

Against the Return of Fagin Dickens and the Persistence of the Principle of Goodness

Michela Marroni

Università degli Studi della Tuscia, Viterbo, Italia

Abstract Bob Fagin was a boy who helped twelve-year-old Dickens during his traumatic experience at Warren's Blacking Factory. Taking the cue from the discrepancy between the real Fagin and devilish Fagin in *Oliver Twist*, I will consider the reasons underlying Dickens's choice of this particular name for such a villain. At the same time, in light of the scarcely plausible contrast between Oliver's innocence and the urban decay surrounding him, I will argue that the novel should be interpreted as a social metaphor whose ethical model is *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Indeed, as suggested by the novel's complete title – *The Adventures of Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress* – the eponymous hero's experience can be regarded as a transition from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City where the "principle of good" is ultimately brought into action. However, unlike Bunyan's motivated and energetic hero, Oliver is a character whose main traits are passivity, innocence, and silence. Although melodramatic and awash with sentimentality, Victorian middle-class readers readily subscribed to the novel's message based on the final triumph of goodness.

Keywords Dickens. *Oliver Twist*. Fagin. Principle of Goodness. *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Summary 1 *Oliver Twist*, the Real Bob Fagin, and the Use of Innocence. – 2 Fagin's World as a Social Metaphor and Anti-Semitism. – 3 Echoing *The Pilgrim's Progress*: An Inspiring Source and a Religious Intertext? – 4 Sentimentality, Melodrama, and Goodness, or, How to Subscribe to the Victorian Middle-Class Orthodoxy.



Peer review

Submitted 2020-07-28
Accepted 2020-09-07
Published 2020-12-22

Open access

© 2020 | Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Public License



Citation Marroni, M. (2020). "Against the Return of Fagin. Dickens and the Persistence of the Principle of Goodness". *Annali di Ca' Foscari. Serie occidentale*, 54, 239-254.

1 **Oliver Twist, the Real Bob Fagin, and the Use of Innocence**

Dickens wanted to enter Victorian households as a narrator who, while dealing with the many problems afflicting London and the entire nation, was wary to avoid creating any psychological destabilization and anxiety. He knew very well that a novel, which aimed to disturb domestic tranquillity would never be met with favour by the public. And Dickens wanted the approval of his readers and to be successful from his very first works. He was well aware that the domestic serenity which the Victorians sought so hard to protect, even though completely artificial and fundamentally hypocritical, was a value no middle-class family would wish to renounce. The family unit was the social and moral centre which upheld society. As G.M. Young noted in the 1930s, for the Victorians nothing was more important than the family: "The Family may be regarded as of Divine institution, as a Divine appointment for the comfort and education of mankind" ([1936] 1966, 151). This desire for tranquillity was also connected with the desire for cleanliness, that is, hygiene as an expression also of moral and religious cleanliness:

Cleanliness is next to godliness. [...] Neatness is the outward sign of a conscious Respectability, and Respectability is the name of that common level of behaviour which all families ought to reach and on which they can meet without disgust. (Young [1936] 1966, 24)

From Dickens's point of view, respectability, domestic tranquillity as well as internal and external cleanliness make up a frame of values which he intends to place at the forefront of his literary exploration with a view to alternating between the dramatic and sentimental and the humorous and caricatural – all the necessary ingredients for a successful final product. Dickens did not need to be a scholar in narratology; nor was it necessary for him to have any idea about reception theory to know that to celebrate Victorian values he had to begin from the opposite extreme and could only find a reassuring landing place after a tortuous itinerary. If the Victorians glorified the family as a perfect microcosm, his novel would be about a child without a family and apparently without a future; if the Victorians held that the home should be considered the pivot of their world, he would present a plot which would focus on the representation of the slums of London and the degradation of its inhabitants; if the Victorians believed that hygiene was the expression of purity and honesty, he would create filthy, physically repellent characters motivated by evil and cruelty. All of these factors give meaning to Dickens's second novel, *Oliver Twist*, which appeared in in-

stalments in the monthly *Bentley's Miscellany*, from February 1833 to April 1839 with illustrations by George Cruikshank.¹

As Angus Wilson has noted, every page Dickens wrote was written in a state of anxiety which was sheer torture to him:

[T]he years of writing *Oliver Twist* were peculiarly harried by quarrels with his publisher, Bentley. Liberty was bought, in fact, at some price. But there was another anxious question which must have pressed upon him: would his second novel maintain the fantastic popularity of *Pickwick Papers*? Every novel is a hurdle for the popular novelist, but certainly the second is the most alarming. (1976, 11)

