

JACOB RIIS' TWO HALVES: A STUDY BETWEEN HIS PHOTOGRAPHIC AND LITERARY WORK

Rebeca Romero Escrivá / Ph.D. Thesis Project
Universitat de València Estudi General (UVEG)

The art of writing presents, in the American tradition, some more thorough perspectives than those usually provided by the study of the national history of European literature. *Las dos mitades de Jacob Riis. Un estudio entre su obra fotográfica y literaria (Jacob Riis' Two Halves: A Study Between His Photographic and Literary Work)* is a critical and contrasted research work (directed by Prof. Vicente Sánchez-Biosca) which tries to establish the reading value of the work of Riis, the Danish photographer and journalist emigrated to the United States in 1870, within the heart of the tradition of American literature, photography and mass media of the 19th century's ending and the beginning of the 20th. The hypothetical point of departure is that Riis' photographic and literary productions cannot be estimated but studied separately. This hypothesis serves to set forth the notion that the interdisciplinary research character effectively responds to its own object. The segment of the United States history portrayed by Riis invites us to change the parameters of the traditional study of the photography close to the "Fine Arts". Since we estimate Riis' language with a different perspective from that of pure aesthetics, the evaluation of his photography can be placed within a more wider framework: that of the "work of the art" – to use the Emerson's phrase – as opposed to a mere "work of art". Riis, first of all, was a social reformer. He took pictures for its nominal value, and so he tried to illustrate his texts about social denunciation of the unhealthy and massive living conditions of the tenement houses for the different communities of immigrants of the south zone of Manhattan (Lower East Side, Little Italy and Chinatown).

Riis' starting point, therefore, was the text, and his main work, *How the Other Half Lives. Studies Among the Tenements of New York* is, first of all, an American text². To determine the question of the genre of the work, among the realistic and naturalistic fiction and the muckraker literature, is one of the aims of this research. *How the Other Half Lives* is a text set in the history of the American literature, because its purpose, which is the improvement of the living conditions in a big city, relates to the aboriginal motive of the true foundation of the American cities, so that Riis' topic (the tenement houses) can be linked with the metaphor that John Winthrop declared on board of the *Arbella*: the "City on a hill". The city that Riis describes, nevertheless, forces us to lower our look to locate it in the muck-collector: in the poorest neighborhoods of the ever-expanding New York. As good muckraker, Riis cleans rather than beholds the city that has to be a celestial and human crown on earth. In this respect, the rhetoric of the American puritanism, from Winthrop and even Bunyan to Riis, can be discerned in the appraisal of *How the Other Half Lives* and leads us to analyze the ambivalent relation of the intellectual in America against the city in the American context of the postwar period, when urbanization and industrialization coincides with the new responsibilities of the writer and the photographer in the public life.

Riis was obliged to recover and appeal to the ethical temperature of the Christian belief that could have survived in the spirit of the American readers, accustomed to the blindness that was imposed and assumed by a hedonistic and capitalist world that disregards the underprivileged. Significantly

enough, it was President Roosevelt (of whom Riis was a friend and political assistant), who rescued and distorted the term “muckraker”, from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim Progress*, to refer to the journalists who (as Riis himself) were speakers of the social denunciation. In other words, the big changes undergone by America as a civilization should not affect our will to interpret texts like Riis’ as a critique and improvement of the realities attained by the democratic experiment.

On the other hand, the same paradigmatic shift that we have indicated in the literary area should also be applied to Riis’ photographic work. Since the photographs were meant to illustrate the text, we cannot as a result exempt Riis’ work from being rigorously evaluated when compared to other contemporary photographers, such as Arnold Genthe and Frances Benjamin Johnston, or those belonging to the following generation, such as Lewis Hine, with whom he shares the special conscientiousness that he dedicated to infancy, to the improvement of the living conditions of the children. In fact, although Riis took pictures only during five years of his long experience as a journalist, he was the first documentary photographer who put the magnesium flash into practice as a lighting source. This technique allowed Riis to work in the darkness of the slums tenements. With a camera of 4x5 inches and negative of crystal (dry plate), circumstances forced Riis to learn the job of the photographer, since no assistant wanted to expose himself to the dangers of crossing the slums quarters by night, as we see in his well-known pictures *In the Sun Office, 3 A.M.* (1890), *Street Arabs in Sleeping Quarters, Five Cent Spot. Lodgers in a Crowded Bayard Street Tenement* (1889), or *Men’s Lodging Room in the West 47th Street Station* (1892).

Professional photographers, as writers, are submitted to the appraisal or the judgment of a candid world of readers, whose opinion – as citizens – has a particular importance. The competition or power of photography will not be measured against other arts, as the painting or the novel or even movies, but against reality itself: this would be the subject that human being as such tries to interpret (and to dominate) differently and always as far as he wants a common world, that is to say, the hope to forge a community (or to found a city) without abandoning the zeal of justice.

Finally, I wish to add that, beyond the purely theoretical study, there has also been a sort of practical conclusion to the essay on Riis: the edition of the catalogue *Entre meses (Between Months)*, a photographic exhibition inaugurated in the Casa de Cultura de Calpe (Alicante) and also taken to Valencia, in which I have developed the concept of the measurement of space with regards to time opposing the old city to the modern one. The other half of the Lower East Side of the 21st century can be seen in its pages³.

For contact and information: rebeca.romero@uv.es

- 1 Thesis in progress at the Departamento de Teoría de los Lenguajes y Ciencias de la Comunicación, Universitat de València Estudi General (UVEG), Spain. Rebeca Romero Escrivá is assistant professor at the Valencian International University (VIU).
- 2 Though Jacob Riis is known from his first book of denunciation, *How the Other Half Lives* (Scribner, New York 1890), his work as a writer (apart from several articles that he wrote as a journalist and were published in the daily press) includes the titles *Children of the Poor* (Scribner, New York 1892), *Out of Mulberry Street* (Century, New York 1898), *A Ten Years War* (Houghton, Boston 1900), *Children of the Tenements* (Macmillan, New York 1903), *The Peril and Preservation of the Home* (Jacobs, Philadelphia 1903) and *Theodore Roosevelt, the Citizen* (Macmillan, New York 1919). Riis also wrote works of fiction. None of them was illustrated by photographs, which reinforces the idea that Riis was using the image only for its documentary value.
- 3 Rebeca Romero Escrivá, *Entre meses. Una exposició fotogràfica*, Sala de Belles Arts, Casa de Cultura Jaume Pastor i Fluixà, Calpe (Alicante), April 2007. With a prologue by Vicente Aupí and introductory notes by Javier Alcoriza.