

The Newgate Novels of Charles Dickens

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Although criminals and prisons appear in almost all of Dickens' novels, two groups of his works particularly draw our attention as giving them central and prominent roles. One lies in the earlier period of his career and contains *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*; to the other group, coming toward the end of his career, belong *Our Mutual Friend* and *Edwin Drood*. As one who is interested in the Newgate Novel¹ and the controversies over it, I wish to deal in this essay with the first group, especially with *Oliver Twist* and *Barnaby Rudge*. *Oliver Twist* may legitimately be said to be a Newgate novel, for it was regarded by contemporary reviewers either as a lamentable contribution to the criminal romances brought into vogue by the hand of Bulwer and Ainsworth, or as something only a little different and better than them. Unlike *Oliver Twist*, *Barnaby Rudge* was not discussed in the context of such romances when it appeared, a fact that prevents us from unhesitatingly classing it in the category of the Newgate Novel. However, since it has much in common with Newgate novels—the important part assigned in the novel to criminals and the somehow sympathetic attitude to them—it does not seem amiss to accept *Barnaby Rudge* as a novel belonging to the Newgate genre.

Let us begin by looking at the reception of *Oliver Twist* at the time of its appearance. We find Mary Mitford complaining thus:

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1. As to the Newgate Novel in general, cf. my own essay, "Bulwer-Lytton as an Author of Newgate Novels," *Essays and Studies*, Tokyo Woman's Christian College, Vol. 24, No. 1.

Seriously, what things these are—the Jack Sheppards, and Squeerses, and Oliver Twists, and Michael Armstrongs—all the worse for the power which, except the last, the others contain! grievously worse!²

Jack Sheppard is the criminal hero of Ainsworth's romance; Squeers, the brutal school proprietor in *Nicholas Nickleby*, and Michael Armstrong, the factory boy and titular hero of Francis Trollope's novel. Thus, the four characters mentioned in the above passage have little in common; much less do the four novels in which they appear. *Jack Sheppard* is simply a romance devoted to entertainment, while *Michael Armstrong* is a so-called 'novel with a purpose,' written for the purpose of revealing the misery of factory boys. For all her misconceptions, however, Mary Mitford was not alone in her disapproval. The description of violence and low life in *Oliver Twist* offended those readers who had already been made uneasy by the novels of Bulwer and Ainsworth, and blinded them to its essential features.

Instead of complaining, *Punch* satirized the Dickens novel. In the column called "Literary Recipes," it first presents the ingredients of *Jack Sheppard* thus:

Take a small boy, charity, factory, carpenter's apprentice, or otherwise, as occasion may serve—stew him well down in vice—garnish largely with oaths and flash songs—boil him in a cauldron of crime and improbabilities. . . . Stew down a mad mother—a gang of robbers—several pistols—a bloody knife. Serve up with a couple of murders—and season with a ganging-match.

Then *Oliver Twist* is considered:

N.B. Alter the ingredients to a beadle and a workhouse—the scenes may be the same, but the whole flavour of vice will be lost, and the boy will turn out a perfect pattern—strongly recommended for weak stomachs.³

It has been surmised that this article was written by Thackeray. As I have already traced Thackeray's anti-Newgate campaign in my previous essay,⁴ let it suffice here to say that the above satire serves

2. In S. M. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth and His Friends*, 2 vols. London, 1911, Vol. 1, p. 376.

3. Ellis, *op. cit.*, 361.

4. 'Thackeray's "Anti-Newgate" Attitude,' *Essays and Studies*, Tokyo Woman's Christian College, Vol. 25, No. 2.

again as a reminder that Dickens, Bulwer, and Ainsworth were all targets of Thackeray's attacks.