Nevertheless, after *The Pickwick Papers* (1836-37), *Oliver Twist* confirmed Dickens's talent and his readers responded enthusiastically (its monthly sales were about eleven thousand copies) such that its full-length edition appeared in November 1838, before the final instalment was published in the magazine. Upon a closer look, its success was no accident. As a matter of fact, his novel seemed deeply ingrained in a particularly turbulent moment in the country's history, marked by socio-economic fluidity and social and political transformation. In this connection, his story had all the ingredients with which to confront the social and urban problems of the late thirties. Above all, *Oliver Twist*, implicitly, fictionalized the need to impose a tighter surveillance in the area of society which was not immediately visible, that is, the underworld. Unsurprisingly, it is from this dark and wild territory of London that emerges the Jew Fagin, who may be regarded as its most destructive and, at the same time, the most theatrical representative.

Fagin himself, even if only through his name, recalls the autobiographical dimension of the novel. Dickens was only twelve years old when his father was imprisoned with the rest of the family at Marshalsea (Southwark) on 20 February 1824. Charles found himself forced to work at Warren's Blacking, in Old Hungerford Stairs near the Strand, in complete solitude and distress. However, during this difficult period he found practical help as well as constant moral support in a boy called Bob Fagin:

¹ Dickens was the first editor of *Bentley's Miscellany* and, because of disagreements with Richard Bentley, he decided to resign in 1839, when he was replaced by William Harrison Ainsworth. During his editorship, Dickens - with *Oliver Twist* - gave origin to a form of publication that would characterize literary journals for decades to come. Incidentally, *Bentley's Miscellany* continued until 1868. The editorial policy of the journal embodied middle-class ideals and aimed to increase the number of its readers with a combination of orthodoxy and sensationalism. Before founding the journal, Richard Bentley as publisher, had printed the works of several important authors; among his many faults was that of having refused the manuscript of *Sartus Resartus* (1833-34) by Carlyle who was still little-known in the English literary scene.

My work was to cover the pots of paste-blackening; first with a piece of oil-paper, and then with a piece of blue paper; to tie them round with a string; and then to clip the paper close and neat, all round, until it looked as smart as a pot of ointment from an apothecary's shop. [...] Two or three other boys were kept at similar duty down stairs on similar wages. One of them came up, in a ragged apron and a paper cap, on the first Monday morning, to show me the trick of using the string and tying the knot. His name was Bob Fagin; and I took the liberty of using his name, long afterwards, in *Oliver Twist*. (Forster 1876, 1: 25-6)

In his memories, Bob Fagin encompasses not only the positive values of friendship but also, and most of all, protection from a world full of hidden temptations and menace. Indeed, at Warren's Blacking he found help and psychological support in a boy who, as the autobiographical passage recalls, had saved him several times from moral and physical violence at the hands of the other boys in the factory. One may ask why, therefore, Dickens deliberately decided to make Fagin the villain of the story. In retrospect, Dickens does not analyse his relationship with Bob Fagin in the positive terms he felt as a young boy, but views it as a protective friendship and a helpful bond which posed a risk in that they could have dragged him away from his ideals as a gentleman.

Consequently, some years later, the name Fagin would become synonymous with a world from which Charles wanted to escape. Thus, in the novel, *Oliver Twist* wants to leave behind him the Jew's 'school', which represented the most traumatic experience of his life. His early defender Fagin recalls this risk: the risk of remaining forever imprisoned, because the protection of a friend, in the most sordid areas of London, in an underworld where kindness and hope are absent. As Sanders points out, Dickens's terror does not only concern the netherworld but also the idea of finding himself living in the conditions of the working class:

To give this good-hearted boy's name to the arch-villain of *Oliver Twist* suggests the degree to which Dickens had come to associate his kindness with the entrapment in the world of Warren's, and by extension in the culture and non-aspirant ethos of the working class. (2003, 7)²

² With regard to the figure of Bob Fagin, Michael Slater observes: "In real life Bob Fagin's kindness and protectiveness towards, and general mentoring of, himself as a young boy at Warren's must, at some level, have featured in Dickens's mind, both at the time and in retrospect, as the most insidious and dangerous threat of all to whatever hope he might have had of restoration to the genteel world from which he seemed to have been expelled for ever" (2011, 98-9).

