



• A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC •

Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens

With an Introduction by Irving Howe





TAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC • A BANTAM CLASSIC

Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens

With an Introduction by Irving Howe



BANTAM BOOKS

NEW YORK • TORONTO • LONDON • SYDNEY • AUCKLAND

OLIVER TWIST
A Bantam Book

PUBLISHING HISTORY

"Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress. By Boz" was first published in Bentley's Miscellany from February 1837 to March 1839, with illustrations by George Cruikshank. The novel was first issued in book form in three volumes in 1838, with the title as above. In the second edition, in 1839, the title page reads "Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens." In the edition of 1846 the title is "The Adventures of Oliver Twist," with the subtitle as in 1838; later the subtitle was dropped.

*This is the text of the Charles Dickens Edition (1867).
Bantam Classic edition / October 1981*

*Cover painting, "An Irish Immigrant Landing at Liverpool"
by Erskine Nicol.*

Courtesy of Christopher Wood Gallery, London.

Introduction copyright © 1982 by Irving Howe.

*No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopying, recording, or by any information
storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publisher.*

For information address: Bantam Books.

*If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that
this book is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and
destroyed" to the publisher and neither the author nor the publisher
has received any payment for this "stripped book."*

ISBN 0-553-21102-1

Published simultaneously in the United States and Canada

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. Its trademark, consisting of the words "Bantam Books" and the portrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S. Patent and Trademark Office and in other countries. Marca Registrada. Bantam Books, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036.

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

OPM 37 36 35 34 33 32 31 30 29

Charles Dickens

was born in a little house in Landport, Portsea, England, on February 7, 1812. The second of eight children, he grew up in a family frequently beset by financial insecurity. At the age of eleven, Dickens was taken out of school and sent to work in a London blacking warehouse, where his job was to paste labels on bottles for six shillings a week. His father, John Dickens, was a warmhearted but improvident man. When he was condemned to Marshalsea Prison for unpaid debts, he unwisely agreed that Charles should stay in lodgings and continue working while the rest of the family joined him in the jail. This three-month separation caused Charles much pain; his experiences as a child alone in a huge city—cold, isolated, with barely enough to eat—haunted him for the rest of his life.

When the family fortunes improved, Charles went back to school, after which he became an office boy, a freelance reporter and finally an author. With *Pickwick Papers* (1836–7) he achieved immediate fame; in a few years he was easily the most popular and respected writer of his time. It has been estimated that one out of every ten persons in Victorian England was a Dickens reader. *Oliver Twist* (1837), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9) and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41) were huge successes. *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843–4) was less so, but Dickens followed it with his unforgettable *A Christmas Carol* (1843). *David Copperfield* (1850), *Bleak House* (1852–3), *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) reveal his deepening concern for the injustices of British society. *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), *Great Expectations* (1860–1) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5) complete his major works.

Dickens's marriage to Catherine Hogarth produced ten children but ended in separation in 1858. In that year he began a series of exhausting public readings; his health gradually declined. After putting in a full day's work at his home at Gads Hill, Kent, on June 8, 1870, Dickens suffered a stroke and he died on the following day.

Ask your bookseller for Bantam Classics
by these British and Irish writers:

Jane Austen
J. M. Barrie
Charlotte Bronte
Emily Bronte
Frances Hodgson Burnett
Fanny Burney
Lewis Carroll
Geoffrey Chaucer
Wilkie Collins
Joseph Conrad
Daniel Defoe
Charles Dickens
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle
George Eliot
Ford Madox Ford
E. M. Forster
Kenneth Grahame
Thomas Hardy
James Joyce
Rudyard Kipling
D. H. Lawrence
W. Somerset Maugham
John Stuart Mill
E. Nesbit
Sir Walter Scott
William Shakespeare
George Bernard Shaw
Mary Shelley
Robert Louis Stevenson
Bram Stoker
Jonathan Swift
H. G. Wells
Oscar Wilde
Virginia Woolf