In some cases, however, *Oliver Twist* was more favorably accepted than other Newgate novels. In a review of *Jack Sheppard*, for example, the reviewer speaks highly of *Oliver Twist* because of Dickens' "high moral object":

If Boz has depicted scenes of hardened vice, and displayed the peculiar phases of degradation which poverty impresses on the human character under the combinations of a defective civilization, he is guided in his career by a high moral object; and in tracing what is most loathsome and repulsive, he contrives to enlist the best feelings of our nature in his cause, and to engage his readers in the consideration of what lies below the surface.⁵

This reads like a statement by Dickens himself of what he meant to do in *Oliver Twist*, for, according to the preface written for the edition of 1841, he intended to "attempt something which was needed, and which would be a service to society,"⁶ by divesting thieves and murderers of the glory and fascination which had so often been mistakenly thrown around them, and by instead presenting them as they really were. Although he does not specify this "something," from the context it apparently means teaching people the real misery and squalor of the lives of criminals, thereby warning them against the danger of stepping into evil ways. Such a warning was no doubt directed to those masses who were exposed to poverty and, through it, to degradation. Since literacy was spreading among common people, and since magazines like *Bentley's Miscellany*, in which *Oliver Twist* was serialized, were available at coffee-houses,⁷ it might not have been vain thus to address lower-class readers in a novel. However, to upper- and middle class readers, such a warning was irrelevant; they simply enjoyed reading about poverty, degradation and crime as about something novel and curious.

5. *Athenaeum*, Oct. 26, 1839, p. 803.

6. *Oliver Twist*, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1970, p. xv.

7. Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1963, p. 6.

In this connection, the following extract from a review of *Oliver Twist*, which I already discussed in my essay on Bulwer, will help to grasp the characteristics of Dickens' "high moral object":

He [Dickens] is . . . exempt from the meretricious cant of spurious philosophy. He never endeavours to mislead our sympathies—to pervert plain notions of right and wrong—to make vice interesting in our eyes—and shake our confidence in those whose conduct is irreproachable, by dwelling on the hollowness of seeming virtue. His vicious characters are just what experience shows the average to be; and what the natural operation of those circumstances to which they have been exposed would lead us to expect. We are made to feel both what they are, and *why* they are what we find them. We find no monsters of unmitigated and unredeemable villainy; no creatures blending with their crimes the most incongruous and romantic virtues. . . .⁸

The point I tried to make, and want to make again on the basis of the above extract, is that *Oliver Twist* is here favorably compared with Bulwer's *Eugene Aram* not so much because Dickens' vicious characters are faithful representations of actual characters (which is not always true) as because Dickens did not offend his middle-class readers in the way Bulwer did. In *Oliver Twist*, there is no heroic highwayman, who turns out to be a son of a gentleman, like Paul Clifford, and no murderer with a seemingly decent character and social position, like Eugene Aram. Sikes and Fagin are conceived as "insensible and callous natures, that do become utterly and incurably bad."⁹ There is an unsurmountable distance between these underworld criminals and the respectable middle-class characters, a distance wide enough to enable the reader to regard these criminals as creatures of a different world and so to shed self-complacent tears over their misery and fate. The same distance also intervenes between them and Oliver, a child of a gentleman. Without any convincing reasons, Oliver is not at all infected by the venomous germs of the surroundings he is thrown into, and he is finally rescued and brought back to his proper place. Thus, we find Dickens', "high moral object" strongly biased toward his sense of belonging with his middle-class readers.

8. *Edinburgh Review*, LXVIII (Oct. 1838), pp. 77–8.

9. *Oliver Twist*, xvii.

Of course, other authors preceding or contemporary with Dickens shared such a bias, and there are other heroes who, like *Oliver Twist*, are fortunately rescued from what seems to be an inevitable fate through some unconvincing process. Apart from some fortunate heroes of the *Waverley* novels, we find a close kinship to Paul Clifford. But *Oliver* is even more fortunate than Paul, for, influenced by the evil forces around him, Paul is degraded into being a criminal, whereas *Oliver* remains intact throughout. Indeed, it may be possible to conclude, as Humphrey House does jokingly, that in *Oliver Twist* "Dickens' main lesson was that a good heredity can overcome anything, and that in some cases environment counts for nothing at all."¹⁰

If, then, *Oliver Twist* was more favorably accepted than other Newgate novels by contemporary reviewers, the reception had much to do with the fact that Dickens had more of the middle-class bias, in that sense being more conventional than other authors. What went over well with Victorian readers often goes over badly with us, however. The purpose of this essay is to reexamine Dickens' Newgate novels and to put into relief such qualities in them as appeal to *us* as unique in contrast to other novels of the genre.

