the creation from the Book of Genesis:

It had never so much as crossed Theobald's mind to doubt the literal accuracy of any syllable in the Bible. (...) True, there was just a little scare about geology, but there was nothing in it. If it was said that God made the world in six days, why He did make it in six days, neither in more nor less; if it was said that He put Adam to sleep, took out one of his ribs and made a woman of it, why it was so as a matter of course. *He, Adam, went to sleep as it might be himself, Theobald Pontifex, in a garden, as it might be the garden at Crampsford Rectory during the summer months when it was so pretty, only that it was larger, and had some tame wild animals in it. Then God came up to him, as it might be Mr. Allaby or his father, dexterously took out one of his ribs without waking him, and miraculously healed the wound so that no trace of the operation remained. Finally, God had taken the rib perhaps into the greenhouse, and had turned it into just such another young woman as Christina. That was how it was done; there was neither difficulty nor shadow of*



difficulty about the matter. Could not God do anything He liked, and had He not in His own inspired Book told us that He had done this? (*TWAF* 81-82, *italics mine*)

The opening reference to geology with respect to creationism directly leads us to the ongoing debate on evolutionary theories during the nineteenth century. The issue is pervasive throughout in Bulter's macrotext, as he is strongly influenced by the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of The Species* (1859), besides *The Vestiges of The Natural History of Creation* by Robert Chambers (1844) and *Principles of Geology* by Charles Lyell (1830-33). On the whole, Lyell attempts to demonstrate how "the present is the key to the past,"⁶ in that the analysis of available materials may account for unknown natural stages far back in time. In his parodic discourse, Butler effectively insists on reversing this implicit assumption and turns a mythological past into the key to interpret Theobald and Christina's biological roots. In the family narration of the Pontifexes, there is no real need to find scientific evidence for any chaotic or rational lines of evolution whatsoever: God is the only active agent in the universe. However, God himself, in the person of "Mr Allaby or his father," takes on the role of a surgeon in the greenhouse that serves the purpose of an operating theatre.

All reflections on parenthood as a family category, in *The Way of All Flesh*, are in some way strictly connected to the category of literary fathers. This parallel allows Butler to mark a sort of watershed in the history of the relationships between parents and children:

It must be remembered that at the beginning of the nineteenth century the relations between parents and children were still far from satisfactory. The violent type of father, as described by *Fielding, Richardson, Smollett and Sheridan*, is now hardly more likely to find a place in literature than the original advertisement of Messrs. Fairlie & Pontifex's "Pious Country Parishioner," but the type was much too persistent not to have been drawn from nature closely. The parents in *Miss Austen's* novels are less like savage wild beasts than those of her predecessors, but she evidently looks upon them with suspicion, and an uneasy feeling that *le père de famille est capable de tout* makes itself sufficiently apparent throughout the greater part of her writings. In the *Elizabethan time* the relations between parents and children seem on the whole to have been more kindly. The fathers and the sons are for the most part friends in *Shakespeare*, nor does the evil appear to have reached its full abomination till a long course of Puritanism had familiarised men's minds with Jewish ideals as those which we should endeavour to reproduce in our everyday life. (*TWAF* 52-53, *italics mine*)

The four fathers of the eighteenth-century literary scene are considered as spokesmen of a distorted patriarchal authority that has no scruple about using violent educational methods, beating children, denying personal fulfillment and depicting love or marriage as a mainly economic settlement. Just to cite few examples, we can call to mind the sudden change in Pamela's feelings towards Mr B., and the dispute between pamelists and anti-pamelists about her alleged hypocrisy in matters of love; the antithetical perspectives of Mr Thwackum (derived from "to thwack, to beat with a stick") and Mr Square, the two schoolmasters in *Tom Jones*, respectively obsessed with the respect for the Scriptures and abstract speculations on virtue, who resemble the spiritual leaders Badcock and Pryer delivering sermons to force Ernest to follow their material interests (Verzella 36).

As far as religious themes are concerned, *The Way of All Flesh* is more widely affected by a puritan bestseller such as *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) by John Bunyan. It provides a coherent background for mystical abandonments, as several personifications of vices and virtues like Superstition, Ignorance, Envy, Discretion, Prudence and Piety are scattered along Christian's journey from the "City of Destruction" (this world) to the "Celestial City" (heaven). The protagonist's name displays the deep connection between Bunyan's allegory and *The Way of All Flesh*, since Ernest is baptised Christian in the first draft of the novel

⁶ The statement rephrases James Hutton's doctrine of uniformitarianism. See Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology: being an Inquiry how Far the Changes of the Earth's Surface are Referable to Causes now in Operation*, London: John Murray, 1835.



(Verzella 48).

In conclusion, extending the meaning of this intertextual overlapping further, we notice how both responses to life possibly meet a need for regeneration from death: in Christian's metaphorical pilgrimage, complete loneliness is found to be the key to salvation, whereas Ernest makes up his mind to leave his parents, only in order to shake himself free of the burden of fatherly doctrines and finally try to follow his way to a resurrection of the flesh. Once again, Butler subverts the traditional meaning of literary strategies, as the young protagonist of the novel is not supposed, like Christian, to symbolically find a redeeming corner in this world, but he will only distance himself from his family which constantly impedes any personal development. In consideration of this veiled ambiguity in the protagonist's pure search for freedom and self-interest, it is not always possible to detect Butler's actual support to the claim for new educational models or his complete rejection of a specific set of values, nonetheless his work certainly deserves to be part of a watershed between an old "rusty" world and rising alternatives.

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