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ITEM OF MORTALITY: LIVES LED AND UNLED IN *OLIVER TWIST*

BY JAMES BUZARD

What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

—T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”

A stimulating recent paper by Andrew Miller considers *David Copperfield* (1850) and the so-called optative mode of thought operating in it—that mode in which, as the philosopher Stuart Hampshire puts it, one “explains himself to himself by his history, but by the history as accompanied by unrealized possibilities on both sides of the track of actual events.”¹ In the optative mood, we track back through the course of these actual events in our lives, stopping at all the points where, had we chosen differently or had other things befallen us, our lives could have been very different from what they in fact became. With the optative disposition, we may regret the path we have actually pursued, second-guess our choice of everything from entrée to profession or partner, but most importantly we may imbue our existence with the ethically salient awareness of its thoroughgoing contingency. And, as Miller puts it, “[t]houghts of contingency are viral.”² So many alternatives crowd around the tightrope of factitiousness we happen to have tread; the branching moments in our history that might have led to other tracks begin to multiply and feed upon our lived life like flesh-eating bacteria; we imagine our almost-selves stepping off of so many outbound trains onto alien platforms and into the arms of strangers that every last aspect of the existence we actually find ourselves having can start to feel miraculous—or nightmarishly momentous. Such a perspective—as T. S. Eliot wrote in a somewhat different context—can give “an importance to our most trivial pursuits, to the occupation of our every minute, which we cannot contemplate long without the horror of nightmare.”³

In his treatment of *David Copperfield*, Miller focuses on the non-existent figure of David's hypothetical sister, not a character in the novel but merely a figment of Aunt Betsey Trotwood's wishful imagination, the second Betsey Trotwood that-might-have-been: as Miller puts it, she functions as an "ambassador within the novel for all that is excluded from it" and as "a hyperbolic emblem for the thought that the lives we do not lead are internal to those that we do."⁴ A similar point, it seems to me, could be made about the character of Dick in *Oliver Twist*, Oliver's supposed little friend from his early days at Mrs. Mann's infant farm. Remember Dick? He figures four times in the novel, twice directly represented and speaking lines of dialogue, twice as an object of Oliver's thoughts or a topic of his conversation. But no sooner had I set about a straightforward application of Miller's reading onto the earlier Dickens novel than I ran into difficulties. While I continue to think it true that Dick functions as an "ambassador within [*Oliver Twist*] for all that is excluded from it," the thinking so does not lead me to any nightmare-inducing or ethically instructive vision of contingency.⁵

Moving back from *David Copperfield* to *Oliver Twist* entails, of course, the shift from *Bildungsroman*, which presupposes a multiplicity of possible life-paths, to secularized psychomachia, in which forces of light and dark wage war over the fate of a soul. And as with the war of the angels and demons in *Paradise Lost* (1674), in *Oliver Twist* the outcome is never in doubt; only the details of the outcome. Only two results are possible in psychomachia—saved or lost—and though these may be staged in a variety of ways, the varieties are functionally equivalent. At no stage in his career was Dickens prepared to file as lost a sensitive boy character into which he had poured considerable amounts of his own psychic energy. In writing *Oliver Twist*, however much he may have enjoyed the clever and actually quite trivial criminality of the Dodger, Dickens was not about to write *Jack Sheppard* (1839).⁶

Another reason it proved difficult for me simply to cut and paste Miller's argument about contingency has to do with the status of chance occurrences—along with our choices, the great instrument of contingency in our lives—in *Oliver Twist*. Steven Marcus writes aptly of the coincidences in the novel that they are "of too cosmic an order to belong to the category of the fortuitous."⁷ Listing some of the most staggering examples, Marcus concludes that they

beggar[] the very notion of accident. For the population of *Oliver Twist* consists only of persons—the wicked and the beneficent—involved with

the fate of the hero. There are, almost, no other sorts of people in it; and in a world where there is no accidental population, no encounter can be called a coincidence. In effect there is also no reality, no existence in *Oliver Twist* other than the parabolic one the characters inhabit and serve; and where the world is thus circumscribed, the ordinary tests of fortuitousness do not apply.⁸

This catches the atmosphere of the novel admirably, and Marcus does not mention all, or even the most remarkable, of the so-called coincidences. The plenitude and the jaw-dropping quality of aleatory experience in *Oliver Twist* explode the very category of the aleatory and send us careening toward its opposite, predestination. So if Dick is an ambassador within the novel in which he appears for all that is excluded from it, one of the things he is ambassador for is contingency itself.

In fact, *Oliver Twist* seems determined to sweeten its freedom from contingency by flirting outrageously with the illusion of it. On the first page, the narrator tells us that for some time after Oliver's birth

it remained a matter of considerable doubt whether this child would survive to bear any name at all; in which case it is somewhat more than probable that these memoirs would never have appeared, or, if they had, being comprised within a couple of pages, they 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.⁹

We need a word—surely one exists in German—for the sensation that comes over us at being offered such phony contingency as this. A similar moment, with a useful distinction, is to be found in the scene in which Oliver stands before the half-blind, half-child magistrate, about to be articulated to the brutish chimneysweep Gamfield. “It was the critical moment of Oliver's fate,” the novel tries to convince us: “If the inkstand had been where the old gentleman thought it was, he would have dipped his pen into it and signed the indentures, and Oliver would have been straightway hurried off” (*OT*, 25). Unlike Oliver's death in the very first chapter, this possible but not actualized event could indeed have happened; but the point is that it wouldn't have mattered to the outcome if it had. Any contingency worth its name has got to make a difference; but even if Dickens had decided to forego the atmospheric sleeping-among-the-coffins business at Sowerberry's and to consign Oliver to Gamfield, it is unthinkable that Oliver would then have been roasted up a chimney or pummeled to death, and he certainly would not have been morally corrupted by

proximity to a master “whose villanous countenance [is] a regular stamped receipt for cruelty” (*OT*, 24). Oliver would simply have run away from Gamfield as he does from Sowerberry and wound up where he was always destined to go.

No more to be trusted than Dickens’s profferings of false contingency are those related moments when the novelist finds it incumbent upon him to wave in the direction of allowing social environment a measure of influence over Oliver’s character. Oliver’s speech has been the subject of considerable comment: this “workus” boy has somehow managed to acquire the eloquence of a courtier.¹⁰ At various points in the narrative, rather half-hearted efforts are made to suggest Oliver’s susceptibility to the circumstances and role models surrounding him. When Oliver doggedly accepts the news that he is to be sent to Mr. Sowerberry’s funeral establishment, for example, the narrator informs us that our hero’s so-called formative years in the workhouse and at Mrs. Mann’s have put him “in a fair way of being reduced to a state of brutal stupidity and sullenness for life, by the ill usage he had received” (*OT*, 31). On this point, we are apt to feel we are being had. A later passage tells of Fagin’s attempt to win Oliver over to a life of crime: “In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils; and, having prepared his mind by solitude and gloom to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it and change its hue for ever” (*OT*, 152). “Once let him feel,” Fagin adds a few pages further on, “that he is one of us; once fill his mind with the idea that he has been a thief, and he’s ours—ours for his life!” (*OT*, 159). He even gives Oliver a copy of the *Newgate Calendar* to read as preparation for his first act of house-breaking, apparently believing the boy will take the “history of the lives and trials of great criminals” for his Plutarch and learn to emulate their models (*OT*, 164). This inept attempt to get Oliver to engage in a perverse form of moral perfectionism, or the pursuit of moral improvement through the internalization of exemplars, could not be more counterproductive: “In a paroxysm of fear the boy closed the book and thrust it from him. Then, falling upon his knees, he prayed Heaven to spare him from such deeds, and rather to will that he should die at once, than be reserved for crimes so fearful and appalling” (*OT*, 164).¹¹

