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Oliver Twist Chapter--First Draft

"Oliver Twist's Silence, Fagin's Villainy, and the Hazards of Anti-Poor Law Authorship:
Dickens' Narrative Politics"

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In an effort to differentiate the quality of Charles Dickens' early works from his later "six great novels," F.R. and Q.D. Leavis claim a stark contrast between the novelist's two "orphan" tales: the 1837 "Oliver Twist" and the 1850 "David Copperfield." According to their 1970 book, "Dickens the Novelist," "David Copperfield" succeeds as a "great" work of art because, despite its "obviously moralistic episodes, there is no obtrusive schematic intention"(100). Though both novels set out to chronicle the dangers and injustices of the social world as encountered by an innocent orphan, they construct their protagonists through two different representational tactics: realism and sentimentalism. David, the Leavises argue, is a "real child and boy with specific sufferings, in a realistic and not merely symbolic ambience...[because of this] we have the impression of being taken into to his confidence...we understand his unique and not merely predictable feelings." Young Oliver, on the other hand, is "almost entirely an object used for satiric diatribe against the Poor Laws and the society that produced them...[He] hardly exists as more than an innocent anonymous consciousness to register suffering and bewilderment engendered by these conditions"(108). For the Leavises, Dickens thus betrays his artistic inexperience in "Oliver Twist;" he allows his early novel to fall into a reductive sentimentalism in the service of a political argument. In so doing, he sacrifices the literary merit that he later achieves in David Copperfield: the artistic ability to construct a protagonist who "incarnates" the spirit of an age. David, the Leavises continue, allows us to "examine impersonally the experience of growing up in the first half of the 19th

century, with the problems that a young man of that generation incurred, an experience that needs the kind of objectivity that inheres in the novelist's art"(46). But as a sentimentalized symbol of the cruelty of the Poor Laws, Oliver exposes the author's politics, his politically biased subjectivity, and thereby, his literary failure.

I begin with reference to this 1970 argument not because I want to set up F.R. Leavis as a straw man, representative of an outdated humanism, as is so often the case when he is mentioned in contemporary literary criticism¹. Rather, in some very substantial ways, I agree with the Leavises estimation of "Oliver Twist," particularly with their claim that within the novel, the young protagonist is sentimentalized, evacuated of subjective particularity in order to function as embodied suffering. More importantly for my argument, though, I believe that Dickens himself would agree with this characterization. I would even extend the Leavises argument to include the novel's characterization of evil, as well as good. That is to say, if the novel works to sentimentalize Oliver, creating him as embodied good, so it sensationalizes its villain Fagin, creating him as embodied malevolence. I agree, and believe that Dickens would agree, with contemporary critics like Elaine Hadley and Juliet John, who claim that "Oliver Twist" engages in the "melodramatic mode," a technique that Hadley defines as the tendency to present "emphatically visual renderings of bodily torture and criminal conduct, atmospheric menace and providential plotting, expressions of highly charged emotion, and...the *personifications of absolutes like good and evil*"(3, italics mine). But where the Leavises see such a departure from realism as indicative of "bad literature," Dickens, I argue, views it as "bad politics." In saying this, I do not mean to set up a biographical argument in which Dickens came to view his second novel as a failure. Rather, the novel

¹ Footnote re: Leavis and contemporary criticism

itself works to point to the social implications and ethical difficulties in using such representative techniques. In "Oliver Twist," Dickens self-consciously creates a narrator who, like him, is both politically invested in exposing social injustice and financially invested in producing a marketable literary work but who, unlike him, seems unaware of the ethical dilemma that inheres in these simultaneous investments. In creating this narrator, Dickens can grapple with the conflicted subject position of a middle-class, popular author who, while aiming to expose the suffering of the poor, also profits from representing their misery. "Oliver Twist" can thus best be understood as the author's self-conscious meditation on the fraught relationship between what we now refer to as "social activism" and marketable literary authorship.