However, a further point could be added. In Oliver's naive eyes his first image of Fagin is that of a poor Jew who has, almost like a benefactor, gathered together a group of ragged children and offered them food and shelter. At first, after Jack Dawkins (that is, the Artful Dodger) introduces him to the band of little thieves and pickpockets, the sly Jew does not appear to him to be so despicable in his meanness. He believes, in his innocent interpretation, that "perhaps his fondness for the Dodger and the other boys, cost him a good deal of money" (Dickens [1837-38] 2008, 66). In other words, Oliver imagines a family group with an extravagant old man as a fatherly instructor. Still, it is not long before he understands that this is an anti-family, exactly the opposite of what a typical Victorian family should be. Fagin embodies a negation of the family and is the quintessence of evil at the same time. Oliver is still a child, unable to recognize the signs of evil in the world. Fagin is first introduced as a satanic, sloppy and dirty man, intent on brandishing a big fork while cooking sausages in a filthy, dark room: "The wall and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt" (60). And again:

with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. He was dressed in a greasy flannel gown, with his throat bare. (63)

The red hair, the flames of the fireplace, the black walls and the repellent face of the old man do not represent for Oliver clues to extreme vice and corruption. The innocent boy interprets the environment without being able to piece together the various signs presented before him. With no comprehension of wickedness, the orphan observes Fagin and obeys his orders, eating and drinking "a glass of hot gin-and-water" (63), before going to sleep for the first night in Fagin's hovel, unaware that he is under the roof of an old Jew who is "worse than Devil" (373).³ The new family that it has been his fate to encounter is precisely the opposite of the domestic scene in which the Victorian middle-class were eager to create their own personal stories of fidelity, religious certainty and resistance to the temptations of the outside world.

3 As for some ideas derived from Defoe, see Marie Hamilton Law 1925, 892-7. Law explains that Fagin is defined several times in the novel as "the merry old gentleman", which is one of the ways of describing Satan.

2 Fagin's World as a Social Metaphor and Anti-Semitism

Dickens sets his hero on a path which starts with a sequence of negative experiences and ends with a positive resolution. The initial sense of destructiveness is functional to the constructive vision of a finale which signals the victory of good over evil, even though it is a victory that is against all criteria of verisimilitude. It is no accident that in his lengthy study on the author, George Gissing writes that in *Oliver Twist*, he reveals "an astonishing lack of skill when it came to invent plausible circumstances" (2004, II, 45). In this sense, Fagin's world is barely plausible. Yet, its meaning becomes clearer if it is regarded as a metaphor of the real world in which the struggle for survival is never fought with conventional arms as such. What counts is shrewdness, double-crossing and concealment which, on every social level, regulates the relationships between individuals. The myth of the gentleman is at odds with a reality that does not allow for kindness but only for the Victorian orthodoxy. In Dickens's view, social conventions and the taste of his readers had to be satisfied and for this reason the narrator adapts his characters for the needs of the plot. If the beginning of *Oliver Twist* reveals a narrator able to realistically portray the obscure and often corrupt lives of human beings, the ending exposes the limitations of a story that attempts to offer its readers the reassuring scene in which human goodness succeeds in defeating the malign plotting of a devilish figure like Fagin.

Echoing Gissing, the Marxist critic Arnold Kettle has also pointed out the implausibility of the conclusion:

The end of Fagin is a different matter. It is sensational in the worst sense, with a *News of the World* interest which touches nothing adequately and is worse than inadequate because it actually coarsens our perceptions. It is conceived entirely within the terms of the plot [...] and the whole debasing effect of the plot on the novel is immediately illustrated; for it is because he is working within the framework of the plot - in which the only standards are those of the sanctity of property and complacent respectability - that Dickens *cannot* offer us any valuable human insights, *cannot* give his characters freedom to live as human being. (Kettle 1972, I, 128; italics in the original)

Sensationalism, therefore, has a negative effect on the verisimilitude of the social context as well as on the credibility of Fagin, both in his actions and his words. In this respect, the Fagin at the beginning is by no means different from the Fagin who is hanged at the end - his words are always those of a person who has no sense of humanity whatsoever. Only a few hours before being condemned to death, his attitude is far from human. While he finds himself behind

bars and the judge is about to pronounce sentence upon him, Fagin's mind seems to be elsewhere. Even in these dramatic moments, he is never touched by repentance or a sense of guilt: his eyes rest on banal details which testify to his inability to react psychologically in a way in which any other human being faced with death would react:

Not that, all this time, his mind was, for an instant, free from oppressive overwhelming sense of the grave that opened at his feet; it was ever present to him, but in a vague and general way, and he could not fix his thought upon it. Thus, even while he trembled, and turned burning hot at the idea of speedy death, *he fell to counting the iron spikes before him*, and wondering how the head of one had been broken off, and whether they would mend it, or leave it as it was. Then, he thought of all the horrors of the gallows and the scaffold - and *stopped to watch a man sprinkling the floor to cool it* - and then went on to think again. (428; italics added)

It seems natural to ask what the narrator intends by showing the reader how Fagin's attention is attracted by banal objects in spite of the fact that the context in no way invites thoughts that are not connected with one's destiny or reflections on the past over the sins and errors one has committed. Obviously, this kind of self-analysis does not apply to Fagin, who is seen counting the bars as if he were counting the money or the objects stolen by his "youthful friends", and, a little later, observing a man wasting water in order to wash the floor. For the narrator, the character is a hard, insensitive being with no psychological distress, a slave to his activity as a Jew collecting things in his avarice.⁴ Although Dickens attempted to soften his tone in subsequent revisions, it seems clear that he was animated by a deep-rooted anti-Semitism that has in Fagin its prime target. Not only, but as Susan Meyer has noted, "Fagin is also represented as part of a mysteriously interconnected Jewish underworld. He secretly communicates with the minor Jewish character Barney (who speaks through his nose, in stereotyped fashion)" (2005, 245).⁵

⁴ On Dickens's anti-Semitism see Stone 1959. In particular on *Oliver Twist*, Stone observes: "*Oliver Twist* grew out of an era and a literary tradition which was predominantly anti-Semitic. Laws, parliamentary debates, newspapers, magazines, songs, and plays, as well as novels, reflect the latent anti-Semitism which was part of the early Victorian heritage. In 1830 a Jew could not open a shop within the city of London, be called to the Bar, receive a university degree, or sit in Parliament. Sir Robert Peel, who a few years later championed the Jewish cause, was still in 1830 opposing Jewish emancipation on the strange grounds that the restricted Jew was not like his free compatriots" (1959, 225).

⁵ According to Meyer, Fagin's presence is functional to the Christian vision of Dickens's narration: "In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens emphatically criticizes what he represents as unchristian in the behavior of the English toward the poor. He then introduces his

Fagin is a totally negative character who, perhaps also to appease the widespread anti-Semitic prejudices among the middle and lower classes, Dickens portrays in such a way as to allude to a sort of covert and dangerous alliance among all the Jews in London.

In other words, Fagin desires nothing more than death and destruction. Thus, in Chapter LII, while he is in prison waiting for the dawn to break on the day of his execution, the narrator underlines the fact that he has “a face retaining no human expression but rage and terror” (Dickens [1837-38] 2008, 435). In Fagin only the forces of evil prevail and their persistent influence prevents any form of repentance to emerge in moments of psychological weakness. In this respect, when the eponymous hero visits him in his prison cell it is significant that their relationship has not changed. It is exactly the same as it was during their first encounter three years previously. On the one hand, there is Oliver’s disarming innocence, on the other, Fagin’s wickedness which, in spite of his approaching death, continues to weave its plots against the good in the world:

“Yes, yes”, returned Oliver. “Let me say a prayer. Do! Let me say one prayer. Say only one, upon your knee, with me, and we will talk till morning”.

“Outside, outside”, replied Fagin, pushing the boy before him towards the door, and looking vacantly over his head. “Say I’ve gone to sleep – they’ll believe you. You can get me out, if you take me so. Now then, now then!”

“Oh! God forgive this wretched man!” cried the boy with a burst of tears.

“That’s right, that’s right”, said Fagin. “That’ll help us on. This door first. If I shake and tremble, as we pass the gallows, don’t mind, but hurry on. Now, now, now!” (435; italics in the original)⁶

Characteristically, in his naivety Oliver imagines a scene of contrition. But his attempt to offer a prayer is opposed by Fagin’s dark

readers to the distinctly non-Christian Fagin. At the novel’s end he symbolically purges the novel’s representative of the absence of Christianity by killing off Fagin, preparing the way for a vision of a purified England in the idyllic village, with the church at its moral center, to which Oliver, Mr. Brownlow, and the Maylies retreat in the novel’s final pages” (2005, 241).