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Whenever we dismiss those aspects of Dickens which made him fit for respectable Victorian drawing-rooms, it is almost routine to quote Edmund Wilson and to emphasize how "Dickens identified himself readily with the thief, and even more readily with the murderer."¹¹ Certainly Dickens often goes astray from his ostensible purpose of blaming criminals, and shares with them their passion and violence, their agony of isolation and despair. At the same time, however, I feel we should not be too ready to ignore what we may call Dickens' ostensible purpose as merely ostensible. While I find

10. Humphrey House, "Introduction," *Oliver Twist*, ix.

1. Edmund Wilson, "Dickens: the Two Scrooges," *The Wound and the Bow*, London, Methuen, 1961, p. 15.

nothing to object to in Edmund Wilson's now-classic essay, I feel the process by which Dickens identifies himself with criminals is worth more attention.

Let us examine two passages from *Oliver Twist*. In the first passage, Oliver, taken for a pickpocket, is driven to bay:

'Stop thief! Stop thief!' There is a magic in the sound. The tradesman leaves his counter, and the carman his waggon; the butcher throws down his tray; the baker his basket; the milkman his pail; the errand-boy his parcels; the school-boy his marbles; the paviour his pick-axe; the child his battledore. . . .

'Stop thief! Stop thief!' The cry is taken up by a hundred voices, and the crowd accumulate at every turning. Away they fly, splashing through the mud, and rattling along the pavements: up go the windows, out run the people, onward bear the mob, a whole audience desert Punch in the very thickest of the plot, and, joining the rushing throng, swell the shout, and lend fresh vigour to the cry, 'Stop thief! Stop thief!'

'Stop thief! Stop thief!' There is a passion *for hunting something* deeply implanted in the human breast.² (Italics, the author's)

In such a passage, it is hard to imagine that Dickens is identifying himself solely with the poor hunted boy. On the contrary, as if he were one of the people running after Oliver, his style is animated with a rhythmic ring and a feeling of speed. The vivacity of the style is all the more noteworthy because here in Chapter 10, almost for the first time, Dickens abandons the detached and satiric attitude with which he has hitherto considered *Oliver Twist*. In the passages preceding the one quoted above, he has been describing how Oliver watches his companions picking the pocket of a gentleman, and how, astounded, he takes to his heels, not knowing what he is doing. Then with the cry of 'Stop thief!' Dickens has suddenly left Oliver's point of view and joined the crowd hunting down the poor child.

In the next paragraph, Chitling tells how the raging mob surrounded Fagin when he was arrested:

'You should have heard the people groan. . . . The officers fought like devils, or they'd have torn him away. He was down once, but they made a ring round him, and fought their way along. You should have seen how he

2. *Oliver Twist*, 66-7.

looked about him, all muddy and bleeding, and clung to them as if they were his dearest friends. I can see 'em now, not able to stand upright with the pressing of the mob, and dragging him along amongst 'em; I can see the people jumping up, one behind another, and snarling with their teeth and making at him; I can see the blood upon his hair and beard, and hear the cries with which the women worked themselves into the centre of the crowd at the street corner, and swore they'd tear his heart out!³

Here too, the passion of a mob hunting down a helpless criminal is vividly conveyed. The similarity of the two passages strikes us the more because the persons hunted down are conceived by the author to be at opposite extremes: a son of a gentleman who is going to be rescued from out of the underworld, and an unredeemable wretch who is going to be condemned to death. We are led to suspect that such scenes as above must proceed from some essential core of the imagination of the author, so essential that it is capable of effacing his more conscious, perfunctory setting-up of Oliver and Fagin as the respectable vs. the criminal.

It is by no means easy to define the attitude of Dickens toward such mobs as are described in the above two passages. It is true that our sympathy is fastened upon the breathless, panting child and the bleeding Jew; in both cases Dickens seems to be resentful of the merciless pursuit of the mobs. However, if we look at the above passages closely, we notice that our sympathy is directed toward the criminals through the author's taking the point of view not of the persons hunted down but of the hunting mobs. The more keenly we are made to feel their brutal resentment, their sadistic hostility toward the violators of law, the more deeply our pity is stirred. Certainly Dickens identifies himself, as Edmund Wilson says, with "rebels and criminals," but he often expresses his sympathy by identifying himself with the force opposing them.