Even Rose gives voice to the theory, everywhere disproven in the novel, that Oliver, and she herself, might be susceptible to the power of surroundings. “But even if he has been wicked,” she pleads with Mrs. Maylie,

think how young he is; think that he may never have known a mother's love, or even the comfort of a home, and that ill-usage and blows, or the want of bread, may have driven him to herd with the men who have forced him to guilt. . . . Oh! As you love me, and know that I have never felt the want of parents in your goodness and affection, but that I might have done so, and might have been equally helpless and unprotected with this poor child, have pity upon him before it is too late. (*OT*, 239)

One notes with distaste that strange verb “herd” and groups it with the pig-like “drunken men and women [who] were positively wallowing in the filth” (*OT*, 63) in the Saffron Hill slums, with the impoverished, maddened widower and his mother-in-law whom Oliver visits with Sowerberry and who “seemed so like the rats he had seen outside” (*OT*, 41), with the simian Sikes of George Cruikshank’s illustrations, with the capering, monkey-like “Master Bates,” and, of course, with Fagin: “As he glided stealthily along, creeping beneath the shelter of the walls and doorways, the hideous old man seemed like some loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved, crawling forth by night in search of some rich offal for a meal” (*OT*, 153). The profound disturbance Dickens confronts in contemplating the likelihood that we may be formed by our environments to any appreciable extent gives rise to such grotesquely dehumanizing characterizations. *Oliver Twist*’s most iconic scene, the one in which Oliver asks for more gruel, is in fact occasioned by another boy’s half-jesting prediction that his hunger will drive him to an act of cannibalism.¹² Those not graced with Oliver’s (and Dick’s) miraculous ability to withstand the forming and deforming pressures of habitat drop beneath the zone of the human. For us, of course, such figures as Oliver and Dick never inhabit it. Between the people degenerating into beasts and the angels in human form, the actually human is this novel’s missing link. In saying this, we are perhaps saying no more than the obvious: Dickens’s characterization in this work is that of melodrama.

Writing of *Sketches by Boz* (1836), J. Hillis Miller passed on the people represented in that book the dismal sentence, “As a man’s surroundings are, so will his life be,” since the metonymic chain that takes Dickens’s imagination “from things to people to stories” is supported by “the assumption of a necessary similarity between a man, his environment, and the life he is forced to lead within that environment.”¹³ “[I]t is easy to see,” he maintained, “how . . . the predominance of metonymy reinforces [a] deterministic vision of

man's life."¹⁴ In *Oliver Twist*, most of the supporting cast lies under the condemnation of this brutal law. It is particularly the case for Fagin, "engendered in the slime and darkness through which he moved" (*OT*, 153).¹⁵ It is breathtakingly the case for the hastily glimpsed population of Smithfield market, where man and beast are all mixed up together, like some species of minotaur:

Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade were mingled together in a dense mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of beasts, the bleating of sheep, and grunting and squeaking of pigs; the cries of hawkers, the shouts, oaths, and quarreling on all sides, the ringing of bells and roar of voices that issued from every public-house; the crowding, pushing, driving, beating, whooping, and yelling; the hideous and discordant din that resounded from every corner of the market; and the unwashed, unshaven, squalid, and dirty figures constantly running to and fro, and bursting in and out of the throng, rendered it a stunning and bewildering scene which quite confounded the senses. (*OT*, 171)

Against the backdrop of that "hideous and discordant din," Oliver's mild and mellifluous and inexplicably bourgeois speech strives to be heard, and the job of Dickens's tale is to pluck Oliver, more Ariadne than Theseus, from the labyrinth.

About halfway through the novel, Fagin has learned his lesson. "I saw it was not easy to train him to the business," he tells Monks; "he was not like other boys in the same circumstances." "Curse him, no!" Monks replies, "or he would have been a thief long ago" (*OT*, 214). We confront in *Oliver Twist* more than just the kind of structural incommensurability of protagonist and minor characters that Alex Woloch has described in his study *The One Versus the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*; intersecting with that distinction is the mismatch between the conceptions of human nature as essentially malleable or obdurate—a distinction of such moment to Dickens that he handles it as one of species.¹⁶ And Fagin could have seen Oliver's difference all along: as many have noted, it was stamped upon his face, that face whose perfectly sincere "expression of melancholy" made Oliver "a delightful mute" for Sowerberry's funeral processions (*OT*, 38). Comparable to the illusory contingency and the specious assertions that environment may shape Oliver's nature is Dr. Losberne's rhetorical question: since "[v]ice . . . takes up her abode in many temples, . . . who can say that

a fair outside shall not enshrine her?" (*OT*, 239). Virtually everything in the novel arises to repudiate Losberne's insinuation. We recall the "something in that boy's face" that gives Brownlow pause (*OT*, 80); the "beautiful mild face" in the portrait of Agnes Fleming that hangs in Brownlow's house (*OT*, 90); the fact that Oliver's face is the "living copy" of that one (*OT*, 93); the face of Oliver's mother in his dreams, "always look[ing] sweet and happy" (*OT*, 87). Momentarily disposed to doubt Oliver (because he has trusted and been disappointed in the past), Brownlow is compelled to acknowledge there is "truth in every one of [his] thin and sharpened lineaments" (*OT*, 93). Nancy notes Oliver's utter out-of-placeness among the criminals when she says, "I can't bear to have [Oliver] about me: the sight of him turns me against myself and all of you" (*OT*, 209). In the real world, such an appearance of innocence would be a priceless asset to the guilty, as Toby Cratchit perceives when he remarks, "Wot an inwalable boy that'll make for the old ladies' pockets in chapels. His mug is a fortun' to him" (*OT*, 177). Fagin tells Sikes that it's precisely Oliver's face that makes him so potentially valuable as a thief, whereas with all the other boys he might employ, "their looks convict 'em when they get into trouble" (*OT*, 160). On the other side of the ledger, we have the chimneysweep Gamfield's "villanous countenance," that "regular stamped receipt for cruelty" (*OT*, 24), Fagin's "villanous-looking and repulsive face" (*OT*, 64), the magistrate Fang, who "[i]f he were really not in the habit of drinking rather more than was exactly good for him, . . . might have brought an action against his countenance for libel, and have recovered heavy damages" (*OT*, 81). We have the faces of the customers in *The Three Cripples*, "whose countenances, expressive of almost every vice in almost every grade, irresistibly attracted the attention by their very repulsiveness" (*OT*, 207). Not for nothing does Fagin in his cell possess "a countenance more like that of a snared beast than the face of a man" (*OT*, 448). Those not proof against the degrading forces of circumstance and environment are preemptively "badged and ticketed," snared from the start, caged beasts from birth (*OT*, 5).¹⁷