6 At the beginning of the 1970s, Raymond Williams gave an illuminating description of the method Dickens adopted in the representation of his characters: “His characters are not ‘rounded’ and developing but ‘flat’ and emphatic. They are not slowly revealed but directly presented. Significance is not enacted in mainly tacit and intricate ways but is often directly presented in moral address and indeed exhortation. Instead of the controlled language of analysis and comprehension he uses, directly, the language of persuasion and display. His plots depend often on arbitrary coincidences, on sudden revelations and changes of hearts” (1971, 31).

and malicious thoughts. The boy's sensitivity calls into question the idea of human pity itself which, from the condemned man's point of view, has no value whatsoever. As a matter of fact, the whole novel is constructed on a series of dichotomies which, besides evidencing its underlying Christian teaching, defines a diegesis based on the opposition life/death, as is explicitly presented in the final words of Chapter LII:

Day was dawning when they again emerged. A great multitude had already assembled; the windows were filled with people, smoking and playing cards to beguile the time; the crowd were pushing, quarrelling, and joking. Everything told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the centre of all - the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death. (436)⁷

Life and death are contemplated within the same scene: there are the objects of fun ("playing cards to beguile the time") and those of the executioner ("the black stage, the rope"). The hanging that the excited crowd are waiting is staged in a sensational way as to become a kind of theatrical representation. Admittedly, this time there is something more than the usual death sentence: the man who is walking onto the gallows is a Jew, the filthy old Fagin, an individual in league with Satan whose features and voice are instantly repulsive. Therefore, the pleasure of a spectacularized death is heightened precisely because it is a Jew who is about to be hanged. It is no surprise that Fagin's nefarious influence is part of a world without light: his hanging occurs on "the black stage" where only "one dark cluster of objects" can be seen. His soul belongs to the power of blackness, which envisages no change of heart, no redeeming final words. Naturally, if Fagin's life ends for ever on that macabre stage, with a crowd yelling in celebration, Oliver's life continues in the direction of the light. Needless to say, the reader was by no means surprised by the novel's anti-Semitic dimension. Indeed, in Victorian public opinion as well as in British literary tradition, Jews were often depicted as custodians of every evil, anti-Christian and anti-British, always attempting to undermine national identity. These attitudes found a significant confirmation in the fact that

⁷ See Annette Federico on the significance of death in *Oliver Twist*: "This unsettling paragraph ends the penultimate chapter of *Oliver Twist*. It is the closure that the reader has been waiting for, but not in terms of justice being done - that is an open question. It is, rather, a momentary *disclosure* to the reader of the unimaginable - in the midst of life, the extinguishing of a self, the decisive erasure of what constituted the human being" (2011, 381).

a profound strain of anti-Semitism lingered in British political life, partly racist in nature, partly based on religious bigotry that still saw the Jews as requiring to be punished for their part in killing Christ. (Heffer 2014, 252)⁸

It stands to reason that Dickens was fully aware of the persistence of these negative feelings and, in many respects, *Oliver Twist* reflected such anti-Semitic generalizations.

3 Echoing *The Pilgrim's Progress*: An Inspiring Source and a Religious Intertext?

The complete title of the novel is *The Adventures of Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress*. The subtitle deserves particular attention because, as often occurs in Victorian novels, the author offers a key to interpreting it precisely at this paratextual level. Indeed, as has been observed by more than one critic,⁹ *The Parish Boy's Progress* directly refers to John Bunyan's most famous work, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84), which narrates the journey of Christian from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City after numerous vicissitudes and temptations which put his resistance to the test. If we consider the development of *Oliver Twist*, it is not difficult to recognize in the London underworld and the place in which Fagin dominates the most dangerous part of Oliver's journey. In his innocence, he is unable to tell the difference between good and evil. It is only after the orphan boy sees with his own eyes Fagin's real nature that he revises his initial impressions. Indeed, after being involved in a robbery Oliver realizes he has ended up not among honest people but in a den of thieves and pickpockets. In this sense, Fagin's hovel can be seen as the epitome of the City of Destruction. Before Oliver

⁸ In connection with *Oliver Twist*, Heffer tellingly observes: "When even a writer considered to be so humane as Dickens could use Fagin as a representative of British Jewry, anti-Semitism was a grave problem" (2014, 259).