Indeed, the "passion of hunting something" and pity toward the hunted-down, or, to put these ideas in another way, aggressiveness and the fear of being exposed to it, seem to make up two essential

3. *Ibid.*, 384.

aspects of Dickens' imagination. The two aspects are inseparable from each other, one presupposing the other. More often than not, however, it is the first phase, the phase of aggressive passion, which comes to the fore. Even in the first few chapters of *Oliver Twist*, we cannot but notice how often the portrayal of his characters is inspired by it:

... Mr. Bumble was a fat man, and a choleric; so, instead of responding to this open-hearted salutation in a kindred spirit, he gave the little wicket a tremendous shake, and then bestowed upon it a kick which could have emanated from no leg but a beadle's.⁴

Mr. Gamfield growled a fierce imprecation on the donkey generally, but more particularly on his eyes; and, running after him, bestowed a blow on his head, which would inevitably have beaten in any skull but a donkey's.⁵

'... There! Get down stairs, little bag o' bones.' With this, the undertaker's wife opened a side door, and pushed Oliver down a steep flight of stairs into a stone cell. . . .⁶

Oliver was awakened in the morning, by a loud kicking at the outside of the shop-door; which before he could huddle on his clothes, was repeated, in an angry and impetuous manner, about twenty-five times.⁷

Mr. Bumble violently shakes the wicket; Mr. Gamfield beats his donkey; Mrs. Sowerbury pushes Oliver down the stairs, and Noah Claypole kicks at the door. They are all people who, though not criminals, lack warm, humane feelings and are full of malicious intent. Needless to say, the violent impulses manifested in their actions are identical with those of the mobs we have seen before.

Gradually, then, we must consider Dickens' ambiguity. It lies in the way in which he embodies his aggressive imagination. In some cases, it certainly finds expressions in the portrayal of the rebel and the criminal. Fagin, for example, sends some of his comrades to the

4. *Ibid.*, 6.

5. *Ibid.*, 15.

6. *Ibid.*, 27.

7. *Ibid.*, 29.

gallows and afterward reflects:

'What a fine thing capital punishment is! Dead men never repent; dead men never bring awkward stories to light. Ah, it's a fine thing for the trade! Five of 'em strung up in a row, and none left to play booty, or turn white-livered!'⁸

Sikes' entrance into the novel is marked with the same kind of violent gesture:

'Why didn't you come in afore?' said the man. 'You're getting too proud to own me afore company, are you? Lie down!'

This command was accompanied with a kick, which sent the animal to the other end of the room.⁹

More often than not, however, the aggressiveness in Dickens imagination vents itself, as we have seen, in individuals who are not criminals, but cold-hearted, malicious persons. Also, what interests me even more, it vents itself in the mobs who hunt down criminals and, in that sense, apparently belong to the side of law and justice. It is true that Dickens had antipathy toward those who violate the peace and order of society. Among such violators, he firmly believed, "there are . . . some insensible and callous natures, that do become utterly and incurably bad."¹⁰ Also, in one of his letters, which I will quote later, he disapproves of people's morbid sympathy with condemned criminals. At the same time, though, he bestows on the people who are the defenders of law and order those cruel and malicious passions which are more likely the attributes of criminals. Not only does he bestow them thus, but he also shares them. And sometimes he does both without seeming to be aware of what he is doing.

Let me illustrate this point through a comparison of two of his characters, Dennis the Hangman in *Barnaby Rudge* and Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*. They both are minions of the law, but they are totally different from each other. Dennis is one of Dickens' characters in whom he definitely intends to make their sadistic passions

8. *Ibid.*, 59.

9. *Ibid.*, 86.

10. Cf. footnote 9 of Chap. I

appear loathsome. To Dennis the condemned men who are in his charge are like his secret treasure. When the rioters invade the Newgate prison to set the prisoners free and, hearing the uproar, the condemned men entreat him to unlock their cells, he enjoys bullying them:

... he [Dennis] rapped at one of the doors with his stick, and cried:

'Hold your noise there, will you?'