As opposed to the realist novel, with its satisfyingly deep character-psychology, melodrama, making virtue visible on the surface, figures interiority or depth of character only negatively. As James Eli Adams writes, "Within melodrama, psychic depth becomes a mark of criminality, a sign that someone has something to hide."¹⁸ So it is appropriate too that Fagin can do—up to a point—what Oliver and Dick and Rose can never do, namely dissemble. He convincingly mimics a respectable gentleman in order to train the boys in pickpocketing, and he

frequently puts on a brave face when inwardly troubled. In the Three Cripples, for instance, Fagin laughs with the landlord, but then we read, "The Jew was no sooner alone than his countenance resumed its former expression of anxiety and thought" (*OT*, 208). He shows his true nature when unobserved, as for example in that early, indicative scene in which he draws forth his miser's chest of riches only when convinced that Oliver, lying nearby, is asleep. The one great exception to the rule of reading faces in *Oliver Twist* is of course Mr. Brownlow's gruff friend Grimwig, of whom we learn, "the variety of shapes into which his countenance was twisted defy description" (*OT*, 109). As Woloch has shown, Grimwig's doing this exemplifies the eccentric minor character's protest against minoriness, his refusal to "wholly or comfortably fit into the [narrative] space he is allocated."¹⁹ We might even be tempted to regard Grimwig's perpetual threat to eat his own head as the symptom of a masochistic or suicidal impulse, imagining an act of violence against the self to which the minor character may be driven in his frustration at being unable to strike back against the power responsible for his minority: the narrator.²⁰ By eating his head, Grimwig could erase the countenance Dickens has pasted on it. Given what reliable indicators of character all the other faces in this novel are, Grimwig might even assume for us the proportions of a sacrificial hero, volunteering to devour his face on behalf of all the others who may all too readily be known, and placed, by theirs.

One of the stranger elements in *Oliver Twist* seems to stand guarantee for the protagonist's exemption from the sway of environment under which so many of the others languish: the so-called "remembrances of scenes that never were" that provide sustenance to what would, if Oliver had any inner life, be his inner life (*OT*, 238). These miracles descend on Oliver in dreams and through his experience of the countryside; they may bring him images, presumably reliable, of the mother who died minutes after his birth, and they involve the logic of group identity that Walter Benn Michaels has described, the logic that permits us to speak of such things as our "national memory" when no member of the nation could possibly remember everything it contains. Virtually everything in the history of "our" people, Michaels argues, with bracing literalism, did not happen to us or was not done by us; it happened to and was done by people who came before us, to whom we bind ourselves by alchemizing the dross of the mere what happened into the what-happened-to-us, which we license ourselves to label familial or ethnic or national "memory." The catalyst for this transformation, Michaels goes on to contend, has traditionally been

that of race. Race adds pathos to the issue of cultural identity, making it possible to speak of the tragedy of a people “losing their culture” and turning the fact of something’s being a part of our culture into “a motive for doing it”—so as to be true to the kind of people we are.²¹ And pathetic it would be were Oliver to lose contact with his departed mother’s channeled energies, which work much as Michaels suggests in keeping him true to what he is, though in this novel, and in the wider anthropological discourse of the 1830s, the categories of class and species are nearly interchangeable with that of race. Those mystifying educated speech patterns of Oliver’s invite explanation as the kind of inherited characteristic expounded in the pre-Darwinist thought of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and others, habits developed in prior generations and passed on to him as an irrevocable legacy. George Stocking reminds us that in the first half of the nineteenth century, “[t]he notion that acquired characteristics could be inherited was widely accepted,” even though Lamarck’s own work was not, and that even the young Darwin can be seen to espouse “the belief that the habitual behavior of human groups in different environments might become part of their hereditary physical makeup.”²²

Stocking’s mention of “different environments” here may appear to raise a challenge to the argument I have been advancing about environmental conditioning and Oliver’s resistance to it. Because Lamarckian assumptions work at the line between environmental factors and innate qualities as determinants of human character, it may be well to consider two possible qualifications of my thesis. First, we may wish to entertain the notion that Oliver’s ancestors were people sufficiently receptive to the formative influence of environment as to develop habits under its pressure—good habits—that have made their way down to their little descendant. The result, paradoxically enough, is that the descendant, endowed with this inheritance, can now draw upon it to withstand the pressure of new and different (specifically, worse) environments. Environmental pressure is given its due, but relegated to the past. Inherited characteristics appear to have become, to all intents and purposes, fixed “racial” ones.

Or, to make a different but related qualification, we might revise my thesis more radically and concede that even Oliver is, as his ancestors were, at the mercy of certain environmental forces—but only positive ones, those tending to make him even better than he is to start with. Some such formulation appears needed, we might think, to account for the Wordsworthian orgy Dickens superintends in book 2, when Oliver, recuperating from the gunshot wound he sustained during

Sikes's botched assault on Mrs. Maylie's house, is taken to the country. For we are told that Oliver "seemed to enter upon a new existence" thanks to being there (*OT*, 262):

Who can describe the pleasure and delight, the peace of mind and soft tranquility, which the sickly boy felt in the balmy air, and among the green hills and rich woods of an inland village! Who can tell how scenes of peace and quietude sink into the minds of pain-worn dwellers in close and noisy places, and carry their own freshness deep into their jaded hearts? Men who have lived in crowded pent-up streets, through whole lives of toil, and never wished for change; men to whom custom has indeed been second nature, and who have come almost to love each brick and stone that formed the narrow boundaries of their daily walks—even they with the hand of death upon them, have been known to yearn at last for one short glimpse of Nature's face, and carried far from the scenes of their old pains and pleasures, have seemed to pass at once into a new state of being, and crawling forth from day to day to some green sunny spot, have had such memories wakened up within them by the mere sight of sky, and hill, and plain, and glistening water, that a foretaste of Heaven itself has soothed their quick decline, and they have sunk into their tombs as peacefully as the sun, whose setting they watched from their lonely chamber window but a few hours before, faded from their dim and feeble sight! The memories which peaceful country scenes call up are not of this world or of its thoughts or hopes. Their gentle influence may teach us to weave fresh garlands for the graves of those we loved, may purify our thoughts, and bear down before it old enmity and hatred; but, beneath all this there lingers in the least reflective mind a vague and half-formed consciousness of having held such feelings long before in some remote and distant time, which calls up solemn thoughts of distant times to come, and bends down pride and worldliness beneath it. (*OT*, 261–62)

Such are the uses of Romanticism. Dickens lifts "crowded pent-up streets" from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" ("For I was reared / In the great city, pent 'mid cloisters dim"), and the passage as a whole is a prose knock-off of William Wordsworth's "Immortality Ode," with its assertion that

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.²³

But where Wordsworth contends with the progressive loss of those haloing clouds as we age, striving to find in it a compensating gain that

will inspire rededication to this life and to human community, Dickens, in shifting attention to those dying men from the cities, declines the moral courage of his model. We seem to have strayed into the paradise from which we come and to which the novel can hardly wait to return us. In this dense and soggy instance of what D. A. Miller has called “the non-narratable,” we seem in fact to have arrived at the novel’s end two hundred pages before it finishes. This third critic named Miller I am citing has written cogently about narrative closure as having to be “imported [into narratives] from elsewhere, from a world untouched by the conditions of narratability.”²⁴ It pays to think about narrative, he says, as among other things “an interruption of what will be resumed,” and here, as is not uncommon in Dickens, we come up against what feels like an eagerness to get on with the resumption.²⁵ So deadly to storytelling is the landscape this section of the novel describes, so likely does it seem that our interrupting narrative, the “full, true, and particular account of the life and adventures of Oliver Twist,” is just going to open its veins and lie back in a warm bath, that Dickens speedily resorts to some drastic measures to snap himself out of it (*OT*, 112). In the very next chapter, death gets dislodged from the perspective of its avid welcomers and shifted into that of people potentially to be left behind, as Rose falls mysteriously and almost fatally ill. *Et in Arcadia ego*. The necessity of running a message to town brings Oliver literally crashing into Monks (another coincidence of “cosmic” dimensions), which leads to the notorious moment, the subject of one of Cruikshank’s most powerful illustrations, when Fagin and Monks appear outside the window of the room where Oliver lies sleeping over his studies and manage to get away without leaving so much as a footprint. The extremity of the representation of pastoral bliss generates its polar opposite, the quintessence of urban corruption, and narrative energy is reignited by the latter’s violation of the former’s domain.

