

Character Revisited: Bakhtinian Authoring in *Oliver Twist*¹

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Arguments about character and its relevance to the study of the Novel often focus on the relation between art and life. Some look for a correspondence between the two; others put “life” between quotation marks, seeing it, and character, as linguistically constructed and ideologically determined. In “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity,” a book-length essay written in the 1920s, the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin sidesteps the issue of mimetic representation, concentrating instead on the relationship between the external reader or author and the character within the novel. For reasons that may become apparent later in this article, Bakhtin treats reader and author as much the same, almost as co-creators (67, 207). Bakhtinian authoring begins with the foundational act of belief that makes the fiction possible—the wanting to believe in a character, in a hero. The reader has to give something of himself or herself in the first place to bring the work of art to life by humanizing the characters, and in doing this he or she enters into an active relationship with them. Belief in fiction, especially in the novel, draws on the desire to love another as another, not necessarily for oneself. Bakhtin puts his faith in that belief. So does Dickens. So does John Ruskin when he claims that in response to Sir Walter Scott’s heroes “All our good feelings are brought into play. . . . Have we not for the time overcome . . . our great enemy, Self?” (365–66) Of course, loving disinterest may not be successfully realized in practice, but Bakhtin argues that in being acted upon it shapes the historical development of the novel as a genre.

According to Bakhtin, authors begin creation through empathy. Artistic or aesthetic activity then gets properly under way when the artist steps back, in order to actively contemplate the hero from the outside. Authors and their readers strive to give a shape to the hero’s life, to see it in the round. Bakhtin calls this “consummation.” He writes that we can never see ourselves properly except through others’ eyes. The hero’s birth and death, for example, are necessarily unknown to the hero himself (14, 64), for only the

author can see those ultimate limits of the other's life. Heroes cannot see themselves from the outside and in themselves they are incomplete, looking to an unknown future, wanting to *know* the shape of their lives. Heroes need an author if they are to find that shape, which is why for Bakhtin personality is intersubjective, not subjective. Disinterested aesthetic love, made possible by his outside position, his "excess" of vision, allows the author to bestow a shaping understanding on the hero. The basic distinction between the author and the hero is, then, that the author can offer *understanding*, while the hero is driven by the need to *know*, to find or create meaning. A real-life example of authoring would be a mother with her baby: "Words of love and acts of genuine concern come to meet the dark chaos of my inner sensation of myself: they name, direct, satisfy, and connect with the outside world. . . . The child begins to see himself for the first time as if through his mother's eyes" (50).²

For Bakhtin, aesthetic shaping within art and life are synonymous, with the former a more intense version that can also permeate the latter. It can be argued, however, that whereas authoring may be true in real life, fictional characters are not real and should not be treated as such. Surely there is just one consciousness in play, namely the author's? To answer this, we need to join the dots in Bakhtin's thinking, as he often expects us to do. We can say the novel creates a confusion that allows us to treat fictional characters *as though* they are real. In giving oneself to giving form and acting as the organizing agent of a text, author/readers live for a time to give shape to someone else and lose sight of themselves. "[S]uch is the nature of all active creative experiences," writes Bakhtin. "[T]hey experience their object and experience themselves *in* their object, but they do not experience the process of their own experiencing" (6-7). The finite nature of self-consciousness, the fact that in the aesthetic activity of belief we cannot see our selves at work, makes it impossible for us to judge whether the hero is the product of our own consciousness or whether we have actually encountered another consciousness external to ourselves. In that ignorance, the hero comes alive, thereby freeing us to entertain the apparently impossible while appreciating that it could be exactly that.

The dynamic intersubjectivity of authoring *is* the life of culture, built up through media and genres over time. The novel as a genre is remarkable for its sense of *doubleness*: as the role of the author emerges into cultural consciousness, so character becomes the criterion for cultural value, and the authorial insistence on the importance of the hero translates the "as if it were true" of fiction in general into the "as if *he* or *she* were true" of the novel. In the process, the reader takes on a new importance. The driving force is the democratic power that the foregrounding of authoring gives to readers to share

in creation, a power so great that Bakhtin speaks of giving a soul to another (128–29).

The immense popularity of Mr. Pickwick, from his first appearance onward, testifies to the pleasure of readers in literary creation. Readers felt and still feel indebted to Dickens for making it possible for them to share in an activity so comically startling that they are compelled to return to the narrative, complicit in the creation of an apparently self-perpetuating hero. The given that Pickwick endlessly longs for and negates at every turn is Wisdom. The longing and the negation artlessly invite the shaping and saving grace of loving art, a consummating celebration to be enjoyed in the creative renewal of each fresh installment of the serial or reading of the book.

Giving aesthetic love is no straightforward business, at any time or in any place. The same capitalism that disseminates authoring power also promotes a self-regarding materialism that undercuts the traditional Christian credo of unselfishness. In the nineteenth century it combines with the romantic belief in the supremacy of the individual will, and this unholy alliance produces the most powerful icon of modern times: the self-made man, in whose image society is formed. Or deformed, according to both Dickens and Bakhtin. In Bakhtin's view, a crisis of authorship is precipitated by the growing belief in the autonomy of the individual (202–03). This is *self-consummation*: the assertion of one's own godlike, infinite power through subordinating the world to one's self. Self-consummation, I would argue, is the power that Dickens entertains, defines and combats. The battle will be his lifework, starting with *Oliver Twist*.

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If Pickwick celebrates authoring, *Oliver Twist* enacts Dickens's realization of its ambiguous power. Unlike Bakhtin in "Author and Hero," and learning from the eighteenth-century British novelists who provide the models for his writing, Dickens sees that fictional heroes may themselves be authors of others in the world of the novel and that a self-consummating author can consciously exploit the desire to love another as another. In moral terms, he understands from early on that selfishness feeds on love.