⁹ Wilson notes: "*Oliver Twist*, although its value lies in Dickens's unique contributions to it, has a number of forefathers. Its sub-title 'or the Parish Boy's Progress', perhaps suggests some of the moral fable inherent in *Pilgrim's Progress* [sic], still in the early nineteenth century and even later one of the most widely read books in English" (1976, 13). As regards the paratext Stephen Gill also observes: "The full title [...] invokes John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678-84), the most famous account in the language of how a struggle against temptation and evil wins at last a secure reward" (2008, ix). In terms of its literary influences, critics have not neglected to note the picaresque tradition together with Hogarth's works in which the word 'progress' has a very different meaning from that of Bunyan: one needs only recall his series of paintings *The Harlot's Progress* (1732) and *The Rake's Progress* (1735).

meets Fagin, convinced he has found a new home, if not a new family, the urban surroundings already present all the signs of corruption and decadence in anticipation of the corrupt and crooked characters he is about to meet:

A dirtier or more wretched place he 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 children, who, even at that time of the night, were crawling in and out at the doors, or screaming from inside. The sole places that seemed to prosper, amid the general blight of the place, were the public-houses; and in them, the lowest orders of Irish were wrangling with might and main. 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 filth; and from several of the doorways, great and ill-looking fellows were cautiously emerging; bound, to all appearance, on no very well-disposed or harmless errands. (59-60).

Like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress* the orphan boy faces a journey in which he is destined to encounter all the sins a human being is capable of committing. The dominant image of filth is the best way of representing what could be Bunyanesquely described as the City of Vice whose labyrinthian streets and alleys configure a descent towards the lower, bestial levels of humanity, a new barbarism dominated by evil. In the darkness of the night, Oliver is surrounded by men and women who, besides being an expression of degraded and corrupt humanity, in the narrator's words, are the actors of a moral fable. In particular, it is a fable on the contrast between the innocence of the "parish boy" and the general state of degeneration. In fact, Oliver passively observes but does not understand. The day after his arrival, when he has the opportunity of seeing exactly how Fagin educates his 'pupils' as pickpockets, he can only think of what meaning to attribute to that strange game between the old man and his boys:

Oliver wondered what picking the old gentleman's pocket in play, had to do with his chance of being a great man. But thinking that the Jew, being so much his senior, must know best, he followed him quietly to the table; and was soon deeply involved in his new study. (69)

It is only when he sees the practical execution of the lesson taught by the Jew, that Oliver understands that he has ended up in the wrong place:

What was Oliver's horror and alarm as he stood a few paces off, looking on with his eyelids as wide open as they would possibly go, to see the Dodger plunge his hand into the old gentleman's pocket; and draw from thence a handkerchief! To see him hand the same to Charley Bates; and finally to behold them, running away round the corner at full speed!

In an instant the whole mystery of the handkerchiefs, and the watches, and the jewels, and the Jew, rushed upon the boy's mind. He stood, for a moment, with the blood so tingling through all his veins from terror, that he felt as if he were in a burning fire; then, confused and frightened, he took to his heels; and, not knowing what he did, made off as fast as he could lay his feet to the ground. (73-4)

This is Oliver's moment of self-awareness: the scene before his eyes is that of a band of wrongdoers which is totally different from the original impression he has had in which he believed that Fagin was a benefactor doing all he could to support so many unfortunate boys. At the very moment in which his eyes are finally opened, Oliver feels he is in "a burning fire" - and, significantly, the same biblical image is also cited in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Fagin's world is not the world of education and culture towards which he aims to aspire. Even though the experience forces him to re-evaluate his own self and his ideas, it must be said that Oliver's language remains, so to speak, the metonymic language of innocence: his choice of words is never allusive or full of metaphorical connotations but effectively corresponds to what he wants to say. As Michal Peled Ginsburg writes, "Oliver always uses language literally: the signifier always refers directly to the signified" (1987, 228). In brief, Oliver speaks a language that is consistent with his innocent view of the world, which is in keeping with his being a shy boy characterized by unresponsiveness and silence, if not total passivity. This is reflected in his words, which are often reticent and insufficient in expressing what he feels, above all when he is in difficulty.

A significant example can be seen in Chapter XI when, before the judge Mr. Fang, he cannot even give his own name in his utter fear: "Oliver tried to reply, but his tongue failed him. He was deadly pale; and the whole place seemed turning round and round" (80). Showing no sign of self-defence, completely confused and bewildered before Mr. Fang's interrogations, he remains in absolute silence which is only broken when he asks for some water: "At this point of the inquiry, Oliver raised his head, and looking round with imploring eyes, murmured a feeble prayer for a draught of water" (80). In its representation of a hero who is the epitome of physical and verbal inaction, the courtroom episode culminates in a most melodramatic scene: "Oliver availed himself of the kind permission; and fell heavily to the floor in a fainting fit. The men in the office looked at each other, but no one