So in spite of that “seemed to enter upon a new existence,” that gesture toward acknowledging Oliver’s limited liability to alteration under environmental pressure, the second qualification of my thesis turns out to make little difference to it, for the new existence upon which Oliver seems to enter is that of the (narrative) afterlife (*OT*, 262). In this bucolic retreat, people do not really get influenced in ways that alter their manner of living in this world; they get prepared for going to the next. A world untouched by the conditions of narratability: a world where stories cannot go, where the atmosphere is too thin for them to breathe. The kind of world where people might enact what Dickens,

the great storyteller, aims at, what Marcus, echoing Lionel Trilling, aptly calls “a conception of social life as profoundly unconditioned.”²⁶

But what if it all were otherwise?

Let's begin:

Chapter the First. *Treats of the Place where Oliver Twist was born, and of the Circumstances attending his birth.*

Among other public buildings in the town of Mudfog, it boasts of one which is common to most towns great or small, to wit, a workhouse; and in this workhouse there was born on a day and date which I need not trouble myself to repeat, inasmuch as it can be of no possible consequence to the reader, in this stage of the business at all events, the item of mortality whose name is prefixed to the head of this chapter. (OT, 3)

I follow here the serial version of the novel, published in 24 installments in *Bentley's Miscellany* between February 1837 and April 1839. In all subsequent versions the town is left unnamed.

Note how the workhouse in which Oliver is born comes into focus, set before us first as an item on one kind of list (the public buildings of Mudfog) and then as an item on another kind (the workhouses of Great Britain). We zoom in, then out, but from both points of view the workhouse appears to us a listable kind of thing. Just “a workhouse.” Note also the cavalier attitude taken toward the data that would locate Oliver's birth in time. The narrator “need not trouble” himself to record this information because he appears to have decided to approach his material—at this stage of the business—by adopting a style akin to that of the Mudfog parish authorities themselves, for whom this little being is just another in a series about whose members they wish to trouble themselves as little as possible. An “item of mortality” may just have been born, but our protagonist has not been, yet. “Item” inevitably suggests a list, suggests the existence of other items, since no one itemizes that which is singular. The items on a list possess a functional equivalence, a common item-ness that persists beneath whatever system of delineation is employed to make the list a list, rather than one undifferentiated blot. Items on a list can seem interchangeable, the catalog a defining opposite for narrative plot. Oliver's short-lived mother, too, is readily placed on a list of her own, as the surgeon examines her left hand and says, “The old story . . . no wedding-ring,

I see" (*OT*, 5). People and places are filed into preexisting categories as types of people and places. J. Hillis Miller's comment on *Sketches by Boz* seems right on target for this dawning narrative, too: "What he sees first are things, human artifacts, streets, buildings, vehicles, objects. . . . These objects are signs, present evidence of something absent. . . . Human beings are at first . . . seen as things among other things . . . [and] [t]he emblem for this confrontation of a collection of disconnected objects whose meaning is still to be discovered is the list."²⁷ We seem indeed to be reading what "might almost be described as the last and longest of the Tales from the *Sketches*."²⁸

Of course, we will want to say, Dickens's whole purpose is to denounce the impersonal and brutal system into which Oliver is born, which approaches people not with sympathy but rather from without, as items on lists, interchangeable parts, bunches of matter to be organized and ruled. Dickens believes it a crying shame, we may continue, that Oliver is "badged and ticketed, and [falls] into his place at once—a parish child—the orphan of a workhouse—the humble, half-starved drudge" (*OT*, 5). And it is true, of course, that Dickens could be derisive about utilitarianism and other, to him, overly rationalistic approaches to human problems and human nature. He mistrusted systems. Yet his tale, *Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy's Progress*—note how the subtitle figures Oliver as one of a type—does possess, as all narratives do, what Woloch calls a "character-system" that allots narrative space asymmetrically among protagonist and minor characters.²⁹ What I want to do now is to hold that system in abeyance a little, to consider it as not commencing its operations on the very first page of our story. I want to imagine there to be a lapse of some time between the birth of the "item" in the novel's first sentence, and the birth of the protagonist. This will involve exploiting the tension between the two parts of Dickens's title, "Oliver Twist" and "The Parish Boy's Progress." It will require that we set aside the distinctiveness of the protagonist, his utter singularity, and allow Oliver, however briefly, to remain a specimen. Just "a parish boy." We will consider what it would be like to let Oliver fall under the dictate of Thomas Malthus, who in the 1803 edition of his *Essay on the Principle of Population* wrote that the individual child "is, comparatively speaking, of little value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place."³⁰ The thought experiment I am proposing we conduct involves injecting the element of contingency into a fictional world inhospitable to it.

To think of *Oliver Twist* this way, we can probably best begin by recalling how he got to be "Oliver Twist."

Mrs. Mann raised up her hands in astonishment, but added, after a moment's reflection, "How comes he to have any name at all, then?"

The beadle drew himself up with great pride, and said, "I invented it."

"You, Mr. Bumble?"

"I, Mrs. Mann. We name our foundlin's in alphabetical order. The last was a S, - Swubble: I named him. This was a T, - Twist: I named him. The next one as comes will be Unwin, and the next Vilkins. I have got names ready made to the end of the alphabet, and all the way through it again, when we come to Z." (*OT*, 10)

This conversation takes place on Oliver's 8th or 9th birthday (the serial version of the novel makes it 8th, all others 9th), when Bumble has come to take him from the baby farm to be apprenticed to a trade.

The first thing we will be tempted to say about this passage is that the system it describes is an arbitrary one, making use of the alphabet to provide the minimal distinctions necessary to avoid just referring to each new arrival in the system as "boy."³¹ In a truly contingent world, however, it is hard to distinguish between the arbitrariness of a name assigned by cycling through the alphabet and that of a name acquired by the chance of who one's parents are. We might also appreciate the way Bumble's system parodies God's creation-by-naming, and the philosophical tradition holding that names attach themselves to definitive features, to essences, in the things named. The parody resides in the fact that "Twist" can appear to forecast Oliver's future: as in, to twist from a rope, to hang as a criminal.³² In the early chapters of the novel, we have the white-waistcoated gentleman to thank for keeping this predictive potential in the name before our mind's eye, with his repeated assurances that "that boy will be hung" (*OT*, 15). Rigorous application of this logocentric logic would lead us to wonder what sort of essential nature is supposed to be designated by a name like "Swubble," or for that matter, "Vilkins," questions calling for a degree of Talmudic dexterity to which I can't pretend. The name "Unwin," on the other hand, seems more promising, as the name for someone whose destiny it is to do the opposite of win. Together with "Twist," it can suggest to us that Bumble's list both discriminates among the items on it and presents them as all of a piece, to the extent that different names may come to appear so many synonyms for "boy without a future."