Opposing that selfishness in *Oliver Twist*, Dickens enlists the power of Mr. Brownlow and his band of goodness—the Maylies and Mr. Losberne – in support of the potential for loving consummation offered by the innocence of Oliver. However, in bringing Fagin to life he creates a monster of self-consummation whose demonic power threatens to compromise Dickens's own New Testament conception of loving authoring. To combat his character, Dickens takes Bakhtin's route in "Author and Hero" and

concentrates on the authoring relationship between the external author and the authorial hero within the text. Dickens, and the reader with him, will author authors, a dangerous practice that heralds the emergence of a peculiarly Dickensian version of what Bakhtin has taught us to call dialogism.

Dickens begins, however, with the relatively easy target of Mr. Bumble and the Workhouse. As G.K. Chesterton says, he is not primarily concerned with critiquing such doctrines as Utilitarianism. Rather, Dickens's concern is to attack oppression in a resolutely personal way: "he disliked a certain look on the face of a man when he looks down on another man" (xi). However, he sees as early as *Oliver Twist*, and perhaps even earlier in the trial narrative of *Pickwick*, that many in society seek to objectify oppression, to make it more effective by systematizing it. In Dickens's later novels, systems of selfishness will define society itself.

The systematization of oppression is made personal through the well-known dramatic characterization that we have come to call Dickensian. In Dickens's "circle of stage fire" as Ruskin calls it, self-consummation promotes itself through a sense of heightened individual personality. Bumble and Fagin, lawful and unlawful oppressors, dramatize themselves, performing in order to impress their selves upon society, and authoring others in the service of their own self-consummation. The understanding of oppression that Dickens develops throughout his career begins to take shape in *Oliver Twist*. A self-consummating predator such as Fagin works to block his victim's knowledge of himself and his world. Deprived of self-knowledge, the victim cannot become a hero with a capacity to receive and then perhaps to give love.

The Workhouse institutionalizes ignorance. Bumble's performance turns on identifying himself with the system he represents. The Workhouse is everything and must be good; he, Bumble, is the Workhouse, so he must be good; the outcast Oliver, by contrast, is nothing and must be bad. Telling the child he is to be apprenticed, Bumble says, "The kind and blessed gentlemen which is so many parents to you, Oliver, when you have none of your own: are a-going to 'prentice you: and to set you up in life, and make a man of you: although the expense to the parish is three pound ten! —three pound ten, Oliver! —seventy shillin's—one hundred and forty sixpences! —and all for a naughty orphan which nobody can't love." (Ch. 3, 16) The pompous rhetoric is the beadle, swelling through a succession of main clauses to the climax of "Make a man of you," before counting down financially from pounds to shillings to sixpences to the nothing that is Oliver. O. Zero. The supposed munificence of the Workhouse authorities becomes Bumble's generosity in the act of speaking and is confirmed by the repetition of

Oliver's own nullity: no parents and no one to love him. In the verbal act of giving, Bumble takes away, making himself through making nothing of the child. This is self-consummation at the expense of innocence.

A shared self-interested oppression of the weak and a knowing abuse of knowledge define Workhouse society. The social solidarity of the oppressors is expressed through an assumed caring morality accompanied by a knowingness of gesture and action that mocks the morality while blocking the knowledge. The knowingness exercised by the criminal society of self-interest in London is more developed and dynamic than in the Workhouse, but it, too, is intensely hostile to knowledge. Knowingness, as opposed to simply knowing something, involves the display of a consciousness of secret knowledge. Revealing and hiding, it takes teasing advantage of the innocent who lack a consciousness of the game being played. In a society ruled by knowingness, those who know that the world works through self-interest can take pleasure in practising together against the innocent who stupidly think the world turns on goodness.

Knowingness works, above all, through style, the formal expression of self. Style of manner, gestures, clothes. Style of language. Oliver notices at the outset the Dodger's hat, "stuck on the top of his head so lightly, that it threatened to fall off every moment; and would have done so, very often, if the wearer had not had a knack of every now and then giving his head a sudden twitch: which brought it back to its old place again" (Ch. 8, 46-47). Showily defying gravity, the Artful lives up to his nickname and turns nature into art. Style is the man. Or rather, style is the child playing at being a man. His opening words—"Hullo! my covey, what's the row?" (Ch. 8, 46)—are unlike anything in the Workhouse world. The Workhouse would only shut Oliver up. The Dodger's easy familiarity invites him to open up, which he does. Criminal society offers the lure of friendship, but at the same time the slang exercises the Dodger's power by impressing upon Oliver that this city boy knows what he is talking about.

The Artful Dodger's style, his overriding concern with the form of his self-presentation, makes him the model for the boys in Fagin's gang. As Fagin says, he "understands the catechism of his trade" (Ch. 18, 118). This remark is presumably meant seriously for Oliver, whereas the Dodger might relish the mocking blasphemy. It is a telling example of Fagin's authoring technique, which here acts in one way on the innocent while simultaneously winking to the knowing. But the wink itself is a further level of performance, which conceals from those who are confident that they are in the know the knowledge that Fagin actually holds them in contempt. The Dodger has simply fallen for Fagin's display of his own acting.³ Meanwhile, the Dodger's half-comic

preaching to Oliver in Chapter 18 about the virtue of stealing takes the form of an act of friendship that would shape Oliver's sense of himself. In other words, it would author him. The friendly talk is conducted on the Dodger's own condescending terms since Oliver is cleaning his boots at the time. Disguised by a play of words—the Artful refers to it as “japanning his trotters” —the demeaning task still asserts the Dodger's power. He dodges verbally. One important function of the slang is to catch the attention, confusing the innocent while the knowing get on with their criminal activity. The style acts to suppress the knowledge that Oliver is a kidnap victim held against his will and to persuade him that his future lies with the gang. Helped by Charley Bates, the Dodger's mocking performance of morality—“You've been brought up bad,” said the Dodger, surveying his boots when Oliver had polished them (Ch. 18, 118)—works on several levels. If Oliver is stupid, he may take the Dodger at face value. If he is not, he may laugh at the mimicry of conventional moralizing, but the humor would catch him in the toils of knowingness. He would find himself playing the game. And so, indeed, may we.

The Dodger's mimicry of the respectable law-abiding world in the famous courtroom scene in Chapter 43 steals the show, his self-authoring rhetoric assuming power over the law itself:

“Come on,” said the jailer.