Read through this framework, the novel's "melodramatic" mode is characteristic not of Dickens himself, but of his narrator.² Such a distinction is important in understanding how and why "absolutes of good and evil" become "personified" in the novel. As the innocent victim of the New Poor Law, Oliver is created as the archetype of "good." It would make logical sense that Oliver's archetypal corollary, "evil personified," would be a Poor Law administrator. Yet despite the variety of greedy, exploitative bourgeois bureaucrats present in the novel, it is Fagin, the lower-class, Jewish thief, who emerges as the narrator's most irredeemable, and infamous, villain. As many critics have pointed out, the novel is specific in its indictment of Fagin. Whereas the novel uses satire to condemn the greed of the bourgeois administrators and the vice of the other lower-class criminals, it refuses Fagin the same comic treatment. Instead, as Susan Meyer has pointed out, the novel "degrades him through narrative comments that indicate his subhuman status." The

² Footnote re: Hadley and anti-poor laws

novel, she argues, does not direct humor at Fagin "simply because he is too terrible for comic treatment"(246). Fagin is, moreover, the only criminal in the novel to be condemned to death, despite the fact that he commits no specific capital crime within the narrative. This particular vilification of Fagin has puzzled readers and critics of the novel since its publication.³ In distinguishing Dickens from his narrator, I also offer an answer to this pervasive interpretive difficulty. Fagin is rendered particularly villainous because he threatens the narrator's authorial ownership over the poor, as well as the sentimental representational strategies that he employs to write their misery. By encouraging his young thieves to "speak for themselves" and "establish for themselves a great reputation," Fagin challenges the narrator's exclusive provenance over lower-class stories. Likewise, by transforming them from starving workhouse children to well-fed criminals, Fagin makes it more difficult for the narrator to assimilate the boys into his sentimentalized narrative of innocent suffering. It comes as no surprise then that the narrator writes Fagin as villain, pathologizing that which poses the greatest threat to his personal benefit. By attending to the various textual moments in which the text expresses its ironic distance from this narrator, we can read the novel as exposing the self-interest and bias at the root of the narrator's vilification of Fagin. The novel thus ultimately establishes the notion of evil (and by extension, good) as fundamentally contingent, dismantling the archetypes upon which the melodramatic mode rests. While the narrator certainly employs this melodramatic mode for political purposes, using sentiment and sensation to his own economic and social advantage, the novel rejects such tactics. Accordingly, while the Leavises are correct in their assessment of the narrative's troubling representational

³ Footnote re: early reviews, mention of Dickens in review of Browning's *Dramatic Idyllis*, contemporary reviews, John Sutherland and "Why is Fagin hung?"

techniques, they direct their attack at the wrong figure. Dickens, or at least his novel, is on their side.

The “Hazards” of Anti-Poor Law Narration

The lack of scholarship on *Oliver Twist* that distinguishes the novel’s narrator from Dickens himself is curious. After all, the novel was originally published as part of the “Mudfog Papers,” a series of vignettes that appeared in *Bentley’s Miscellany*, written under Dickens’s pseudonym, Boz. It was not published under Dickens’ own name until it was released in novel form, two years later. Yet because of the tendency to read *Oliver Twist* as Dickens’s autobiographical reckoning with his years in Warren’s Blacking Factory⁴, scholars have accepted Dickens and the narrator as one and the same. The primary trouble with this critical trend is that it prevents scholars from recognizing the various ways in which the text holds the narrator in ironic distance, problematizing his representational techniques. Indeed, from the very first page of the novel, we are asked to attend to the subjective nature of the work that the narrator will do in writing Oliver’s life.

In the novel’s initial sentences, the narrator introduces himself as the “biographer” of the newborn Oliver, who lingers in the background between life and death. The narrator postures that, had the child died in infancy, “these memoirs...being comprised within a couple of pages, would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography, extant in the literature of any age or country”(1).

⁴ Footnote re: criticism that has operated biographically.