On Bumble's account, he has, up to the moment of this conversation, named at the very least 20 boys (A-T), undoubtedly many more, as we assume that "Oliver Twist" does not make his appearance in the very first run through the alphabet, and we sense that Bumble has been

beadle for some time. And he has at least 32 more names ready for foundlings as yet forthcoming: U–Z, then A–Z (“all the way through it again” [OT, 10]). But we note that Bumble contents himself with illustrating the workings of the system with the specification of only four names. The principle of Occam’s razor dictates that in reasoning, we should be guided by a “law of parsimony” favoring the simpler explanation fitting the facts over the more complicated. Bumble is a reasonably good utilitarian, husbanding his energies and expending minimal effort, or at least next to minimal, to perform his task. (He might have done it with three names, but we will not begrudge him the egregious “Vilkins.”) It also seems important that “Twist” should be neither first nor last among the names: it adds to the typicality of our not-yet-protagonist if, like the middle of a plot as Aristotle described it, he comes at us as “that which itself naturally follows something else, and has something else after it.”³³ It’s important that we see *Oliver Twist* as embedded in, subordinated to, an ongoing list, neither its origin nor its culmination, nothing special, nothing requiring the modification of an existing plan: Oliver “Twixt,” in short, betwixt and between. D. A. Miller again: narrative construed as “an interruption of what will be resumed”—in this instance, Bumble’s list and the growing population of wretched boys it exists to manage.³⁴

In my thought experiment, we would imagine the alphabetical series of names as stretched out horizontally before us on a line extending to left (the past) and right (the future). Swubble on our left, the as-yet-unborn Unwin and Vilkins on our right. We would imagine ourselves as having a moveable viewfinder mounted on a track running parallel to this series and bringing into focus one item of the series at each point along the track, with the items bracketing it on either side discernible as distinct entities yet beginning to blur at the outer edges. We just happen to have stopped at “*Oliver Twist*.” Beyond Swubble and Vilkins, boys recede into the first letters of their Bumble-bestowed surnames.³⁵

By the time we get to Bumble’s explanation of the naming system, Oliver’s situation as an interchangeable item among others has been continued at Mrs. Mann’s infant farm, where he has joined “twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws” already there, “roll[ing] about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food, or too much clothing” (OT, 6). Note that we can’t assume, though it’s inviting to, that, if 30, these elders stretch back from T to A, and then from Z to P of the previous cycle; or, if 20, from T to A and then simply to Z of the previous round. Why not? The novel suggests that “eight and a half out of ten” do not survive the system (OT, 7). If there

are 30 boys at Mrs. Mann's before Oliver gets there, we must subtract 25.5 of them (let's kill off another half-boy and round up to 26); if 20, we subtract 17, but we can infer nothing about which 26 or 17 they are. We are assuming, of course, that Mrs. Mann's is the only baby farm to which the Mudfog workhouse sends its orphan boys, and that it sends all its orphan boys there. We are assuming, in other words, the possibility said to be explored in Oliver's case—whether “there was no female then domiciled in ‘the house’ who was in a situation to impart to Oliver Twist the consolation and nourishment of which he stood in need” (*OT*, 6)—is never realized for any boy. We may also assume that it is workhouse policy to reclaim boys from the farm on their eighth or ninth birthdays and to then begin seeking apprenticeships for them with area tradesmen. This would mean that all of the surviving 4 or 3 boys who were at Mrs. Mann's when Oliver was first sent there have preceded him in being returned to the workhouse and, assuming they have survived their time there as well, sent on to learn trades. These speculations follow from our thought experiment of trying to take seriously the notion that Oliver is a perfectly typical Mudfog parish boy.³⁶

It's not until Oliver leaves the baby farm that he steps out of the crowd and begins to take on the mantle of protagonist: “Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known; and a sense of his loneliness in the great wide world sank into the child's heart for the first time” (*OT*, 11). The loneliness he feels is the loneliness of the leading man: among the *dramatis personae*, he has no kin. Some trace of his old typicality may linger in the fact that he is chosen by lottery to ask for more gruel, on behalf of the whole group; but the result of his performing this function is to be singled out as the object lesson of a new prayer “in which [the other boys] entreated to be made good, virtuous, contented, and obedient, and to be guarded from the sins and vices of Oliver Twist, whom the supplication distinctly set forth to be under the exclusive patronage and protection of the powers of wickedness, and an article direct from the manufactory of the devil himself” (*OT*, 18).

Let's read the sentence quoted near the top of my last paragraph once more, or at least part of it: “Wretched as were the little companions in misery he was leaving behind, they were the only friends he had ever known.” Now let's recall something Bumble says in explaining the naming system: “The last was a S, - Swubble: I named him. This was a T, - Twist: I named him. The next one as comes will be Unwin,

and the next Vilkins.” Taking the two together, we arrive at this: unless we abandon the assumptions upon which we’ve been proceeding and hypothesize some factor completely external to our system that might be responsible for all those unnumbered “little companions in misery he was leaving behind,” we will be incapable of accounting for their existence. For Bumble has told us, hard to swallow though it is, that not one orphan boy has been born and needed to be named since the birth of Oliver Twist eight or nine years earlier. Where did all these others come from? How is it that there’s not an Unwin or a Vilkins among them? Are there other letters between U and T in Bumble’s alphabet, like the finer gradations of measurement on a ruler? But no; Bumble says “the next one as comes will be Unwin.” Did the workhouse temporarily abandon the naming system for a host of boys that it contented itself with calling simply “boy,” but then, finding this unmanageable, decide to resume the system for the next one to be born? What is going on?

Even Homer nods, but Dickens’s blunder in this instance is salient to our thought experiment and to our relationship to Oliver. The mistake makes a kind of sense, but only if we drop the experiment. For however much the early pages of this novel gesture toward the typicality or specimen-nature of the figure who will become our protagonist, we know, as we have always known, that from word one he has been set apart. Only a recognition of his qualitative difference from all the other boys can explain why, once he is born, Dickens does not need any more boys—except for the purpose of staging Oliver’s departure from them. Rather than being, as I’ve attempted to imagine him, “Oliver Twixt,” rather than resembling the middle of a narrative plot as formulated by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, our hero turns out to resemble the end of a plot: “that which itself naturally follows something else . . . but has nothing else after it.”³⁷ And once we grasp that this is his true nature, we hear the whoosh of contingency fleeing the building. We are in a position somewhat similar to the one Monks finds himself in, when he declares of Oliver that “[i]f a crowd of devils were to put themselves into his exact shape, and he stood amongst them, there is something that would tell me how to point him out” (*OT*, 283).