INTRODUCTION

With the opening chapters of *Oliver Twist* Dickens made his way, forever, into world literature. His place in the English tradition was already secure: he had written *The Pickwick Papers*, a work of spectacular comic gifts, marred, it's true, by sentimentalism but lovely as an idyll of gentlemanly-Christian innocence. *The Pickwick Papers* seems utterly English, a fiction attuned to the idiosyncrasies of its own culture. *Oliver Twist*, however, can attract and hold almost every kind of imagination, since its main figures—the defenseless waif, the devilish fence, the unctuous beadle—speak a language of gesture and symbol that quite transcends national cultures. Drawn with those expressionist stabs of language that would become one of Dickens's major resources, *Oliver Twist* anticipates such later, greater novels as *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*. True, it lacks the compositional richness and maturity of feeling we find in Dickens's culminating work; but in its opening chapters, where Oliver is coldly brutalized by agents of English society, and in the sequence where Oliver is kidnapped and taken by Bill Sykes on a housebreaking expedition, we can recognize the Dickens who belongs in the company of Gogol, Balzac, and Dostoevsky.

It has been customary in recent decades to speak of at least two Dickenses, the first an exuberant performer of comedy and the second a mordant social critic increasingly expert in the uses of symbolic grotesquerie. Modern literary criticism has understandably focused on the second, the dark and serious Dickens, but it's only in analysis that the two Dickenses can be separated. In the strongest novels, entertainer and moralist come to seem shadows of one another—finally two voices out of the same mouth.

The entertainer takes over now and again in *Oliver Twist*. He is splendidly busy in the chapter where Bumble courts Mrs. Corney, with one hand round her waist and both eyes on her silver, while expressing—definitively, for all the ages—"the great principle of out-of-door relief," which is "to give the paupers exactly what they don't want, and then they get tired of coming." Entertainer and moralist are not

always at ease with one another; they tend at some points to go about their business separately; and that's one reason we find it unprofitable to keep *Oliver Twist* neatly placed in a categorical bin—is the book a crime story, a fairy tale, a novel of education, a social melodrama? The only sensible answer is that it is all of these together, mixed up with Dickens's usual disregard for the boundaries of genre.

For all our pleasure in its comic play, *Oliver Twist* finally grips us as a story of moral rage. The opening chapters may seem a little too declamatory, even strident—some of Dickens's furious interjections might well have been cut. But remember, this is a young man's book, full of anger and mistakes; and one's deepest response to the "overture" of the first few chapters isn't critical at all, it is a blend of astonishment and admiration. Oliver begging, "I want more"; the horrible chimney-sweep Gamfield explaining that "boys is wery obstinit, and wery lazy, and there's nothinkg like a good hot blaze to make 'em come down [from chimneys] with a run"; Bumble growing warm over the ingratitude of the poor ("It's meat," he opines, that has made Oliver so refractory); Dickens sputtering on his own that he wishes he could see "the Philosopher" (read, Economist) "making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish" that Oliver has just made—such bits of incident must survive in collective memory as long as the world knows the bitter taste of the insolence of office.

Some decades ago critics were inclined to "place" *Oliver Twist* historically, which often meant to take the sting out of the book. They explained that Dickens had as one of his targets the English Poor Law of 1834, which he regarded as inhumane; that paupers had indeed been treated brutally in England, though not quite so brutally as Dickens imagined; and that the passage of time has improved the conditions of the poor, so that it would be an error to take literally Dickens's version of the poorhouse.* Now, all this is true

*Inspired by Malthusian economists who believed there must always be a segment of the population in destitute condition, the Poor Law had as its purpose to prevent or minimize breeding among paupers. The poorhouse was made as repulsive a place as possible; the sexes, including husbands and wives, were separated; the meals were wretched; uniforms were required. Dickens writes in *Oliver Twist* of "three meals of thin gruel a day, with an onion twice a week, and half a roll on Sundays"—a caricature, but not an outrageous or unwarranted one.

enough, yet by one of those turns of history that make a joke out of all historical schemas, the social outlook Dickens was attacking has again come to seem familiar. No one talks about "welfare chisellers" in *Oliver Twist*, perhaps because Bumble and Mrs. Corney were born a little too soon; but that apart, we have no difficulty in aligning Dickens's caricature with our own familiar reality.