At this they all cried together that they were to be hanged on the next day but one; and again implored his aid.

'Aid! For what!' said Mr. Dennis, playfully rapping the knuckles of the hand nearest him.

'To save us!' they cried.

'Oh, certainly,' said Mr. Dennis, winking at the wall in the absence of any friend with whom he could humour the joke. 'And so you're to be worked off, are you brothers?'

'Unless we are released to-night,' one of them cried, 'we are dead men!'

'I tell you what it is,' said the hangman, gravely; 'I'm afraid my friend that you're not in that 'ere state of mind that's suitable to your condition, then; you're not a-going to be released: don't think it—Will you leave off that 'ere indecent row? I wonder you an't ashamed of yourselves, I do.'¹¹

Dennis the Hangman is one of the characters who seem to personify the essential emotional pattern in Dickens.¹² He is both an executor of law and a rebel against it, for he himself takes an active part in the Gordon riot, though he does not give his treasured condemned men away to his fellow rioters. He firmly believes that, since he has been a faithful servant of the law, he will be exempt from any punishment imposed on the rioters. Even when he is sentenced to death, he expects a reprieve. Then, when he realizes it is not coming, he crawls on his knees, begging for life in a most abject manner. He was cruel in the name of the law; now he finds himself exposed to the same mercilessness.

11. *Barnaby Rudge*, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1968, p. 500–501.

12. No wonder, therefore, that he is frequently discussed in articles and books on Dickens. See, for example, Edmund Wilson, *op. cit.*, 18–9; Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel*, Detroit, Wayne State Univ. Press, 1963, pp. 179–189.

Now let us look at Inspector Bucket in *Bleak House*. Unlike Dennis, he is intended by the author as a good and trustworthy executor of law. He is the detective employed by Mr. Tulkinghorn to discover Lady Dedlock's secret. Shortly after he unearths it, Mr. Tulkinghorn is found murdered. Suspicion naturally falls on Lady Dedlock. However, Bucket builds up evidence bit by bit and finally arrests Hortense, Lady Dedlock's maid, instead.

He is an efficient detective. Free from any prejudice, he gathers evidence in quite a scientific way, and, on the strength of that evidence, he tactfully leads the true murderer to admit her crime. At the same time, however, Dickens' intention seems to be to present him as a kind-hearted man. When Bucket takes Hortense to the police, for instance, he tells her:

'... Now, my dear, put your arm a little further through mine, and hold it steady, and I sha'n't hurt you!'

In a trice Mr. Bucket snaps a handcuff on her wrist. 'That's one,' says Mr. Bucket. 'Now the other, darling. Two, and all told?'¹³

At first glance, Bucket seems polite and even kind, but such a passage suggests that the kindness of the inspector is of the most shallow kind, with something feline about it; it reminds us of a cat which lovingly watches a mouse before she eats it. What I want to say is that even Inspector Bucket, who apparently springs from Dickens' admiration of Inspector Field¹⁴ and who has Dickens' whole-hearted approval, is not free from the bullying passion of Dennis the Hangman. Thus, we find that the two characters who are supposed to stand a world apart are not so much removed from each other as they seem at first glance.

It will not be amiss here to remark that, as has already been pointed out,¹⁵ Inspector Bucket is the first detective to appear in English fiction and that in this episode we find a prototype of the modern detective

13. *Bleak House*, The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, 1971, p. 742.

14. With regard to Inspector Field, cf. Phillip Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, London, Macmillan, 1965, pp. 206-7.

15. A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel*, London, Peter Owen, 1968, p. 95.

story. The fact seems to me very significant, for, although both genres deal with crimes and criminals, the detective novel is opposed to the Newgate Novel in its attitude to the criminals. In short, the Newgate Novel was sympathetic with them, whereas the detective novel could not flourish, as Dorothy Sayers puts it, "until public sympathy has veered round to the side of law and order."¹⁶ It certainly is not a coincidence that the components of both types of fiction coexist in Dickens.