dared to stir" (81). In one of his first descriptions of a courtroom, Dickens shows the superficiality and inhumanity of the administration of justice which, as is seen in the chapter, is carried out by using completely irrational methods. Thus, although there is no proof against him, the little boy is initially condemned to three months of hard labour since Mr. Fang is convinced that he is a very good liar. Mr. Brownlow, the old gentleman who has been the victim of the theft, tries to intervene to tell the judge that Oliver did not commit the crime, but, for Mr. Fang, Oliver is only a "hardened scoundrel". Finally, the bookseller's intervention saves Oliver who is subsequently freed: "Little Oliver Twist lay on his back on the pavement, with his shirt unbuttoned, and his temple bathed with water; his face a deadly white; and a cold tremble convulsing his whole frame" (82). The courtroom scene concludes with a kind gesture on the part of Mr. Brownlow who, full of pity for the little orphan, takes him home with him to save him from the vice and corruption of the London slums.

The whole chapter revolves around the grotesque aspects of justice and the melodramatic portrait of Oliver: these two ingredients, together with a sense of paradox, make up the formula Dickens will often adopt in his works whenever he happens to describe courtroom scenes. In fact, paradoxically, after he sentences Oliver, Mr. Fang is forced to withdraw his decision as a consequence of the bookseller's convincing testimony; no less paradoxical is the fact that Oliver is set free without uttering a word in his own defence, without protesting his innocence, but simply entrusting his destiny to the passive acceptance of events. There is also something comical in the fact that he cannot give the judge his own name and that, because of his confused silence, the guard answers for him saying his name is Tom White - *white* not only because he is unconsciously influenced by the boy's pale skin but also for the implicit reference to his innocence.

4 Sentimentality, Melodrama, and Goodness, or, How to Subscribe to the Victorian Middle-Class Orthodoxy

The courtroom scene closes one phase of Oliver's life. Yet it would be exaggerated to draw a parallel between the novel and *The Pilgrim's Progress*: Bunyan's hero is the expression of vitality and responsiveness, not to mention the facility with which he combines biblical quotations and personal reflections in his dialogues with the characters he encounters on his journey to the Celestial City. In this respect, it would be incorrect to state that "Oliver is a kind of everyman making his progress through life guided not so much by Providence, as in Bunyan's working, but by the latent truth of his real identity which, under the compulsion of an unfolding plot, must emerge" (Morris 2014,

221). Even though he travels through a series of different places and social contexts, and even though he is a hero on a journey – transported from one place to another, in precisely the same way Mr. Brownlow takes Oliver away from the courtroom to Pentonville, a residential area of London – his movements are never the consequences of his autonomous decisions but always actions to which he submits and that never call his own will into question. To define him as an ‘everyman’ appears inappropriate since there is nothing universal about Oliver. On the contrary, his story is quite extraordinary and appealing for readers because of its combination of sensation and sentimentality, and not because the boy can be seen as a universal hero. Indeed, for Dickens, his protagonist had to be an example of absolute goodness. As he pointed out in the preface to the third edition of the novel (1841), his intention was to make Victorian readers see “in little Oliver, the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance, and triumphing at last” (Dickens [1837-38] 2008, liii).

During the years of radical transformations, in the decades in which social problems were becoming increasingly evident, violence was a dangerously destabilising factor both in the manufacturing cities and in the countryside. Meaningfully, *Oliver Twist* was published in the period following the Reform Bill of 1832, when the great expectations for reform were again and again frustrated by an industrial class whose only aim was to exploit factory workers without caring about the conditions in which they lived. In an England that was profoundly changing, the principle of evil, as Carlyle had denounced, seemed to be the dominant code in all classes of society from the wealthy to the proletarian. In this historical context, affirming the principle of good meant offering the English nation a behavioural paradigm and a moral direction. Tellingly, *Oliver Twist* conveyed a message that intended to tell its readers that the triumph of goodness was still possible, despite the many enemies and obstacles in its road. In this regard, despite his recurring gestures of passivity, Oliver embodies the principle of goodness wherever he goes. In his journey through a restless nation, adopted by Mr. Brownlow, the narrative voice reminds the readers that “they were truly happy” and immediately adds that “without strong affection, and humanity of heart, and gratitude to that Being whose code is Mercy, and whose great attribute is Benevolence to all things that breathe, true happiness can never be attained” (439-40). As in a moral fable, the implicit message conveyed in the epilogue is that, in spite of everything, in spite of the hero’s physical and psychological weakness and the moments of great torment he experiences, in the end good triumphs over evil. And this is made possible because, in his pilgrimage from sad loneliness to intense happiness, Oliver encounters a series of good people and some providential helpers who do not hesitate to recognize his innocence and help him even at the cost of paying with their

lives, as in the case of self-sacrificing Nancy, a prostitute trapped in the underworld of crime and corruption.