In these opening chapters, then, the twenty-five-year-old Dickens found his voice and his subject. Through the year 1837 *Oliver Twist* appeared serially in a London magazine, overlapping with *The Pickwick Papers*: it would be hard to imagine a more remarkable literary debut. Many writers take years to find their true voice and inescapable subject; some never do. Perhaps it would be better to say that Dickens's subject found him, laying rough hands on his throat, never to let go. The remembered humiliations of childhood, when his father had been taken to debtors' prison and he had been sent to labor in a blacking factory, seethed in his imagination from the start of his career to the finish. Whether it is really true, as Graham Greene once said, that all writers form their picture of the world in the years of childhood, I do not know; but it certainly was true for Dickens.

Later on he would often misuse his gifts, sometimes as the result of sheer exuberance, sometimes through a retreat from the fearful conclusions to which his imagination kept driving him—for how could the most popular novelist of Victorian England acknowledge to himself that his strongest books formed a scathing condemnation of early industrial capitalism? Often there is a deep split between what Dickens the writer shows and what his mind imposes on his books in their concluding pages. But finally, his imagination could never really be tamed, it could only be diverted—and even then it would break out again in spontaneous fury. Dickens had a passion for seeing things as they are.

II

A little boy creeps through this book, an orphan, a waif, an outcast. He is a puling, teary little fellow, never rebellious for more than a few minutes, and seldom even angry. He is a perfect little gentleman who has managed somehow to

come into the world, and the novel, with a finished code of morality. The wickedness of the world never stains him. Through all his wanderings in "foul and frowzy dens, where vice is closely packed"—as Dickens puts it in his preface to the novel's third edition—Oliver maintains a sublime loyalty to English grammar. Starved, beaten, terrorized, kidnapped, he is nevertheless unwilling to resort to the foul language or gutter slang it may be reasonable to suppose he has heard in the slums of London.

To some readers this represents a strain on their credulity, and so indeed it would be if Oliver were conceived by Dickens as an ordinary realistic figure, just another boy thrust into "the cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London." But it would be a mistake to see Oliver in that way. Dickens himself tells us, again in the preface to the third edition, that "I wished to show, in little Oliver, the *principle* of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance and triumphing at last." I stress the word "principle" in order to suggest that more is at stake here than the life of an individual character.

For Oliver is one in a series of recurrent figures in the Dickens world, slightly anticipated in *Pickwick* but more fully realized in *Little Dorrit*. Oliver is emblematic of "the principle of Good" sent into the world on a journey of suffering. This journey, which has some points of similarity to that of Christian's in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Oliver undertakes with no armor other than a blessed helplessness. Oliver is not expected to overcome the evil of the world, nor to struggle vigorously against it, nor even to learn much from his suffering. He is not a figure of strong imposing will—on the contrary, he is usually ready to accept whatever burdens the world imposes on him. He acts only to refuse evil, never to combat it. Yet, as if by some miracle of grace, this journeyer emerges from his experience morally immaculate, quite like the hero of a Western movie who after gunfights and killings doesn't even need to straighten his hat. Everywhere about Oliver evil thrives, but at the end he is as pure as at the start.

This celebration of the passive hero is sometimes related to primitive Christianity, though perhaps what we really mean is that it forms an historical residue of Christianity, clung to by those who can no longer believe God is omnipotent

or even attentive, and who must consequently make of passivity a substitute for active moral engagement. The modern sensibility finds this view of things very hard to accept, even though it is a view that keeps recurring, as a benefit of desperation, in modern literature.

Yet in his very powerlessness Oliver reveals an enormous power: the world cannot destroy him. It is as if he had received, from whom we can hardly say, the blessing that mother Rebecca schemed so hard to get for her son Jacob. Clearly, no one in this world has blessed Oliver, his blessing must have come from another world; and if so, all it can do for him, through the main stretch of the book, is to protect without rescuing him. It's as if God had given Oliver all that He can—which in the world of Dickens's London is not enough.

Such feelings about "the principle of Good" are by no means unique to Dickens: they are to be found among many sincere Christians. Dostoevsky called Dickens "that great Christian" and saw in Pickwick "a positively good man," perhaps a faint emblem of Christ. The creator of Myshkin would have understood why Dickens located "the principle of Good" in a completely helpless little boy.