From the narrator's own admission, then, we know that this particular biography will *not* be the most concise and faithful specimen of biography. In attaining a biological life, Oliver makes his biographer's task one of subjective representation. There will necessarily be an "unfaithful" gap between Oliver's lived experience and the narrator's written representation of that experience. In pointing us to this gap right from the beginning, the narrator himself calls for our attentiveness to Oliver's *biographical* birth, as distinguished from his biological birth. This will not be Oliver's story; it will be the narrator's story of Oliver. This distinction is, as I will later argue, crucial to the narrator's own political agenda. The narrator asks us to remain ever aware that this story, and all its representational techniques, is own creation—Oliver has no hand in it.

Even without this initial caveat, it would be a matter of practical difficulty to be unaware of the narrator's authorial control over Oliver's story. The orphan is, after all, completely silent for most of the narrative, seemingly incapable of telling his own tale. As critics have often pointed out, each time he is asked to tell his own "history" to new companions, he is either silenced thematically by his own overwhelming emotion or formally by the narrator's refusal to grant him dialogue.⁵ When, for instance, Oliver is arrested for his supposed theft of Mr. Brownlow's snuffbox, he is asked by Mr. Fang, the magistrate, to give his statement, beginning with his name:

Oliver tried to reply but his tongue failed him. He was deadly pale; and the whole place seemed turning round and round. "What's your name, you hardened, scoundrel?" demanded Mr. Fang. "Officer, what's his name?" This was

⁵ Karen Olberstein in "Oliver Twist: The Narrator's Tale," argues, Oliver cannot convey his tale through verbal language, only through emotional expression. She uses this as evidence for her ultimate argument that the novel privileges the "honesty" of emotional expression or body language over verbal or written communication. What Olberstein misses, though, is the fact that these "emotional expressions" or "body languages" are also written, particularly by the narrator. Other critics to mention Oliver's absent voice include Anny Sadrin in "The parish boy's progress: a pilgrimage to origins," and Jonathon Grossman in "The Absent Jew in Dickens: narrators in *Oliver Twist*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *A Christmas Carol*."

addressed to a bluff old fellow, in a striped waistcoat, who was standing by the bar. He bent over Oliver, and repeated the inquiry; but finding him really incapable of understanding the question, *and knowing that his not replying would only infuriate the magistrate the more, and add to the severity of his sentence, he hazarded a guess.*

“He says his name’s Tom White, your worship,” said the *kind-hearted thief taker.*”

“Oh, he won’t speak out, won’t he,” said Mr. Fang. “Very well, very well. Where does he live?”

“Where he can, your worship,” replied the officer; again pretending to receive Oliver’s answer.”

“Has he any parents?” inquired Mr. Fang.

“He says they died in his infancy, your worship,” replied the officer: *hazarding the usual reply.* At this point in the inquiry, Oliver raised his head; and, looking round with imploring eyes, murmured a feeble prayer for a draught of water (84, italics mine).

This uni-directional conversation is only one illustration of Oliver’s persistent incapacity for self-narration in the novel⁶. What makes this particular [non]-exchange interesting, though, is the way that it reveals the narrator’s own sympathy for the “kind-hearted thief taker” who verbally authors Oliver’s life story. This officer refuses to let Oliver incur the wrath of the callous Mr. Fang. In this scene, speaking for the voiceless is constructed as a compassionate, protective gesture; it is a means of ensuring that the miserable are not further oppressed as a result of their speechlessness. The narrator identifies with the thief-taker, contrasting him favorably with the cold, bureaucratic court surrounding him. What is more, the scene implies that one might effectively rely on the standard or general narratives of the downtrodden while constructing their individual life stories. The kind-hearted thief taker, “pretending to receive Oliver’s answers,” actually just “hazard[s] the usual repl[ies],” relying on typical, or stereotypical, narratives of street children. Despite