“Oh ah! I'll come on,” replied the Dodger, brushing his hat with the palm of his hand. “Ah! (to the Bench) it's no use your looking frightened; I won't show you no mercy, not a ha'porth of it. *You'll* pay for this, my fine fellers. I wouldn't be you for something! I wouldn't go free, now, if you was to fall down on your knees and ask me. Here, carry me off to prison! Take me away!” (Ch. 43, 300)

Such is the joyful bravado of the Dodger's performance of himself that few would disagree with Claire Tomalin's claim that the Artful's “act of defiance . . . is one of the high points of *Oliver Twist*” (37). We might balk, however, at her further comment that “Dickens invites his readers to approve of such wit and total lack of contrition.” This misses, I think, Fagin's framing of the trial so that it is already subsumed by another performance, in which Fagin directs Charley Bates's eager anticipation of the courtroom drama. The Dodger may act as though he can author himself and the law, and is therefore autonomous, but here that very act is made to serve Fagin's authoring of Charley: “Master Bates, who had at first been disposed to consider the imprisoned Dodger in the light of a victim, now looked upon him as the chief actor in a scene of most uncommon and exquisite humour” (Ch. 43, 296). Identifying the Dodger as a victim could have led to a desire to identify the victimizer. Fagin has now blocked that particular path to knowledge.

Fagin has convinced the boys that he possesses superior knowingness through his ability to display his own acting to them while channelling their youthful energies into a dramatic self-authoring that sets them against the world. He uses their love of performing knowingness to suppress the knowledge that they are pawns to be sacrificed for his advantage. The children are joined by a shared pleasure in performance, but their supposed self-authoring is directed by Fagin, ensuring their willingness to be imprisoned, transported or hanged for him. In authoring them, he is shaping their lives and deaths. Such is Dickens's early model of a self-interested society. The most original of the boys is not the Dodger, his self given to the game, but Charley Bates, whose carnivalesque outbursts of hilarity at the gullibility of innocence constantly threaten to give the game away by admitting truth into the world of lies constructed by Fagin. It is Charley who will eventually turn knowingness into knowledge when he gives practical encouragement to those hunting Sikes and alerts them to the murderer's final attempt to escape (Ch. 50, 344–45). Above all, Charley is dangerous because his constant joie de vivre draws attention to the issue of choice—its possibility or impossibility.

The most basic knowledge the self-dramatizing oppressors in *Oliver Twist* must suppress is that others may have the power of choice. Oliver's resistance to oppression is enacted most famously in the Workhouse when he asks for more, but, as opposed to the question we often wrongly assume Oliver to ask—"Please, sir, may I have some more?"—which would politely cede control of choice to the Workhouse, his actual words—"Please, sir, I want some more" (Ch. 2, 11)—insult authority precisely because they assert the child's power to choose. For that reason, Oliver must be banished from the institutional world. And this, strangely enough, is his salvation. He wouldn't see it like that, but insisting on his choice actually wins Oliver his freedom by getting him out of the Workhouse. Working for Sowerberry may seem no better, but the Gothic extremes of the undertaker's shop help to shake Oliver into a revolt that leads to his escape to London.

In a world of poverty and systematized oppression, the greatest love an author can offer his hero is to preserve his or her power of choice. Dickens seeks to do this for the child in the first part of the book, up until the Chertsey attempted burglary, by working formally, not to aesthetically consummate his hero but to protect his capacity for knowledge. With action and plotting dominated by the oppressors, the focus with the child is on perception, his awkward insistence on seeing the world as it is. A well-known part of the fascination of *Oliver Twist* is the child's-eye view, Oliver's seeing and understanding in a profound way while remaining relatively vulnerable and gullible.

Although Oliver accepts the Dodger's offer to introduce him to Fagin, he remains

unimpressed by the other's style, and on the way to the gang's hideout he notes the hideous reality of the slums to which his guide seems impervious, cocooned as he is in his world of performance:

A dirtier or more wretched place *he [Oliver] had never seen*. The street was very narrow and muddy; and the air was impregnated with filthy odours. There were a good many small shops; but the only stock in trade appeared to be heaps of small children, who, even at that time of night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from the inside. . . . Covered ways and yards, which here and there diverged from the main street, disclosed little knots of houses, where drunken men and women were positively wallowing in the filth. (Ch. 8, 49; emphasis added)

The book's famous low-life realism clearly works to stir consciences and arouse the indignation of Dickens's middle-class readers. At the same time, it reinforces our sense of Oliver's own reality, for we see with him, and we may contrast him with the unseeing criminals. In this instance, realism conveys an openness of character set against and even subversive of a predatory dramatic authoring that would blind and bind its prey.

Oliver can also see into or through others. Welcomed into Fagin's den as an easy victim, and susceptible to Fagin's assumed familiarity and friendship, on his first night in their hideout Oliver still sees everything there is to see about Fagin. In "a drowsy state between sleeping and waking," he experiences a grotesque version of a Wordsworthian epiphany when he watches Fagin poring over his most precious treasures and listens to him singing the praises of death:

"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!" (Ch. 9, 52)

Oliver may respond to Fagin's entertaining games teaching thievery, and to the later regime of physical and mental deprivation and terror, but from the beginning he has an absolute knowledge that can inform his refusal to enter into the drama of the criminal world. Inscribed in his consciousness is the sure knowledge that Fagin lives and consummates himself through others' deaths.

In the openness of his innocence, Oliver also has a reflective power that can afford the knowledge suppressed by a self-consummating drama antagonistic to memory. Aroused to protect the child from the violence of Sikes and Fagin, Nancy points to Oliver as she remembers her own corruption by the Jew: "'I thieved for you when I was a child not half as old as this! . . . [T]he cold, wet, dirty streets are my home; and you're the wretch that drove me to them long ago'" (Ch. 16, 104). Sympathy awakens her to a

knowledge of herself that makes her a hero in Bakhtin's sense (Bakhtinian heroes can be male or female). As such, she could be lovingly consummated by an author. Unfortunately, of course, her chosen author would be Sikes, a man dedicated to the brutal denial of love. Responding to Oliver by providing knowledge to others of his identity, Nancy will instead be malevolently authored by Fagin, who first uses Claypole/ Bolter to frame the scene in which she passes on her information to Brownlow. Fagin then guides Sikes, the man she loves, to beat her to death. And all this goes back to Oliver. For the reader, one of the most shocking thoughts in the book is that the child sets in motion a train of events leading to Nancy's murder. In short, goodness can kill.