To gather Dickens's intentions regarding Oliver is not, however, to find his treatment entirely satisfying. Most readers learn to brush past Oliver, seeing him as a (slightly inconvenient) convenience of the plot. We care about what happens to him, but hardly suppose anything much is happening within him. Still, it's worth asking why Dickens's effort to realize "the principle of Good"—always very difficult for a novelist—seems shaky in *Oliver Twist* and relatively successful in *Little Dorrit*. A plausible answer might be that Oliver, no matter how extreme his suffering, never gets past the conventions of middle-class behavior. One of his few signs of spontaneous life is the burst of laughter with which he watches Fagin and the boys pantomime the picking of a gentleman's pocket; but whenever Oliver is with Mr. Brownlow, Rose Maylie, and the other paragons of middle-class virtue, he serves mostly as their parrot. Such a goody-goody doesn't make a persuasive agent of "the principle of Good," if only because he seems so inert before the temptations of the Bad. Little Dorrit, by contrast, cares nothing about status or respectability; she neither accepts nor rejects the

standards of the world; she is beyond their reach, a selfless creature forever assuaging, healing, and loving those near her. It took Dickens the better part of a lifetime to discover what "the principle of Good" really is.

III

Fleeing poorhouse and apprenticeship, Oliver makes his way to the big city: there is no place else to go. His entry into London, stylishly eased by the Artful Dodger, forms a critical moment in the history of nineteenth-century literature—one of the first encounters with the modern city as physical presence, emblem of excitement, social specter, locus of myth. The early Dickens is still vibrantly responsive to whatever seems fresh in the world, he takes an eager pleasure in the discovery of streets. For him the city is a place of virtuosity, where men can perform with freedom and abandonment: London as the glass enlarging upon the antics of Sam Weller, Sarry Gamp, and a bit later, Micawber. But London—this note is first struck in *Oliver Twist*—is also pesthole and madhouse, a place of terror from which the child-hero must be rescued periodically through a convalescence in the countryside.

Now it is the mixture of these contradictory feelings about the city that helps give the novel its distinctive tone of diffuse anxiety. The contradictory feelings about the city interweave, clash, and run along uneasy parallels, and from the tension they generate Dickens makes his drama. The darkening vision that will overwhelm Dickens's later novels is already present, shadowlike, in *Oliver Twist*—that vision which will prompt him to write in *Our Mutual Friend* that London is "a hopeless city, with no rent in the leaden canopy of its sky. . . ." Yet in *Oliver Twist* London is also the home of spectacle, lurid and grotesque, and one of Dickens's narrative purposes—slyly helped along by the sequence that starts with the Artful Dodger discovering the hungry Oliver and ends when the boy is brought to Fagin's den—is to involve us in Oliver's excitements of discovery. But more than involve: it is a saving characteristic of this novel that we are never limited to Oliver's milky perceptions.

Fagin's den, one of those spittled gray-and-black hovels in which he hides out, is reached by a labyrinth of stairs, eerie

and dark. "The walls and ceilings . . . were perfectly black with age and dirt," but, it's important to note, there is a fire in the den before which "a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair," stands roasting some meat. Here Dickens's ambivalence about the city—which finally is to say, about English society—reaches a high point: this London hovel is hell yet also a wretched sort of home, these are thieves and murderers yet also lively figures who have made for themselves a perverse sort of community.

The point is well elaborated by J. Hillis Miller: "Fagin's den is both a dungeon and a place of refuge. It is . . . absolutely shut off from the outside world, but it is also a parody, at least, of a home, that place where one lives safely . . . Fagin's den [says Dickens] is a 'snug retreat,' and inside its walls we find a society leagued for common protection against the hostility of the outside world."

Those of us who have but little taste for a romantic glorification of criminality will resist the temptation to see Dickens as totally caught up with the world of Fagin and Sykes—though the accounts we have of Dickens's public readings from *Oliver Twist*, in which he impersonated its characters with a terrifying vividness, suggest that part of him must have felt a subterranean kinship with these outlaws. (Less, I think, with their criminal deeds than with their experience as outsiders.) We are surely meant by Dickens to deplore the thieves and murderers, to feel disgust and fright before them. Yet their enormous vitality and articulateness of feeling put them in the sharpest contrast to the blandness of the "good" characters. Fagin and his gang talk like recognizable human beings, Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies, as if they had stepped out of a copybook. And when the Artful Dodger, in one of Dickens's most brilliant set-pieces, is dragged into court, he sounds like a comic echo of Julien Sorel at the end of *The Red and the Black*. "Gentlemen, I have not the honor to belong to your class," Julien tells his jurors. "This ain't the shop for justice," the Artful Dodger tells his judges.