From an ideological point of view, the novel's sentimentality can be perfectly seen within the context of a middle-class ideology, the objective of which was to consolidate the image of a nation that was capable of humanity and solidarity. As Terry Eagleton has aptly underlined, "Sentimentality is the feel-good factor of middle-class society" (2005, 150). In this sense, Dickens was implicitly delineating the image of a nation that was on the path towards a number of reforms that would offer better living conditions to large sections of society which were excluded from the privileges enjoyed by a wealthy minority. However functional to the system and representative of orthodox thinking, *Oliver Twist* is nevertheless also a work that denounces many social injustices, which in some way became more authentic and more evident precisely as a result of the novel's hero and his vicissitudes. Ultimately, Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist* in the conviction that he had important things to say to the nation and its ruling class. But it is undoubtedly the case that in his masterpieces the representation of society becomes even more complex and his denouncements more severe.¹⁰ This is possible because he had retained an accurate memory of his own direct experience of degradation, imprisonment, and desperate solitude during his spell at Warren's Blacking Factory. Even after the writing of *Oliver Twist*, the trauma of this experience remained in his mind, probably together with a vivid recollection of Tom Fagin's gestures and words whose autobiographical impact he tried vainly to exorcize and remove.

Bibliography

- Bunyan, J. [1678-84] (2003). *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Edited by W.R. Owens. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dickens, C. [1837-38] (2008). *Oliver Twist*. Edited by K. Tillotson with an Introduction and Notes by Stephen Gill. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eagleton, T. (2005). *The English Novel: An Introduction*. Malden (MA); Oxford: Blackwell.
- Federico, A. (2011). "The Violent Deaths in *Oliver Twist*". *Papers on Language and Literature*, 47(4), 363-85.
- Forster, J. (1876). *The Life of Charles Dickens*. 2 vols. London: Chapman & Hall.
- Gill, S. (2008). "Introduction". Dickens [1837-38] 2008, vii-xxxii.

¹⁰ See on this point Barbara Hardy (1970, 3-26). Referring to Dickens's major works (in particular *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit*), Hardy observes: "Dickens creates such a powerful anatomy of a corrupted and corrupting society, ruled and moved by greed and ambition, that the wish-fulfilling fantasies of virtue and conversion are too fragile to support faith" (25).

- Ginsburg, M.P. (1987). "Truth and Persuasion. The Language of Realism and Ideology in *Oliver Twist*". *Novel*, 20(3), 220-36. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345676>.
- Gissing, G. (2004). "Charles Dickens. A Critical Study". *The Collected Works of George Gissing on Charles Dickens*. Ed. by J.J. Simon. 3 vols. Rockfield: Graywood Press, 17-201.
- Hardy, B. (1970). *The Moral Art of Dickens*. London: Athlone Press.
- Heffer, S. (2014). *High Minds: The Victorians and the Birth of Modern Britain*. London: Windmill Books.
- Kettle, A. (1972). *An Introduction to the English Novel*. 2 vols. London: Hutchinson University Library.
- Law, M.H. (1925). "The Indebtedness of *Oliver Twist* to Defoe's *History of the Devil*". *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 40(4), 892-7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/457529>.
- Meyer, S. (2005). "Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's *Oliver Twist*". *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 33(1), 239-52. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150305000823>.
- Morris, P. (2014). "*Oliver Twist*, the Perils of Child Identity and the Emergence of the Victorian Child". Lennartz, N.; Koch, D. (eds), *Texts, Contexts and Intertextuality: Dickens as a Reader*. Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 215-31.
- Sanders, A. (2003). *Charles Dickens*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Slater, M. (2011). *Charles Dickens*. New Haven (CT); London: Yale University Press.
- Stone, H. (1959). "Dickens and the Jews". *Victorian Studies*, 2(3), 223-53. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3825878?seq=1>.
- Williams, R. (1971). *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Wilson, E. (1976). "Introduction". Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*. Edited by P. Fairclough. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 11-27.
- Young, G.M. [1936] (1966). *Portrait of an Age*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.