Oliver's reflective power offers self-realization to others, and the authoring influence of his innocence ripples through the book. Through his effect on Nancy, he exposes and challenges the pattern of hateful family relationships underlying self-interested criminal society. Because of him, she denies the antagonistic but collusive manipulation by her father-figure, Fagin, and her lover, Sikes. Sikes himself might seem to be self-sufficient, outside Fagin's repertory company, a non-actor defined by the reality of his vocation—violence. On his side, however, Fagin would author Sikes without his knowing through Nancy, over whom he exerts a tenuous control. In the triangle of their family relationship, Fagin is Nancy's pervert father and Sikes her wife-battering partner, each man hating the other while exploiting her.⁴ Each thinks he knows better than the hated other because each thinks he can control the woman. As a result, they both depend on her in their relationship of mutual hatred. Sikes's confidence in his own self-sufficiency depends on his belief that Nancy will submit to him body and soul, witness his response whenever she asserts herself, and his murderous reaction to her supposed treachery; Fagin's confidence in the all-encompassing authority of his criminal drama, with himself as author-director, depends on his belief that Nancy's acting skills can accommodate the violence of Sikes that underpins his theatre. When Nancy shuts out Fagin, the rage he turns upon her, channelled through Sikes, has the vicious intensity of a father's selfish love denied. Denied, we may add, exactly when he has delusions of forming a new family triangle with himself controlling a presumed relationship between Nancy and a new lover that would dispose of Sikes by murdering him. Far from controlling Nancy, Fagin finds that he is not needed. Sikes, in contrast, finds that he needs another. His brutal confidence has always depended on Nancy. Self-authoring denied, in his rage he kills her in order to assert his self-sufficiency, only to find himself authored by the dead Nancy, and by us, the readers, in the melodrama of his own death.

Oliver unwittingly sets in motion the events leading to the deaths of Nancy and Sikes,

and then to Fagin's execution. As the Jew dazedly says in the condemned cell, Oliver "'has been the—the—somehow the cause of all this'" (Ch. 52, 363). And he is Bumble's nemesis. The authors of the institutional and criminal worlds are both brought down by their involvement with Monks, their systems of oppression collapsing under the weight of the plotting generated by the dark twin who arises in response to Oliver.

The rabid extreme of the self-interest driving the book, the over-emphatic yet strangely vacuous Monks caricatures selfishness itself. His uncanny quality derives from the constructed irrationality of his plotting, so personal and so unnecessary since from any reasonable standpoint he has no need to pursue Oliver or even to bother with him in the first place. His own self-interest has been condensed and abstracted to the point where he hates everyone and everything, including his own body. As an author, Monks has given himself so completely to plot that it directs him. In his very unreality, he unsettles, fascinates and unfixes both Fagin and Bumble, and through them their social worlds, but he is himself unsettled to the point of insanity by Oliver, whom he can only see in a madly objectified sense as the subject of the *story* he will create.⁵ Monks's plotting would appropriate reality within the novel by replacing Oliver's history with a new narrative in which the boy would be publicly identified and condemned as a criminal. When actually faced with the child, he advances to hit him and then falls to the ground, "writhing and foaming, in a fit" (Ch. 33, 217). In absorbing character, plot expresses madness, destroys Fagin, and makes nothing of Monks, who bites his own hands in desperate efforts to prove his reality but succeeds only in confirming himself as an actor in someone else's melodrama.

The plotting is fundamentally generated, of course, by Dickens, himself under intense pressure to counter the evil he has created so powerfully and winningly in Fagin. He responds with his first major foray into dialogism, a move that will determine the direction of his writing life. Authoring and dialogism are ways of thinking about the doubleness of art, both in itself and in life, that derive from different consciousnesses being brought to bear upon each other. While authoring deals directly with the relationship between those consciousnesses, dialogism develops from the recognition that all language is already inhabited by other speakers. According to Michael Holquist, Bakhtin's editor in *The Dialogic Imagination*, "A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes 'dialogization' when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things" (427). Rather than attempting to impose order and meaning, the job of the author is to *orchestrate* the different meanings or voices.

With the Russian writer's grudging acceptance ("Discourse in the Novel" 263, 329),

we can apply dialogism to other forms of communicative art besides language per se: to genre, narrative, character, theme, even to place as it is represented in art. Encompassing all of these, Dickens takes the highly creative and dangerous path of relativizing authoring itself. That is to say, he authors authors, a perilous activity since the dialogical truths that take shape may challenge the writer's opening loving intentions and may even prove unendurable. That goodness can lead to evil, for example, is no easy truth to live with.

In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens authors Fagin through melodrama, with Monks as the vehicle for this crucial development in his writing. Dialogism enters the book, however, in a conventional form as the opening satire on the Workhouse. Dickens's language mimics the dispassionate, formal language of the political economists in order to insist on the responsibility of the educated, respectable men in power who have created such a barbarous system of oppression. The coolly angry humor assumes that we readers are civilized people who naturally join with the author in condemning such inhumanity, and our common stand against injustice licenses us to enjoy the humor despite Oliver's suffering.