⁶ Oliver is again incapable of speech when asked by Mr. Brownlow, “let me here your story, where you came from; who brought you up, and how you got into the company in which I found you.” As Karin Olberstein argues, “it is the narrator who responds” to this inquiry: “Oliver’s sobs checked his utterance for some minutes; when he was on the point of beginning to relate how he had been brought up at the farm, and carried to the workhouse by Mr. Bumble, a peculiarly impatient little double-knock was heard at the street door”(111)

the presumptiveness of this “hazard,” the officer is exactly correct: Oliver’s parents did die in his infancy. Rather than problematizing such a generalization, the narrative makes it an effective and benevolent means of gaining and conveying information about the poor. For the narrator, though, such generalized “hazards” are only accurate if based in particular assumptions. Specifically, these hazards, like the one made by the “kind-hearted thief taker,” must rely on a narrative in which the poor are innocents, downtrodden by their circumstances, not their own vice.⁷ The narrator’s sympathetic identification with the thief taker thus reveals two key elements of his own authorial philosophy: first, “speaking *for* the poor” is a means of enacting social justice and second, one can successfully rely on general narratives of oppressed innocence in telling these tales. The narrator’s investment in and particular rhetorical strategy for “speaking for the poor” is, I believe, directly tied to his specific political interest: opposing the New Poor Law Amendment of 1834⁸.

Despite the nebulous nature of their movement⁹, anti-poor law activists shared a distinct mode of rhetoric, one specifically directed at de-legitimizing the discourse of the Poor Law Commissioners and their supporters. Like the narrator, these anti-poor law activists worked to tell the stories of the poor, revealing the individual suffering caused

⁷ On the other hand, negative generalizations about the poor, particularly those employed to “hazard” narratives about Oliver, are met with the narrator’s satire or dismissal. Mr. Bumble, the parish beadle who assumes all poor children are “wicked and bad-disposed” is satirized, and his narratives of Oliver’s life are always delivered with a sense of the narrator’s irony. Another consistent source of such negative “hazards” is Mr. Brownlow’s attorney and friend, Mr. Grimwig, who warns Brownlow that Oliver, though “well-looking,” is likely deceitful thief who would “re-join his old friends the thieves, and laugh at you.” The narrator is quick to dismiss Grimwig’s presumptions as made merely “in the spirit of contradiction,” thereby immediately discounting his generalization that assumes the poor to be deceitful or vicious.

⁸ There is little doubt that the narrator is, in fact, a strict opponent of the poor laws and interested in using his narrative to critique them. In the novel’s very first pages, he describes the new law as the “rule that all poor people should have the alternative of being starved by a gradual process in the house, or by a quick one out of it”(11)

⁹ There was no singular “anti-poor law movement.” It was a loose collection of Tories and Radicals who organized demonstrations, wrote pamphlets, and generally harassed poor law administrators. For more on the history of this movement, see Nicholas Edsall’s comprehensive 1979 book, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement from 1834-1844*.

by the new amendment. Primarily upper class Tories-turned-Radicals, this movement is now notorious for its patriarchal stance toward the poor. Most of the movement's leaders had been active in the Ten-Hour Movement and, as such, viewed the lower-classes as victims of the Whiggish capitalists and manufacturers in need of benevolent salvation from the upper-classes.¹⁰ As a result, their rhetoric was invested in rendering the poor both miserable and innocent; in these narratives, the poor were guiltless women and children, deserving sympathy and charity.

Most scholarship on the rhetorical technique of the Anti-Poor Law movement has focused on its melodramatic spectacle; indeed, these activists relied heavily on portraits of bodily suffering. Elaine Hadley has contextualized this melodramatic rhetoric by arguing by detailing the physical misery of individual bodies, the activists could counter the abstract, statistical discourse of political economy used by Poor Law advocates. She writes that by “giving a...suffering body to the poor, [activists] could transform their predicament into a recognizable moral force” (98), one that would evoke humanitarian sympathy from the upper classes.