Much of what I have been saying about the status of Oliver in comparison to the other boys can be thought of as dramatizing the title of Woloch’s *The One versus the Many*. *Versus*, not among, because of the incommensurability of protagonist and minor characters, because they are not of the same “species,” so to speak, and their cohabitation in narrative space has an agonistic quality. But while on the one hand

it seems important to stress this incommensurability, in some contexts it can make sense to think instead of a spectrum on which protagonist and minor characters lie at opposite ends, to think of the difference between them as merely quantitative rather than qualitative. The realist novel, for example, is, as Woloch says, “infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero.”³⁸ In realism, the possibility that a minor character might become a hero may not actually be what gets narrated, but it may for all that still not lie within the category of the non-narratable. The fact that Dorothea Brooke’s sister Celia doesn’t become a protagonist in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) should not be taken as an indication that she couldn’t become one. In the melodramatic world of *Oliver Twist*, however, majorness and minorness seem as fixedly opposed to each other as goodness and wickedness. And the quintessence of minorness is a figure who might be Oliver’s alter ego or “secret sharer,” his double, his disavowed twin, a character so vacuous that he might be the very hole where contingency ought to be. We come, at last, to Dick.

The first thing to say about Dick is that, like the rest of the “little companions in misery” whom Oliver leaves behind, he cannot exist. He is the sickly child whom Oliver feels “glad to see” as he runs away from Mudfog for London, “for, *though younger than himself*, he had been his little friend and playmate” (*OT*, 56, emphasis added). Dick’s last name cannot be Unwin or Vilkins; he has no last name. Here is how we see him. Oliver passes by Mrs. Mann’s on his way out of town:

He reached the house. There was no appearance of its inmates stirring at that early hour. Oliver stopped, and peeped into the garden. A child was weeding one of the little beds; and, as he stopped, he raised his pale face, and disclosed the features of one of his former companions. Oliver felt glad to see him before he went, for, *though younger than himself*, he had been his little friend and playmate; they had been beaten, and starved, and shut up together, many and many a time. (*OT*, 56)

This is, of course, the first we have heard of Dick, this figure whose purpose seems to be to condense into singular form the impossible plurality of all the other boys. Out of many, one. Though engendered by the narrative, Dick remains something of an irritant inside it, right up to the point at which he gets expelled from its world—as we are immediately assured will happen. “I heard the doctor tell them I was dying,” he tells Oliver in this short scene. Oliver goes on.

"I shall see you again, Dick; I know I shall. You will be well and happy."

"I hope so," replied the child, "after I am dead, but not before. I know the doctor must be right, Oliver; because I dream so much of heaven, and angels, and kind faces that I never see when I am awake. Kiss me," said the child, climbing the low gate, and flinging his little arms around Oliver's neck. "Good-b'ye, dear! God bless you!"

The blessing was from a young child's lips, but it was the first that Oliver had ever heard invoked upon his head; and through all the struggles and sufferings of his after life, through all the troubles and changes of many weary years, he never once forgot it. (*OT*, 56–57)

The narrative then proceeds to forget about Dick for another sixty pages, after which Dickens places him briefly as a thought in Oliver's head, then again for another twenty, and then once more for several hundred, at which point, upon the very close of the novel, we find out that the doctor was right after all and "Poor Dick was dead!" (*OT*, 440).

Let's start with the clause, "A child was weeding one of the little beds." This is a curious activity to find a dying child performing at daybreak when everyone else is still in *their* beds. I don't think it offensive to the spirit of the novel to suggest that weeding is precisely what it does in the relationship between Dick and Oliver: the one must be uprooted in order for the other to grow. We might also be disposed to think of the death-fixated Dick as preparing the grave in which he will soon be resting, and if we think this, we might then go back to the scene in which Oliver is made to sleep among the coffins at Mr. Sowerberry's—the crucial difference being that he gets to wake up again in the morning. And the false contingency offered to us at the beginning of the novel that, were Oliver to have died in infancy, the book we are reading would then have "possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography extant in the literature of any age or country" may begin to look plausible—with reference to *Dick*, rather than to Oliver (*OT*, 3). Alfred, Lord Tennyson's haunting poem "Tithonus" gives us what in fact may be "the most concise and faithful specimen of biography extant" in its unforgettably cold summary, "Man comes and tills the earth and lies beneath."³⁹ This is biography from ten thousand feet, about the distance from which the tragically immortal title figure in Tennyson's poem looks down from the palace of dawn upon the affairs of the earth-bound; and the biography of Dick—shown, if not exactly tilling here, at least interacting with soil—is not much more detailed than it.

Now let's consider the kiss of farewell Dick gives to Oliver. We're told that Dick climbs the low gate separating the two boys and throws his arms around Oliver's neck. What we're seeing, of course, is the minor character's ratification of the deal he has been offered, his acceptance of the part Dickens has given him to play. But the gate is low, and Dick climbs it, and clings to Oliver, even if only for a moment. Is this ratification after all, or rather protest, the fenced-in minor character trying vainly to escape his narrative prison? Dick's next appearance adds something of interest to the question. We move to the part of the story in which Oliver, having been taken home by Mr. Brownlow, is en route to the booksellers on the errand Brownlow trusts him to complete and Grimwig will eat his head if he does. It occurs right before Oliver is recaptured by Fagin's gang, and he is

walking along, thinking how happy and contented he ought to feel, and how much he would give for only one look at poor little Dick, who, starved and beaten, might be lying dead at that very moment, when he was startled by a young woman [Nancy] screaming out very loud, "Oh, my dear brother!" and he had hardly looked up to see what the matter was, when he was stopped by having a pair of arms thrown tight around his neck. (*OT*, 120)

These arms thrown around Oliver's neck are unambiguously enacting the possibility raised in the first scene with Dick, detaining him and, rather than accepting his qualitative difference, claiming him as brother. One has to notice, at the same time, the aggressiveness of Oliver's thoughts, the pleasure the protagonist seems to take in dwelling on Dick back there in *Mudfog* at this very moment, suffering or even dead, just when he himself is riding high. Oliver, we observe, doesn't think of coming to the aid of Dick, just of looking at him as he suffers or dies. And as soon as Oliver himself is put in jeopardy, he monopolizes the sufferer's role: Dick is forgotten once more. By the time we get to this scene, the image of the arm around the neck has already made another pertinent appearance: recovering from his fever at Brownlow's, Oliver is so moved by Mrs. Bedwin's kindness to him that "he could not help placing his little withered hand upon hers and drawing it round his neck" (*OT*, 87). The voluntary acceptance of this encircling limb is Oliver's way of disowning both Dick's and Nancy's. He is where he belongs. Where he always should have been.

Our most extensive view of Dick comes next. About to depart for London, where he will provide Brownlow with misinformation about

Oliver, Bumble stops at the baby farm and inquires after the children in Mrs. Mann's care.

"Bless their dear little hearts!" said Mrs. Mann with emotion, "they're as well as can be, the dears! Of course, except the two that died last week, and little Dick."

"Isn't that boy no better?" inquired Mr. Bumble. Mrs. Mann shook her head.

"He's a ill-conditioned, vicious, bad-disposed porochial child that," said Mr. Bumble angrily. "Where is he?" (*OT*, 138)

Dick is produced.

The child was pale and thin; his cheeks were sunken, and his eyes large and bright. The scanty parish dress, the livery of his misery, hung loosely upon his feeble body; and his young limbs had wasted away like those of an old man. . . .

"What's the matter with you, porochial Dick?" inquired Mr. Bumble with well-timed jocularity.

"Nothing, sir," replied the child faintly.

"I should think not," said Mrs. Mann. . . . "You want for nothing, I'm sure."

"I should like —" faltered the child.