Our laughter becomes uncomfortable when the Dodger and Fagin appropriate the same language of self-help and Utilitarianism in order to author others. They turn the very mockery previously employed against inhumanity to their own inhuman ends, which deprives us of the security of our previous ironic standpoint. In Fagin, Dickens creates and confronts his first dialogical monster. There will be others, including Quilp, Pecksniff, Tulkinghorn, Mrs. Clennam, and Pumblechook, each unique in their monstrosity and not all of them devilish—or not quite as devilish as Fagin. The Jew's success faces Dickens with the first really serious problem in his writing, for up until the Chertsey attempted burglary there are signs that Fagin's efforts to corrupt Oliver, the angel-child, could eventually work: he “had the boy in his toils; and . . . was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever” (Ch. 18, 120). This comment at the end of Chapter 18 heralds the lowest point in Oliver's misfortunes. Recaptured from Brownlow, he would seem to have no escape from the criminal system of oppression. Fagin takes the grooming of the child in Chapter 18 to a new level in Chapter 20 by exposing him in isolation to the pornographic violence of “a history of the lives and trial of great criminals,” in which “[t]he terrible descriptions were so real and vivid, that the sallow pages seemed to turn red with gore; and the words upon them, to be sounded in his ears, as if they were whispered, in hollow murmurs, by the spirits of the dead” (Ch. 20, 129–30).

Calming himself after a “paroxysm of fear,” Oliver prays “that if any aid were to be

raised up for a poor outcast boy who had never known the love of friends or kindred, it might come to him now, when, desolate and deserted, he stood alone in the midst of wickedness and guilt” (Ch. 20, 130). And he looks up from his prayer to catch sight of “a figure” at the door. Angel of mercy or angel of death, come to answer his prayers? From this point on, Gothic fairy tale in a Dickensian realistic mode takes hold in the narrative. Nancy has come to deliver Oliver to Sikes, who will take him out of London for the burglary, intended as the decisive event through which Oliver will be corrupted.

As he is led through the streets by Nancy, Oliver’s normally acute perception of her is baffled by an enigmatic sense of violent emotion only partly explained. By her own account, Nancy has chosen to take Oliver to Sikes because she wants him to know that she has already suffered for him and is doing all she can to protect him. The urgency of her language combines with uncanny images that hang in the mind: Nancy as the figure at the door, perhaps answering Oliver’s prayers, perhaps not; Sikes holding a loaded pistol to the child’s head and later clasping his hand as he makes off with the him, imprisoning the boy’s vulnerable reaching for affection. This realistic Dickensian version of a Gothic fairy tale—the innocent taken as a prisoner to the ogre’s castle by his protectress, and then spirited away into the darkness—is simultaneously full of meaning and of mystery. Everything seems to hinge on the woman, now left behind. At the end of the chapter she is sitting motionless in front of the fire as Sikes leads Oliver away to commit the crime meant to violate his innocence. But the powerful sense of enigma, which is entirely lost on Sikes, immersed in criminal business, may convey hope in seeming passivity. The surest and most secret advice Nancy could give to Oliver would be to do nothing. Mystery here evokes possibility, and it is Oliver’s passivity, his physical inability to act and do wrong, which will save him, and which will result in the defeat of the system of oppression. Dialogically, action is answered and undermined by the resistance of inaction.

Meanwhile, the main action is under way, master-minded, it would seem, by Fagin, but shaped by his response to the shadowy figure of Monks. In trying to benefit himself while satisfying Monks, Fagin will undo them both. With the plotting turning back on him, the Jew describes himself as “‘bound . . . to a born devil.’” As Robert Tracy says, once he is allied with Monks, “he becomes less a scheming criminal and more a kind of supernatural terror” (572–73). But the terror is beyond his control. Witness the haunting dream-scene when Oliver, apparently safe in his rural sanctuary, wakes to the shock of Monks and Fagin observing him through the open window. Content with identifying Oliver, Fagin would leave him half asleep: “[I]t is he, sure enough. Come away” (Ch.

34, 228). Instead, Monks insists on declaiming melodramatically “with such dreadful hatred, that Oliver awoke with fear.” The child is terrorized, but Monks has ensured Oliver’s recognition of the alliance between his enemies. Fagin, who consistently avoids recognition throughout the book, has, in the very act of terror, been identified. For him, like Oliver, identification is a matter of life and death.

Fagin has entered a gothic-realistic world in which their plotting rebounds on the conspirators. Nancy has started to sense this as her feeling for the child pushes her towards self-sacrifice and a refusal to play her part in the mock-family drama of mutual hatred between father and lover. Her new role will be to outperform and outwit those who have previously governed her performance. The cost will be high, for spying on Monks plotting with Fagin turns her into a shadow in her own life. By the time she is making her final plans with Brownlow, Monks’s melodrama has possessed her to the point where phantoms of death appear in the book she is reading and pass her in the street (Ch. 46, 312). They invade both art and life. The stock language, gestures and images of melodrama express the unreality she feels as she is pushed out of the life she knows: a self-sacrifice in which she gives knowledge to save Oliver and gives up her own life. In the consummation of her death, she will ensure the same end for Fagin and Sikes.

Monks’s unwitting authoring of authors through melodramatic intrigue also completes the undoing of Bumble, this time on a parodic level. Originally the butt of the satire on the Workhouse, Bumble later becomes the target of the attack on self-interested marriage, with Mrs. Corney demonstrating her own authority over her failed author by beating him in front of the Workhouse women. It is Monks, though (and through him, Oliver), who finishes Bumble. The poetic justice of Bumble’s final consummation as a Workhouse inmate himself is ensured by his participation in the destruction of the physical evidence of Oliver’s identity, narrated in full Gothic mode (Ch. 38, 248–56). Blaming his wife will not work since he is legally responsible for her, so the law has the last word on its own self-promoting representative (Ch. 51, 354). The gothic-comic echoes the gothic-realism of the main story: in both cases, through initially attracting Monks, Oliver triggers narratives that work primarily through women (Nancy, Rose Maylie and Mrs. Corney) to destroy the self-authoring dramas constructed by men.

Self-authoring drama—indeed, any kind of show—is anathema to the good characters who come together to help Oliver. Dickens sidesteps the problem of their having to face Fagin and the criminal poor by restricting their relationship with evil to their dealings with Monks, a renegade from their own class. The separation of villains is forced upon Brownlow by Nancy, who would inform on Monks while keeping faith with

Fagin and Sikes, but it has the effect of disconnecting the classes, thereby avoiding important authorial conflict and also evading the issues of social injustice raised so pointedly earlier in the novel.