Hadley is certainly accurate in her characterization of anti-poor law rhetoric as full of melodramatic spectacle. In one 1839 letter to Baron Brougham¹¹, George Wythen Baxter, a prolific anti-poor law activist, explicitly states his desire to “bring to view the “hideous... ghostlike..heart-rendering spectacles of the inhuman New Poor Law.” Baxter begins this spectacle with a portrait of “a young girl...pale as her smock, her form as torn and shattered too!” Though “her bright eyes [are] dimmed, her fair hair neglected, her mild face the picture of despair!... poor thing, she is still a child, quite a child.” Baxter

¹⁰ The Ten-Hour movement was...

¹¹ Lord Chancellor of the United Kingdom and New Poor Law Advocate, Lord Brougham was the recipient of a great number of vituperative letters from Baxter and other opponents of the New Poor Law

then confronts us with a picture of a destitute elderly couple “with heads of frost” who, due to the rules in the workhouse that separate the sexes, are “ruthlessly torn, with brutish jeers and laughter, from each other for ever”(80). Baxter ends his spectacular parade of victims with the image of an “abused, famished wretch...a perfect living skeleton, a moving body of death” whose “ribs might be counted, one by one, like harp-strings”(80).

Such passages confirm Hadley’s assessment of the focus on visualized spectacle in anti-Poor Law rhetoric. In classifying such spectacular rhetoric as “melodramatic,” Hadley seems to be working with Peter Brooks’s definition of the mode as one that relies on the “gestural as opposed to verbal language” to reveal the “cosmic struggle between good and evil”(1). There is little doubt that these texts, like do indeed use on the ‘gestural;’ they employ the silent, suffering bodies of the poor to convey their sympathetic misery. But just in *Oliver Twist*, these texts do not rely on the gestural alone. It is not enough that these bodies *appear* to be suffering; their appearance must be accompanied by a narrator’s “hazard” at their life story, specifically, one that writes of their innocence.

For instance, within his ‘spectacular’ parade, Baxter interjects his own voice, hazarding guesses at the stories of the victims, all of them tales of oppressed innocence. He surmises that the pale young girl’s troubles likely arose from her misplaced, innocent trust in some “gay, fine-faced villain—perchance a Commissioners’ son or a lord of the bedchamber.” From the sight of the “aged couple,” Baxter gathers that they were “lovers even when children and joined together by holy church who had “brought up and provided for their children in honesty and sobriety.” Seeing that “their flesh is weak and they can work no longer,” he further hazards that “their hearts [would be] willing” to

labor, if only their bodies would allow. The “abused, famished” wretch is granted an even more elaborate story. Baxter details his life as one that “has seen better days and happier hours, but misfortune’s frequent visitations, and the Queen’s tax-gatherer calling ever so often, conspired to make his humble home desolate and the grisly outcast you see!”(81). This man’s tale continues in detail for two more paragraphs, highlighting his innocent morality that made him “too honest to steal, for he had some old-fashioned notions of his father’s bible in his head.” What is so particular to Baxter’s rhetoric in these tales, though, is that he never claims to have actually spoken to any of these victims. Just as their bodies appear “ghost-like” into sight, their tales arise from no specific source. Their stories simply “appear,” phantom-like, in Baxter’s imagination.

I highlight this particular aspect of Baxter’s rhetoric because I believe that it holds particular political force for the anti-poor law movement. The opponents of the amendment were up against a Pro-Poor Law discourse that justified the act by claiming that the poor had become “indolent,” “lazy” and “vicious.” Such stereotypes obviously led the anti-poor law activists to counter with a characterization of the poor as “honest,” “innocent” and hard-working, as we saw in Baxter’s letter. But the Poor Law supporters not only claimed that the poor were “indolent” and “vicious,” they also claimed that they were liars. Much of the justification for the new law came through the discourse of “imposture.” The Poor Law Commissioners and supporters argued that a centralized administration system was needed because the so-called poor were actually “imposters” who falsely claimed to be in need. The Commissioner’s Report of 1834 states that the majority of the English poor were actually “paupers,” able-bodied people who could work, but chose not to. This and other pro-poor law texts focused on stories in which

paupers claimed to be disabled in order to avoid labor, or claimed to be starving in order to receive relief money to use for “luxury” goods,¹² Within the framework of “imposture,” claiming poverty was itself an act of vice, since the likelihood, according to the Commissioner’s Report, was that such a claim was actually a lie.