"Hey-day!" interposed Mrs. Mann, "I suppose you're going to say that you do want for something, now? Why, you little wretch—"

"Stop, Mrs. Mann, stop!" said the beadle, raising his hand with a show of authority. "Like what, sir; eh?"

"I should like," faltered the child, "if somebody that can write, would put a few words down for me on a piece of paper, and fold it up, and seal it, and keep it for me after I am laid in the ground."

"Why, what does the boy mean?" exclaimed Mr. Bumble, on whom the earnest manner and wan aspect of the child had made some impression, accustomed as he was to such things. "What do you mean, sir?"

"I should like," said the child, "to leave my dear love to poor Oliver Twist, and to let him know how often I have sat by myself and cried to think of his wandering about in the dark nights with nobody to help him; and I should like to tell him," said the child, pressing his small hands together, and speaking with great fervour, "that I was glad to die when I was very young; for, perhaps, if I lived to be a man, and grew old, my little sister, who is in heaven, might forget me, or be unlike me; and it would be so much happier if we were both children there together." (*OT*, 138–39)

This is Dick's big scene, and he makes the most of it. All the time we have been following the fortunes of Oliver, Dick has been thinking of him much as Oliver has thought of Dick (but more frequently): as alone and suffering. As a matter of fact, we know that Oliver has not spent many dark nights wandering with no one to help him: he was alone and sufficiently miserable on his trek to London, but he traveled by daylight, and before he even reached the metropolis was taken under the Dodger's wing (at Barnet, 10 miles or so north of the city limit). One of the things that can always be surprising to readers coming back to this novel is how comparatively little narrative space is given to Oliver's experiences in the company of Fagin or Sikes, where he suffers indeed; but Dick seems insistent on imagining Oliver as his identical twin, rather than as his defining opposite.

Dick, we may realize, does get the wish he expresses in this passage: "somebody that can write" is putting this down on paper for him. Somebody whose name begins with "Dick," and whose imagination derived particular energy from figures like Dick. More than just another farewell blessing to Oliver, the document, and *Oliver Twist* itself, is of course a species of autobiography, with Dick and Oliver the portraits of our artist seen in the mirror of his colossal and immensely productive self-pity. One boy overcomes the degradation recorded in Dickens's autobiographical fragment, the never-ending sense of shame and contamination Dickens retained from his childhood experiences at Warren's Blacking. Oliver's story is one that imaginatively fumigates the author's innocent, declassed, and violated boyhood self; but Dick's, though immeasurably briefer, is of almost equal worth, even though its protagonist is not, because it preserves the image of that self in aspic and feeds upon an unquenchable resentment.

Let's take this latter story to its end.

"See there, there—" cried Oliver, eagerly clasping the hand of Rose, and pointing out at the carriage window,— "that's the stile I came over, there are the hedges I crept behind for fear any one should overtake me and force me back, yonder is the little path across the fields leading to the old house where I was a little child. Oh Dick, Dick, my dear old friend, if I could only see you now!"

"You will see him soon," replied Rose, gently taking his folded hands between her own. "You shall tell him how happy you are, and how rich you are grown, and that in all your happiness you have none so great as the coming back to make him happy too."

"Yes, yes," said Oliver, "and we'll—we'll take him away from here, and have him clothed and taught, and send him to some quiet country place where he may grow strong and well—shall we?"

Rose nodded “yes,” for the boy was smiling through such happy tears that she could not speak.

“You will be kind and good to him, for you are to every one,” said Oliver. “It will make you cry, I know, to hear what he can tell; but never mind, never mind, it will be all over” (*OT*, 429–30)

And it is all over.

“Oliver, my child,” said Mrs. Maylie, “where have you been, and why do you look so sad? There are tears stealing down your face at this moment. What is the matter?”

It is a world of disappointment—often to the hopes we most cherish, and hopes that do our nature the greatest honour.

Poor Dick was dead! (*OT*, 440)

As ambassador for the absent contingency in the world of *Oliver Twist*, Dick presses the case for his fraternity with Oliver barely hard enough to get it noticed or remembered; mostly his function seems to be to bear away from the narrative its own suicidal tendency, to take upon himself, so Oliver will not have to, the onus of Malthus’s edict: “the infant is, comparatively speaking, of little value to the society, as others will immediately supply its place.” Dick is the character who stands for such shabby treatment at the narrative’s hands because he stands for all those whom Oliver’s existence and centrality cancel out—all those for whom all sorts of fates might happen.

I wrote earlier of situations in which it might be appropriate to think of the difference between the protagonist and minor characters in terms of a spectrum running from the one to the other extreme, and named Dick “the quintessence of minorness.” If we find a qualitative distinction between the two types of character, we have melodrama. If only a quantitative, realism. In suggesting we read something desperate and refusing in Dick’s embrace of Oliver in their first scene together, I was in effect saying that Dick tries, and fails, to make *Oliver Twist* into a realist novel, to change its mode of narrative existence. I want now to extend what I said there by imagining a second continuum, one stretching not from majorness to minorness, but rather from minor characters to non-characters. The two spectrums meet at Dick, the second one extending from his puny figure all the way through the numerous unnamed and unaccounted-for boys mentioned in the novel, and not just at Mrs. Mann’s and the workhouse either, but glimpsed in passing in a host of other situations as well, and finally on into the darkness of complete non-presence in the text we hold in our hands.

Rereading *Oliver Twist*, I could not stop thinking about a passage in W. H. Auden's extraordinary poetic recasting of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *The Sea and the Mirror*. In a prose section of the work, Auden endows Shakespeare's barely lettered Caliban with the eloquence of a late Henry James novel and has him speak directly to the audience. "We should not be sitting here now," Caliban tells us,

washed, warm, well-fed, in seats we have paid for, unless there were others who are not here; our liveliness and good-humour, such as they are, are those of survivors, conscious that there are others who have not been so fortunate, others who did not succeed in navigating the narrow passage or to whom the natives were not friendly, others whose streets were chosen by the explosion or through whose country the famine turned aside from ours to go, others who failed to repel the invasion of bacteria or to crush the insurrection of their bowels, others who lost their suit against their parents or were ruined by wishes they could not control; aware of [those] . . . from whom, only the other day, Fortune withdrew her hand in sudden disgust, now nervously playing chess with drunken sea-captains in sordid cafés on the equator or the Arctic Circle, or lying, only a few blocks away, strapped and screaming on iron beds or dropping to naked pieces in damp graves.⁴⁰

In the spirit of this astonishing text, I want to end by imagining some of those others—even though, by the terms of Dickens's novel, this is as implausible a task as eating one's own head.

Such as?