Brownlow meets Fagin only once, in the condemned cell at the end, and then it is solely to get information about papers said to concern Oliver's past. This says much about the band of goodness led by Brownlow. Rejecting all forms of dramatization—apart from Grimwig, a moral tick of a character repetitively playing the devil's advocate—the band concentrate on Monks's plotting in order to reconstruct reality and establish Oliver's identity. They would finally bring *knowledge* to bear on the lying drama practised by Fagin. Dickens's plan for Brownlow and the band of goodness is all too clear: they are to provide the means for Oliver to transcend the moral and economic squalor of his origins. According to Caroline Dever in *Death and the Mother*, this is to be achieved through "the recuperation of the dead mother at the end of the novel, in which a tombstone is erected in her name" (27). From a Bakhtinian perspective, we might argue that the entire novel, shaped by the mystery of Agnes Fleming's identity and the ideal filial behavior of Oliver himself, constitutes an attempted consummation of Oliver's mother.

Caroline Dever's concern is with the presumed Victorian splitting of the ideal of maternity and the physical reality of women. For her, Agnes's recuperation helps to establish the Victorian "period's most powerful moral abstraction of maternity" (27). My own concern about the ending of *Oliver Twist*, however, is with our probable lack of interest in the dead mother's consummation. Like most readers, including Dickens I would suspect, given his later choice of public readings, my own attention continues to be held by Sikes, Nancy and Fagin, not the consummation of Agnes. Again, Dickens's plan seems clear: through the alternation of the Brownlow/Monks chapters with the Sikes/Nancy/Fagin chapters, he aims to resolve the latter's consummation *by* death with the good characters' eventual loving consummation *of* death at the altar in the old village church. If this does not work, and I doubt whether many would claim that it does, it is partly because the Brownlow band of goodness focus so single-mindedly on knowledge *about* Oliver, not on the shaping art that would offer knowledge *to* him. There is no dynamic relationship with a hero, in which an author such as Brownlow would necessarily meet resistance from a child previously exposed to the society of Fagin, Nancy and the rest. Such realistic expectations of character development are denied by the revelation of character demanded by melodramatic convention: after the Chertsey break-in, all the good middle-class characters instinctively recognize and respond to Oliver's goodness. Indeed,

their goodness is defined as such by their ready acceptance of the ideal. Realism and melodrama, so powerfully combined elsewhere in the novel, here stumble over each other. As a result, Oliver is everything and nothing once he is taken into respectable society. Downplayed in both text and illustrations, he is no longer permitted to bring his acuteness of perception to bear on the good characters around him.

Neither does Brownlow engage aesthetically with Monks. Instead, his summary of the facts of Oliver's origins and the plot against him merely deflates both Monks and the narrative. Meanwhile, the alternating "lowlife" chapters develop with a dialogical intensity that undermines the attempt at a loving consummation and that even seeps into the other chapters, staining the goodness we are meant to applaud.⁶

The lowlife chapters become horrifying as we are made increasingly aware of our own authoring relationship with the characters. When Fagin learns of Nancy's treachery, he determines to kill her. In Chapter 47, his rhetorical denunciation of Nancy inflames Sikes through eliciting his response to a succession of hypothetical betrayals, and then Fagin uses Claypole/Bolter to frame the news of her treason. Within this frame, he catechizes Claypole to get the answers he wants in order to better feed and guide Sikes's blood lust. The scene climaxes with Fagin's understated but obvious instigation to murder, twisting into the injunction "'not [to be] too violent for safety. Be crafty, Bill, and not too bold'" (Ch. 47, 321). The reader is held, I think, in fascination, repulsed by the viciousness yet, dare I say it, admiring the skill with which Fagin handles the dangerous Sikes. Fearful of what the robber is going to do to Nancy, we may also be increasingly terrified by a growing consciousness of our own desire to witness the death that we know is coming. We may be so caught up in Fagin's narrative that we cannot help wanting to see Nancy die.

Fagin channels the mutual hatred between himself and Sikes into a shared hatred of the woman for whom they have competed—"They exchanged one brief glance; there was a fire in the eyes of both, which could not be mistaken"—but the compact is not between equals. Sikes has become Fagin's creature, and when he rushes to satisfy his rage he is acting in both senses of the word under the other man's direction. The climax of Fagin's control of Sikes's lack of control comes in the instant before the murder:

The house-breaker freed one arm, and grasped his pistol. The certainty of immediate detection if he fired, flashed across his mind even in the midst of his fury; and he beat it twice with all the force he could summon, upon the upturned face that almost touched his own. (Ch. 47, 322)

All of Nancy's vulnerable desire for closeness to Sikes is in that "upturned face that

almost touched his own,” but the very manner of her murder is decided by his remembering Fagin’s injunction not to be too violent for safety. There are three people in this murder scene: the victim, the killer, and the author-director. But then again, whenever we enjoy similar accounts of bloody murder, perhaps there are always three people—the victim, the killer, and us in our authoring role—so it may be that Fagin, in an extreme and repulsive form, reflects unsettlingly on our own authoring activities.

We are not Fagin. But the way in which he constitutes his identity through directing and shaping others provides a stark warning of the dangers implicit in authoring. We are not simply the opposite of this monster, for something of him is in us, and we may remember this when he falls. Fagin finally experiences a dialogical monster’s living hell, namely the loss of all authoring power and an accompanying loss of the identity he has constructed at the expense of others’ lives. During his trial, with all the “gleaming eyes” upon him, he can no longer command the direction of their gaze. Lacking authority, he can only observe with an enforced detachment the life around him in the courtroom, outside his control yet controlling him as the verdict comes in. As execution approaches, he plunges into the subjectivity of self-absorption. “‘Are you a man?’” asks the turnkey (Ch. 52, 363), and the answer is before us in the wretch possessed by the knowledge of the death he has visited upon others and which now turns upon him in a dismissive final consummation. At his execution, “[e]verything told of life and animation” (Ch. 52, 364). Our attention is drawn to “all the hideous apparatus of death” but not to Fagin, who is not even identified.