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Dickens' letters to the *Daily News* dealing with the then controversial issue of the abolition of capital punishment confirm what we have seen in the previous chapter. These letters, written in 1846, are based on his recollections of the execution of Courvoisier several years before, the same execution which had made Thackeray feel so horrified and disgusted. Thackeray's horror and disgust drove him to write his essay, "Going to See a Man Hanged," in which he ardently expresses his wish to see capital punishment abolished.

Dickens, too, was an abolitionist. However, the ground on which he demands the abolition is slightly different from that of Thackeray. To the latter, hanging done in the name of law was nothing but legal murder, and he was ashamed of himself for having gone to see the sight at all. It does not seem that Dickens was tormented by the same sort of uneasiness or guilt. Rather, Dickens' objection to capital punishment was founded chiefly on his fear that the sight of execution would cause a morbid sympathy towards the culprit among gentle-hearted people. In his first letter to the *Daily News*, Dickens, dissociating himself "from that mawkish sentimentality" he so often detects in other penal reformers, states, "In most cases of murder, my feeling towards the culprit is very strongly and violently reverse."¹

16. Dorothy Sayers (ed.), *The Omnibus of Crime*, New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., n. d., p. 11.

1. Collins, *op. cit.*, 226. According to Collins, this letter has remained uncollected in any collection of Dickens' letters.

According to Phillip Collins, he later shifted his opinion and turned into an abolitionist not of capital punishment itself but only of public execution.² This seems but a natural sequence.

At any rate, he was already discussing the abolition of capital punishment in 1846. In his letter to an editor of the *Edinburgh Review* written shortly before his letters to the *Daily News*, he insists on the danger of a culprit being turned into a martyr:

... it is a great question whether ignorant and dissolute persons . . . seeing *that* murder done, and not having seen the other, will not, almost of necessity sympathise with the man who dies before them; especially as he is shown, a martyr to their fancy—tied and bound—alone among scores—with every kind of odds against him.³

It seems to me that few passages written by Dickens throw more revealing light on the criminals in his novels. In spite of his warning that the culprit should not be looked upon as a martyr, we suspect that, to his imagination, the condemned man on the scaffold appealed as such a martyr. Indeed, in Dickens' criminals, the images of culprit and martyr often overlap, especially in the scene when they are pursued, prosecuted, or executed. In such scenes, the hunting, howling mobs with their blood-thirsty excitement are made to look as hideous as, or even more hideous than the hideous criminals themselves. Moreover, as the mobs reveal their relentless, merciless aggressiveness, the criminals begin to look more and more like scapegoats, who are to be killed not because of their own guilt but because they have to take upon themselves the guilt of others.

In Fagin, the Jewish fence in *Oliver Twist*, we find a Dickens criminal-scapegoat. In his case, the aspect of scapegoat is reinforced not only by the mob which fills every inch of the court where his trial is going on, but also by Oliver, who gives him over to law and justice and by doing so is himself restored to a peaceful life. As Hillis Miller, in his elaborate analysis of the plot of *Oliver Twist*, says,

2. *Ibid.*, 236–8.

3. *Ibid.*, 228.

Fagin dies “for” Oliver the death he would have died. The embodiment of all the evil in the novel, he is the scapegoat whose death, even more than Sikes’, destroys all that evil, and makes it possible for Oliver to “live happily ever after.”⁴

In the trial scene of Fagin, as in other similar scenes, the force which makes a scapegoat of an old wretched Jew is sometimes associated with natural elements, such as thunder and storm. At the outset, describing the numerous, inquisitive eyes fixed on Fagin, Dickens says that Fagin “seemed to stand surrounded by a firmament, all bright with gleaming eyes.”⁵ The simile of a firmament is significant. It sounds like an expression of a revenging passion, “the passion of hunting something,” in the author himself; he makes an insurmountable distance intervene between the outcast and the decent people, of whom he is one. However it also sounds like an expression of the author’s keen sympathy with the isolated man; Fagin looks up and sees that, however far he may reach out, he cannot arrive at the place where the other people are. When Fagin is sentenced to death,

The building rang with a tremendous shout, and another, and another, and then it echoed loud groans, then gathered strength as they swelled out, like angry thunder. It was a peal of joy from the populace outside, greeting the news that he would die on Monday.⁶

Again, as the wild excitement of the people culminates in “angry thunder,” the two phases of the outcast and of the scapegoat are intensified. The author shares the anger of the crowd, and at the same time he shares the sense of isolation of Fagin.