Considering this rhetoric, it is clear why Baxter, other anti-poor law activists, and our narrator, worked to “speak for the poor,” eliminating their voices altogether. By refusing the poor the ability or space to tell their own stories, these activists rendered void the discourse of “imposture,” at least the verbal kind detailed in the Commissioners’ Report. The sufferer never actually tells their own story, so they cannot claim any falsehoods. Instead, like the “kind-hearted thief taker,” the good poor-law activist “hazards” a guess at their life story,¹³ one that presumes their innocence in order to garner sympathy. Even in the case that this guess is incorrect, the sufferer is herself innocent of any deliberate deception¹⁴. Through this rhetorical strategy, one that renders “imposture” impossible, the poor law-activists could disentangle poverty from vice. Where, then, Hadley finds the political force of anti-poor law rhetoric in its melodramatic focus on the body, I see it located in its resolute refusal to let the poor speak and potentially implicate themselves in a falsehood. This refusal was, I believe, a highly effective, albeit highly troubling, way to challenge the pro-poor law discourse of imposture.

¹² See, for instance, the Poor Law Commissioner’s Report of 1834, page...in which....

¹³ We can see this exemplified in Baxter’s report on the “pale young girl.” He guesses that her present destitution came as a result of her misplaced trust of “some gay, fine-faced villain—perchance a Commissioners’ son or a lord of the bedchamber.” Baxter, then, reverses the discourse of imposture, implying that while the poor are completely legible in their suffering, the middle- and upper- classes, though “fine-faced” are likely full of deceit.

¹⁴ We can see this rhetorical tactic working in *Oliver Twist* in the scene in which the orphan is revealed to Mr. Brownlow as *Oliver Twist*, rather than *Tom White*, the name given him by....

In refusing Oliver a voice, then, the narrator of *Oliver Twist* is working within the framework of a politically specific rhetorical practice¹⁵. By historicizing the narrator's rhetorical strategy, we can fine-tune the Leavises' characterization of Oliver as an "object," an "anonymous consciousness to register suffering and bewilderment." In order to comprehensively counter the discourse of the Poor Law Advocates, the narrator must do more than write Oliver's body as suffering object. He must steal Oliver's voice in order to steel him against charges of imposture. The narrator keeps Oliver silent in order to "hazard" his own biography of the young boy's life, without risk of implicating him in a lie, or even an inconsistency. Unlike the so-called "imposters" in the pro-Poor Law texts, the able-bodied who still claim relief, Oliver never *claims* anything at all.

In the aforementioned scene with the "kind-hearted thief taker," Oliver is thematically silenced by illness. In a later attempt to tell his own tale, though, he is formally silenced by the narrator's refusal to grant him dialogue. There can be no doubt in this instance that it is the narrator alone who appropriates Oliver's voice. After being forced to assist in a robbery of the Maylie household, Oliver is shot by one of the family's servants. Due to the extraordinary benevolence of the young Rose Maylie, an unconscious Oliver is taken into the family home and saved from death. Upon waking, Oliver is "troubled with anxiety to disclose something" to the family and is granted their presence:

The conference was a long one. Oliver told them all his simple history, and was often compelled to stop, by pain and want of strength. It was a solemn thing, to hear, in this darkened room, the feeble voice of the sick child recounting a weary catalogue of evils and calamities which hard men had brought upon him. Oh! If when we oppress and grind our fellow creatures, we bestowed but one thought on the dark evidences of human error...*if we heard but one instant, in imagination, the deep testimony of dead men's voices, which no power can stifle, and no pride*

¹⁵ By historicizing this rhetorical strategy, I think that we can provide a more nuanced account of Oliver's silence than has been thus far offered in Dickens criticism. (Read as "good" child, or the "problem of language," etc.)

shut out; where would be the injury and injustice, the suffering, misery, cruelty, and wrong that each day's life brings with it! (248, italics mine).