We cannot be rid of Sikes and Nancy so easily. The housebreaker’s blood lust has been orchestrated by Fagin, who has shaped the knowledge of Nancy’s betrayal given to Sikes. In the ensuing murder, the Jew uses two people to realize his most complete self-consummation. But the killing, as many readers have noted, brings Sikes alive. He becomes a hero in Bakhtin’s sense of the word. Nancy’s death frees Sikes from Fagin’s direction. Now he knows what he has done, and the knowledge is brought home to him through the ghostly presence of the woman who loved him. He comes alive as he becomes aware of that knowledge and as he desperately tries to escape it. However, the knowledge of the love that he has shut out and abused in his life rebounds with such force that it consummates him in death: the moment of escape becomes the moment of his death, transfixed by the dead Nancy’s eyes.

The consummation, however, does not come solely through Nancy, for *we* want him consummated. *We* want him dead. Remembering *Oliver Twist* dramatized at the Victoria Theatre in the 1840s, one theatre-goer said, “When Sikes . . . seemed to dash [Nancy’s]

brains out on stage . . . [a] thousand enraged voices, which sounded like ten thousand . . . filled the theatre” (Flanders 115). Dickens, though, takes his time getting to the satisfaction of revenge. Chapter 48, “The Flight of Sikes,” begins with the narrator’s assertion of the abomination of the murder, even by London standards:

Of all bad deeds that, under cover of the darkness, had been committed within wide London’s bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst. Of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel. (Ch. 48, 323)

The authoring frame is supplied, not by Fagin, but by Dickens and by us the readers, and as we picture “the bright sun, that brings back, not light alone, but new life, and hope, and freshness,” we impress upon Sikes the images of hope now denied to him.

As Sikes’s authors, we are sometimes with him, sometimes outside him. With him, we see his opening to imagination and perception. His attempts to hide the corpse with a rug evoke a grotesque poetry: “but it was worse to fancy the eyes, and to imagine them moving towards him, than to see them glaring upward, as if watching the reflection of the pool of gore that quivered and danced in the sunlight on the ceiling” (Ch. 48, 323). And he can no longer shut out what he has physically done to Nancy. This from a man who previously hit the woman on the slightest provocation without ever appearing to notice the bruises he inflicted upon her. Now, however, “there was the body—mere flesh and blood, no more—but such flesh, and so much blood!” (Ch. 48, 323)

We are with Sikes in his relief at getting out of the murder room and in his flight out of the city. Oliver’s initial perception of London expressed a freedom in the very noting of the squalor. Here, though, the careful naming of places around the outskirts encircles Sikes, plotting his imprisonment. For we know exactly where he must go. An irredeemable part of London, in his efforts to escape Sikes is drawn back into the city, murder going back to its roots. No other place has such a felt reality in *Oliver Twist* and there is nowhere else to go. We see this before him, and our realization presses upon him with growing force. The consummation of death awaits him, shaping a course that we understand and whose inevitability we welcome even as we are with Sikes in his attempts to escape from the law, from humanity, and from himself.

Moreover, there is no escape for Sikes from art, from the consummation of the narrative in which he is caught. The incident in the public-house, when the pedlar-mountebank hounds the murderer with his insistence that he can remove the stain from his hat, also insists through its Shakespearian allusions on our historical awareness of literature shaping Sikes’s reality. In the following scene at the post-office, where he is

“apparently unmoved” by the report of the dreadful murder in London, Sikes is presumably oblivious to the comment by the stage-coach guard about romance and wealth never coming his way (Ch. 48, 327)—a little bit of everyday life, realistic in its contingency, that we can enjoy and Sikes cannot. Instead, the Gothic reincarnation of Nancy comes his way, shaping the almost unnoticed contingency of the guard’s joke into art. A dark version of romance will not leave him again in this life. Melodramatic art stalks Sikes in the figure of the dead woman and the eyes glaring at him in the night, which make him understand at last that he is seen by love but no longer as human. Perversely, this may make him even more human for us, perhaps because he reminds us in fantastic form of the consequences of our own denials of love.

Sikes’s impulse is to escape into the real life of action, witness his “flying from memory and himself” (Ch. 48, 328) when, with mad heroism, he helps to fight a fire raging at a farm. However, returning to himself and the knowledge of his crime, he overhears reports of the hunt for the murderer and is pushed on again, back toward his death in London, by the most fundamental human art, language. And then language itself abandons him, for his dog and soul-mate Bullseye disobeys his command to “‘Come here!’” and be drowned, which reduces the murderer to helpless whistling for the dog.

We reach Jacob’s Island before Sikes, and complete the preparations for his death: the squalor of the place, the other thieves in hiding, the news of Fagin being taken, and the arrival of Chitling and then the dog build up to the entry of Sikes himself. All is ready for the finale. The reader, though, is also with Sikes in his activity. The more desperate the situation, the more intense his urge to escape. And he carries the readers along with him. When Charley Bates arrives and attacks him, whose side are we on? It seems evenly balanced to me, as it would not have been earlier in the book. Humanity touches him when he seeks to mollify the boy: “‘Why, Charley!’ said Sikes, stepping forward, ‘don’t you—don’t you know me?’” (Ch. 50, 343)

Whatever crimes they have committed, the thieves inside the hideout are all too human in their terror at losing control of their lives. The mass hatred outside would overwhelm those within, just as the narrative drama would absorb the identity of Sikes, at the center of the storm. The mob howling for blood expresses our own voracious appetite for revenge and we may remember the audience in the Victoria Theatre. But the mob also faces us with a nightmare image of our loss of individual identity in the act of consummation. In that we are with Sikes in his spirited defiance, in his resolution not to give way, we will him to survive; in that we are outside with the mob, we hunger for his death. The two are intertwined, and we are made intensely aware that even as the thirst

for justice is assuaged, so the consummating act in which we participate expresses our own desire for blood.