Charlie Unwin, apprenticed to Mr. Gamfield because the magistrate didn't look up this time, and roasted up a chimney. Or William Vilkins, dead of the measles at Mrs. Mann's. Or Silas Wedge, whose surname Dickens misheard when casting him in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). Or Samuel Xenophobe. Or the aptly-named Luke Yonder, who made good Bumble's prediction by emigrating to New Zealand. Or Philip Zimpleton, Albert Ambler, David Breegle, Matthew Coshcrump, Mark Dribble, Edward Emigré (who disappointed Bumble by remaining in Britain to swell the ranks of its surplus population). Or John Farflung, George Grimer, Henry Habeas, the last of these a petty thief, transported to the penal colonies of New South Wales. Or Marcus Izwich, one of a pair of twins, the other of whom died, and of whom Bumble kept having to ask "which is which"? Or Jasper Juplong, Lawrence Klinkery, Thomas Lookalive, Nathaniel Moonshine, Peter Nevermore, Anthony Outcast, and Paul Pauperish, who tumbled as a toddler into the fireplace. Or Daniel Quilp, who survived childhood but went to the bad and developed an unfortunate fixation on a young girl named

Nell. Or Ralph Rapsallion (Bumble had been reading Smollett at the time). Or, finally, Joseph Swubbles, who, like Oliver, made his way to London, and, after many dark nights “without any one to help him,” won himself the nickname “Toughy” for the use of his fists, got himself taken into a crossing-sweeper’s guild, was assigned his corner, forgot his surname, befriended an addict called Nemo, and died, in one of the greatest, saddest passages in Dickens’s oeuvre, having turned out to be nobody’s long-lost son and heir after all. And this—all this—is to say nothing at all of the girls. The ethical force of contingency with which Auden was so preoccupied—and the later Dickens could be—is to be found in the perspective these names might help us toward, the perspective from which, as another section of *The Sea and the Mirror* puts it, “All we are not stares back at what we are.”⁴¹

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NOTES

¹ Quoted in Andrew Miller, “‘Not Forthcoming,’” typescript, 7. My thanks to Andrew Miller for permission to quote from his unpublished work. See also A. Miller, *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008), chapter 7, 191–217.

² A. Miller, “‘Not,’” 5.

³ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture: The Idea of a Christian Society and Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harvest, 1968), 104–5.

⁴ A. Miller, “‘Not,’” 5.

⁵ I cannot, for instance, assent to Philip Horne’s statements, in the introduction to a recent Penguin edition of the novel, that “as a ward of the parish Oliver is proverbial gallows-fodder,” and that “[w]e shall not undergo the full experience of the book if we knowingly decide to feel no suspense about whether he will wind up as an object of ‘the hideous apparatus of death’” (Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy’s Progress* [1837–39; repr. London: Penguin, 2003], xix). One supposes that Dickens could indeed have sent Oliver to the gallows, but only in order to rescue him from it in the nick of time.

⁶ And yet see Burton M. Wheeler, “The Text and Plan of *Oliver Twist*,” *Dickens Studies Annual: Essays on Victorian Fiction* 12 (1983): 41–61, for its controversial argument that Dickens initially intended a short serial about a typical Parish Boy and only later developed his idea into the novel that “rescue[s] Oliver from a representative ‘Parish Boy’s Progress’ . . . from workhouse to criminal associates to deportation or the gallows” (41).

⁷ Steven Marcus, *Dickens from Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 78.

⁸ Marcus, 78–79.

⁹ Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, 3. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated *OT*.

¹⁰ “Oh! Dear lady, if I could but work for you—if I could only give you pleasure by watering your flowers, or watching your birds, or running up and down the whole day long to make you happy, what would I give to do it!” (*OT*, 256). And so forth.

¹¹ On perfectionism, see A. Miller, *Burdens*. Just where and when Oliver learned to pray is an open question, since we are told explicitly that “no one had taught him” at the workhouse or at Mrs. Mann’s (*OT*, 12).

¹² Some years later, Dickens would find so dreadful the prospect that the stranded explorers of the Franklin Expedition had betrayed their British heroism and turned cannibal in their final days that on several occasions he exerted a good deal of energy trying to rewrite the story as one of unshakeable altruism and self-sacrifice. Sidney Carton’s self-sacrifice at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* was only one result of this effort.

¹³ J. Hillis Miller, “The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz*, *Oliver Twist*, and Cruikshank’s Illustrations,” in *Victorian Subjects* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 129.

¹⁴ J. H. Miller, 131.

¹⁵ This representation runs contrary to the notion that Dickens’s anti-Semitism, vile as it is, attaches to any supposedly innate characteristics of “the Jew.” Unless it is an innate characteristic to be susceptible to the force of degrading conditions.

¹⁶ Behind this handling lies the complex story of pre-Darwinian anthropological thought, with its notion of human civilization as the conquest of nature and its controversies over the question of whether the many races of humankind had one origin, as the Bible held, or several—of whether, in other words, the different races of humanity amounted to so many different species. It would be inaccurate to say that in *Oliver Twist* Dickens adheres to a theory of biological determinism or to one of environmental determinism. For one thing, by the 1830s the two positions in anthropological thought had not yet been so thoroughly disentangled as to appear polar opposites: that would come later. Like many of the thinkers of his day, Dickens subscribes to a bit of each theory: the former for one type of character, the latter for the other. For the most part, badness of character means susceptibility to (bad) environmental forces.

¹⁷ We should perhaps remember that Darwin himself, in the same decade as *Oliver Twist*, would report on his meeting with the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego that the “poor wretches . . . stunted in their growth, their hideous faces bedaubed with white paint, their skins filthy and greasy, their hair entangled, their voices discordant, and their gestures violent” seemed impossible to imagine his “fellow-creatures, and inhabitants of the same world” (Charles Darwin, *Journal of Researches into the natural history and geology of the countries visited during the voyage of H.M.S. “Beagle”* [1839; London, 1891], quoted in George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* [New York: Free Press, 1987], 105).

¹⁸ James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 63.

¹⁹ Alex Woloch, *The One Versus the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 129.

²⁰ See James Buzard, “Enumeration and Exhaustion: Taking Inventory in *The Old Curiosity Shop*,” *Dickens Studies Annual* 39 (2008): 17–41, for a related discussion of a character attempting to strike at his narrator. A comparable, dialectically opposite, impulse to Grimwig’s may be found in the youthful Jane Eyre, who plans to enact her protest against the tyranny of John Reed by “never eating or drinking more, and letting myself die” (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [London: Penguin, 1996], 22). Grimwig’s is the more actively suicidal, hyper-masculine, variant of Jane’s self-starvation.

²¹ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), 128.

²² Stocking, 63–64.

²³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1997), 232. William Wordsworth, *Complete Poetical Works* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), 460.

²⁴ D. A. Miller, *Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1981), 266–67.

²⁵ D. A. Miller, 4.

²⁶ Marcus, 90.

²⁷ J. H. Miller, 125.

²⁸ J. H. Miller, 140.

²⁹ Woloch, 14.

³⁰ Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (New York: Norton, 2004), 130.

³¹ To be sure, the alphabet provides much finer discrimination than some systems use: Grimwig recognizes “only two sorts of boys—mealy boys, and beef-faced boys” (*OT*, 111). Oliver is the former.

³² This is the possibility Philip Horne, in his introduction to the 2003 Penguin edition, wants us to keep open as we read. See *OT*, xiii–xlv.

³³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 10.

³⁴ D. A. Miller, 4.

³⁵ Thinking like this brings vividly to life for us Woloch’s observation, made about the Catalog of Ships in *The Iliad*, that “[t]he distinction between counting and naming occurs precisely at the fault line where an individual ceases to command attention as a qualitatively distinct being and begins to be viewed as a quantitative unit” (5).

³⁶ In other words, our thought experiment involves imagining Wheeler to be correct in his claim about Dickens’s “rejection of [his] original plan to develop Oliver as a representative ward of the parish” (56).

³⁷ Aristotle, 10.

³⁸ Woloch, 31.

³⁹ Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 584.

⁴⁰ W. H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror*, in *Selected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 155.

⁴¹ Auden, 130.