Fittingly, it is within this textual moment, the very instance in which the narrator most explicitly covers Oliver's voice with his own, that he openly offers his philosophy of social responsibility. If we want to eliminate the "injustice, the suffering, the misery, cruelty, and wrong that each day's life brings with it," we must "hear but one instant, *in imagination*, the deep testimony of dead men's voices." Good anti-poor law activist that he is, the narrator clearly wants to bring attention to the plight of the oppressed. But he is also a good anti-poor law *rhetorician*, and as such, he knows that actually hearing their tales could be dangerous. Their voices could tell stories of vice or plenty, challenging his narrative of their innocent suffering. Even worse, if given the opportunity to speak, they might very well deceive, thereby lending credence to the pro-poor law discourse of imposture. Thus the narrator has no desire to *actually* hear the voices of the oppressed; he wants only to "hear...their testimony...*in imagination*." He wants the authority to narrate their tales and to silence their voices¹⁶. Unlike the actual voices of the poor, so potentially threatening to his political narrative, these "imagined" voices would only help strengthen his cause. We might return, then, to the narrator's introductory caveat that the following biography would not be Oliver's tale, but would be his tale of Oliver. By asking us to attend to his representational tactics, the narrator emphasizes his authorship over the story. In the context of the anti-Poor Law movement, such a rhetorical gesture can be read both as a political maneuver; it is a means of rendering impossible the

¹⁶ Ironically, it is these imagined voices that, unlike those of Oliver and Baxter's workhouse victims, cannot be "stifled" or "shut out." While the narrator doesn't seem to register the irony here, I would like to highlight this as one of the textual moments in which the novel treats the narrator with critical distance. In the second half of this chapter, I will return to this moment.

discourse of imposture, a discourse fundamental to the justification of the new amendment.

Dickensian Distance (Incomplete Section)

While politically effective within the rhetorical framework of the poor law debate, “speaking for the poor” in order to prevent them from lying or revealing unsavory histories is clearly a troubling narrative strategy. What is perhaps even more troubling is the idea of profiting from this narrative strategy. And such profiteering was exactly what George Wythen Baxter, the same prolific anti-poor law activist who authored the aforementioned “spectacular” letter, accused Dickens of doing in *Oliver Twist*. In an in 1837 letter to Lord Melbourne, Baxter chastises the Prime Minister for the ill-gotten fame he has gained by politically engineering the New Poor Law. Baxter compares Melbourne to other individuals who earn fame and wealth by adhering to Juvenal's maxim that "Aude aliquid brevibus Gyaris et carcere dignum, Si vis esse aliquis" (Do something that deserves the Gallows, or at least jail, if you would be famous). Such individuals, according to Baxter, include the notorious "Edgeware Road" murderer, James Greenacre, and the contemptible

Boz, (doubtless better known to your Lordship as Mister Dickens), a reporter on the establishment of your Lordship's most devoted and most obedient "Morning Chronicle" [who] by scouring up 'betterish than new' the experience and reports of his former moorings at Bow-Street and evening glories at St. Giles, and adding thereunto a double allowance of Cockney filth and slang, has also contrived to obtain a sort of...Rory O'More and 'Bell's Life in London' reputation (13)¹⁷.

¹⁷ Footnote re: Greenacre and the dismembering of his fiancé, place in Newgate calendar.