Perhaps the most impressive scene in Dickens’ Newgate novels, impressive in the sense that it contains all that is unique in Dickens’ handling of the criminal and the relentless mob, is found in Chapter 77 of *Barnaby Rude*. It is the scene in which a crowd of people swarm around the scaffold to see the execution of Hugh, Dennis, and Barnaby.

4. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels*, Bloomington, Indiana Univ. Press, 1973, p. 66.

5. *Oliver Twist*, 404.

6. *Ibid.*, 405.

No doubt the memory of Courvoisier's execution, which Dickens had seen some time before, was at work when he wrote this part of the novel. Just as Dickens had set out the night before the execution so as to be able to watch the whole process of preparation, so the chapter begins with the coming of the dawn when some workmen begin to build the gallows:

A fairer morning never shone. From the roofs and upper stories of these buildings, the spires of city churches and the great cathedral dome were visible, rising up beyond the prison, into the blue sky, and clad in the colour of light summer clouds, and showing in the clear atmosphere their every scrap of tracery and fret-work, and every niche and loophole. All was brightness and promise, excepting in the street below, into which (for it yet lay in shadow) the eye looked down as into a dark trench, where, in the midst of so much life, and hope, and renewal of existence, stood the terrible instrument of death. It seemed as if the very sun forbore to look upon it.⁷

Beautiful dawn, light, and hope, and the terrible instrument of death in the midst of them—the contrast increases in intensity as the scene moves to its climax. Life with its aggressiveness becomes denser and thicker, and the gallows standing in the midst of it attracts all the darkness toward it:

Then, a profound silence replaced the tumult that had so long been gathering, and a breathless pause ensued. Every window was now choked up with heads; the house-tops teemed with people—clinging to chimneys, peering over gable-ends, and holding on where the sudden loosening of any brick or stone would dash them down into the street. The church tower, the church roof, the church yard, the prison leads, the very water-spouts and lamp posts—every inch of room—swarmed with human life.

At the first stroke of twelve the prison-bell began to toll. Then the roar—mingled now with cries of 'Hats off!' and 'Poor fellows!' and, from some specks in the great concourse, with a shriek or groan—burst forth again. It was terrible to see—if any one in that distraction of excitement could have seen—the world of eager eyes, all strained upon the scaffold and the beam.⁸

Certainly this is a re-working of Fagin's court scene. Here again the

7. *Barnaby Rudge*, 589–90.

8. *Ibid.*, 592.

force exerted so forcibly on the outcasts is expressed in such terms as "the roar" or "the world of eager eyes." It is noteworthy that, in this climactic scene, almost all details concerning the individual spectators are discarded. The mob is seen from a slightly different angle from that he takes in his letter to the *Daily News*; there he pays more attention to the behavior of the spectators around him.

I did not see one token in all the immense crowd; at the windows, in the streets, on the house-tops, anywhere; of any one emotion suitable to the occasion. No sorrow, no salutary terror, no abhorrence, no seriousness; nothing but ribaldry, debauchery, levity, drunkenness, and flaunting vice in fifty other shapes.⁹

Even if, then, the memory of such spectators was lingering in the back of his mind when he wrote *Barnaby Rudge*, we can hardly call the scene in Chapter 77 a faithful representation of such a crowd. In his letter, he describes the spectators around him from a spectator's point of view. Here in the novel, he identifies himself with the genii both of the crowd and of the criminal, who is also a scapegoat. Thus, the whole scene is reorganized; it is more ritualized, as it were, with the sharp contrast of the roaring mob and the helpless culprit, of life with its aggressiveness and death with its shame and glory.

This was a familiar image deeply implanted in the imagination of English people.¹⁰ However, behind the image of the criminal-scapegoat, looms the inner drama of Dickens. In the eighteen-thirties and forties, when public executions were still practiced, and when the shadow of the gallows still overhung the streets of London, Dickens took hold of this image, and, investing it with his own deepest emotions, gave it life once and for all in his Newgate novels.

9. Collins, *op. cit.*, 226.

10. I shall examine this point in more detail in my next article.

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