Sikes's consummation by death should be sealed by his slipping from the parapet of the house on Jacob's Island, and hanging himself after seeing Nancy's eyes upon him. The poetic justice sometimes realized by dialogism turns the murderer's violence back on himself so that he enacts the drama of the public hanging he deserved all along. The scene, though, does not quite end there, for as "the murderer swung lifeless against the wall" (Ch. 50, 347), we are suddenly made aware of Charley Bates at the window below, "thrusting aside the dangling body which obscured his view," interfering as he does throughout the novel with any kind of consummating finality, including our own, and asserting the contingent vitality we often call "life."

And then, in the very last paragraph of Chapter 50, Sikes's dog jumps from the parapet, aiming for the dead man's shoulders, missing and dashing his brains out against a stone. The blood should be that of Sikes, not an innocent animal, and this is the most disquieting part of a disquieting end. If Bullseye is Sikes's double, as the novel sometimes suggests, then Sikes dies twice, and the authoring consummation really does rebound on him with doubling violence. But if Bullseye is the one creature apart from Nancy who loved Sikes, as the text also indicates, then love is doubly victimized and the consummation in which we have participated is further compromised by this final act. We do not know. Art and life disappear together into the blankness of a death that is the true end of *Oliver Twist* and that reduces the other endings to relative unimportance: intentionally in Fagin's case, I would think, and unintentionally in the Rose-Harry romantic denouement and the closing consummation of Agnes in the church.

* * * * *

In summary, we can say that in Fagin, Dickens creates a living evil that challenges his very belief in goodness. He meets that challenge by bringing dialogism more fully into play. However, authoring and dialogism are not simply literary devices to be used at will for one's own advantage, and in *Oliver Twist* they create a sense of the interrelatedness of love and death, and of goodness and evil, that is made all the more terrifying by the accompanying insistence on the interrelationship between characters and readers.

The dialogical truths that start to emerge in *Oliver Twist* will engage Dickens's considerable energies throughout his life. They include a recognition of the potential for

evil of authoring itself. It might be thought that if he is to do more than successfully defend goodness against evil and to show love, not just surviving in a society dominated by self-interest but actually creating in its own right, Dickens must learn to control dialogism. Such, however, is not the case. Rather, he writes his greatest novels when he develops the strength to admit it more fully into his writing. The watershed will be *Dombey and Son*. The dehumanization exposed dialogically is so corrosive of Dickens's original conception of loving authoring that it comes perilously close to overpowering Dickens himself.

In my book, *Dickens and Bakhtin*, I consider Dickens's response to *Dombey and Son* in the novels from *David Copperfield* through to *Great Expectations*. It is enough for now, however, to say that in general terms Bakhtinian ideas provide a framework for a reconsideration of the power of love in Western culture. Authoring allows us to avoid both the extreme subjectivity that makes it a vehicle for self-absorption, and the extreme objectivity that renders it an ideological/ linguistic construct. Instead, the subjective and the objective are brought to bear upon each other in the interaction between separate consciousnesses. Dialogism, in the Dickensian sense, defines a western modernity obsessed with self-consummation. It also provides the means for its subversion and eventually, in *Bleak House*, *Little Dorrit* and *Great Expectations*, for its reaccentuation as a more profound authoring.

Dickens, of course, would not speak of his writing in such terms. For him it is a matter of character, story, morality, imagination, duty, entertainment, truth to nature, reforming society, keeping faith with his readership, and God. And we, of course, are familiar with such terms. Yet if modernism served to question the assumptions underlying the practice of Victorian art, postmodernism served in its turn and in its own jargon to make us aware of the Victorian ways in which we ourselves think and speak about art. Many still do, and often for good reason since we are the heirs of the Victorians. However, for all the limitations of postmodernism, especially its tendency to sell mimesis short, it did at least tellingly reveal that nineteenth-century ways of thought do not simply endure in perpetuity: they are subject to change, and the very effort to make them endure changes them. If we continue to feel that Dickens's concerns are important, we need to find new ways of approaching them.

Bakhtinian thinking translates Dickens's art through the prism of a Russian modernism that emphasizes the formal elements of art without losing a sense of humanity (indeed, showing them to be interdependent) and that insists on the interrelationship between form and content. In my opinion, Bakhtin gets close to the Victorian era because

he treats art as kinetic through and through, and this applies to the reader, including the academic critic. In its broadest sense, this means that art carries over into life, that the one necessarily affects the other. Dickens himself takes this as read. Indeed, it is the point of his morality and sentiment. Central to all this is character, both within the novel and in terms of *our own* characters. For Dickens and for Bakhtin, the recognition that no one can simply stand outside the activity of authoring marks the beginning of responsibility.

Notes

- 1 Pages 3–5 and 21–23 are adapted from *Dickens and Bakhtin: Authoring and Dialogism in Dickens's Novels, 1849–1861* (AMS Press New York, 2013). Used with permission of AMS Press, Inc. All rights reserved.
- 2 For accounts of Bakhtinian authoring, see Coates 37–56; Emerson 207–64; Hirschkop 58–108; Pechey 153–80.
- 3 Juliet John comments that Fagin “possesses an acute understanding” of “the way fictions can be manipulated to achieve one’s purposes—i. e. to achieve power” (129). John provides an illuminating account of Fagin’s manipulations, although, as with endnote 5, we might have reservations about the emphasis on self-reflexivity (130).
- 4 Garry Wills argues persuasively that, while Sikes works through force, Fagin is a pederast who works through seduction. “Pedophile” might be a better word for Fagin. Sikes’s hatred of Fagin is so visceral that it suggests a sexual antipathy, perhaps for the father-figure assumed (or known) to have seduced Nancy as a child.
- 5 See Steven Connor for an examination of *Oliver Twist* as narrative(s) dangerously concerned with the nature of narrative itself, although, from Bakhtin’s intersubjective standpoint, self-reflexivity has its limits.
- 6 Cruikshank conveys this in his illustrations. Henry James comments that when he was a child “the scenes and figures intended to comfort and cheer, present[ed] themselves under his hand as but more subtly sinister, or more suggestively queer, than the frank badnesses and horrors. The nice people, and the happy moments, in the plates, frightened me almost as much as the low and the awkward” (420). There is also the eerie Tweedledum-Tweedledee effect of the doubling and redoubling of the characters who comprise Brownlow’s band of goodness.

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