For Baxter, Dickens (who had just begun publication of *Oliver Twist* in Bentley's *Miscellany* at the time of the letter) is comparable to a murderer who profits from his crime; he writes horrific tales of the lower class and, in the process, gains both reputation and wealth. Putting aside for a moment the fact that like many contemporary critics, Baxter conflates Dickens himself with the narrator, let us attend to the heart of Baxter's accusation. Despite what we have seen as their rhetorical similarities, Baxter sees Dickens as having violated the goals of the anti-poor law movement in two major ways. First, he has profited both in personal reputation and financial wealth from his authorship of the lower classes¹⁸. Second, he has defied the most crucial element of anti-poor law discourse. Rather than narrating only the innocent poor, he has also told the stories of the criminal poor.¹⁹

In the remainder of this chapter, I would like to offer an explanation of the way the novel itself anticipates and responds to these two accusations. Tacitly acknowledging the truth of Baxter's first allegation, the text draws certain parallels between the way that Oliver's silent, suffering body is exploited by the bourgeois characters within the novel and the way that it is exploited by the narrator. In creating the narrator as a character himself, Oliver's "biographer," the novel points to the way that even those writers who advocate against the oppression of the poor profit from their suffering bodies. Through this self-conscious tactic, Dickens can both critique the current social structure and simultaneously interrogate the representational tactics that he uses for such a critique. In creating a narrator as a textual double who shares significant elements of his own

¹⁸ Footnote re: the ways in which anti-poor law texts were typically published by subscription and working-class penny newspapers—these authors claimed that they were writing from their own humanitarian motives, and not from the desire to profit from sentimental or sensational accounts of the poor that could be consumed for entertainment.

¹⁹ Footnote re: what Bow-street and St. Giles are. Bow-street: where Bow-Street Runners, a "thief taking" group would operate. St. Giles: notorious "water-stop" en route to gallows at Tyburn in 17th and 18th cent.

identity, Dickens can provide a glance at the troubling elements of his own social position and authorial practices. Through this strategy, he is able to confront and critique the exploitative elements of his own writing, while still retaining the real world privileges of a marketable, bourgeois author.

To Baxter's second accusation, the novel offers a response made complicated by the aforementioned distance between the narrator and the text. The narrator, so close to Baxter in the rhetorical techniques that he uses to write the innocent poor, disagrees with the anti-poor law activist's refusal to narrate the criminal lower-class. The stories of these criminals must be told because, like the innocent, they have been made victims of systemic oppression. "Redeemable" criminals like Nance deserve sympathy, since their vice is a matter of necessity, not desire. Through the narrator's voice, the novel thus offers a rebuttal to Baxter's accusation on his own terms; for the narrator, criminals can and should be assimilated into the established anti-poor law narrative of suffering innocence.

Yet the novel tests the limits of such narrative assimilation in the character of Fagin, *Oliver Twist's* notorious villain. Throughout the novel, the narrator cannot afford any measure of sympathy to the thief. Indeed, he writes him as particularly appalling—a grotesque, inhuman, racial other who must not only be vilified but completely annihilated. In our narrator's hands, the condemned Fagin is even denied a final death scene—his body simply disappears from the work. The narrator's particular vilification of Fagin is a result of his own stalwart adherence to the anti-poor law practice of "speaking for the poor." Fagin threatens this rhetorical practice by urging his boys to "speak for themselves," and to establish "for themselves" a great reputation (381).

Moreover, he feeds and shelters his young brood, thereby eliminating the signs of misery writ on their body. As such, his presence is inimical to both the narrator's political and financial success. In order to prevent his own undoing, the narrator has no choice but to pathologize and ultimately eliminate Fagin from his text. But since the novel has already distanced itself from the narrator and exposed his particular subject position, it also reveals the self-interest at the root of his vilification of Fagin. The novel's response to Baxter, then, is that criminals do need to be written in all their alleged guilt in order that we might perceive the subjective forces behind their vilification. Fagin may not fit easily into the narrative of innocent suffering, but the novel ultimately writes his guilt as highly contingent.