The living core of the novel is neither the story of Oliver nor the depiction of his protectors; it is primarily those segments of narrative devoted to Fagin and his gang. Just as Dostoevsky often yielded himself to the sinners he was

determined finally to make suffer, so Dickens yielded himself to the criminals he knew had to be brought to a relentless punishment. We are talking here not about conscious intent but about those energies of the unconscious which, in every true writer, shape his values.

Fagin is the strongest figure in the book—certainly the most troubling. He is more figure than character, and more force than figure. He barely exists as an individual—barely needs to. We learn nothing about his interior life, we are not invited to see him as “three dimensional,” except, minimally, in the glittering chapter toward the end, where he sits in prison waiting to be hanged and suffers that terror of death which finally makes him one of us. Nor is Fagin given the sort of great redeeming speech that Shakespeare gives Shylock. Fagin does cry out before his death, “What right have they to butcher me?” but this has little of the generalizing moral resonance of Shylock’s “Hath not a Jew eyes?” Clever and cunning, with a talent for mimicking the moral axioms of the respectable world, Fagin is all of a piece, monolithic, a creature of myth. He never rises to Shylock’s tragic height, he never so much as becomes a character at all. Fagin is an emanation of historical myth, generic, emblematic, immensely powerful. Having so created him—or better yet, having so dredged him up out of the folk imagination—Dickens had no need to worry about nuances of depiction.

And Fagin, we cannot forget, is “the Jew.” Throughout the novel he is called “the Jew,” though in revising for a later edition, especially in the chapter devoted to Fagin’s last night, Dickens tried to soften the impact by substituting “Fagin” for “the Jew.” It did not help or matter very much: Fagin remains “the Jew” and whoever wants to confront this novel honestly must confront the substratum of feeling that becomes visible through Dickens’s obsessive repetition of “the Jew.” The film adaptation made several decades ago in England did precisely that. Alec Guinness impersonated Fagin with brilliant, indeed, frightening effect, putting heavy stress on the idea of an archetypal Jewish villain, as well as a secondary stress on the homosexual component of Fagin’s gang that Dickens could only hint at.

Most critics have been skittish about Fagin. They have either ignored Dickens’s fixed epithet, “the Jew,” as if there

were nothing problematic or disconcerting about it, or they have tried to blunt the meaning of Dickens's usage by "explaining" Fagin historically. There is, of course, something to explain. Dickens himself, in a letter to a Jewish woman who had protested the stereotypical treatment of Fagin, sought to reduce the problem to one of contemporary verisimilitude. "Fagin," he wrote, "is a Jew because it unfortunately was true, of the time to which the story refers, that that class of criminal almost invariably was a Jew." Whether this was "almost invariably" so is a question, but that some fences were Jewish is certainly true. One of these, Ikey Solomons, had been tried and sentenced in a spectacular trial only a few years before Dickens wrote *Oliver Twist*, and it seems likely that Dickens, with his keen reportorial scent, drew upon this case.

I am convinced that, despite some conventionally nasty phrases about Jews in his letters, Dickens was not an anti-Semite—he had neither conscious nor programmatic intent to harm Jews. Indeed, a writer with such intent could probably not have created so "primitive" and therefore haunting a figure as Fagin. For, if the fascination with criminal life that's evident in *Oliver Twist* derives in some twisted way from Dickens's childhood traumas, the representative or mythic strength of Fagin comes, I believe, from somewhere else: it comes from the collective folklore, the sentiments and biases habitual to Western culture, as these have fixed the Jew in the role of villain: thief, fence, corrupter of the young, surrogate of Satan, legatee of Judas. With Fagin, as Edgar Rosenberg says, "we are . . . thrown back to that anonymous crowd of grinning devils who, in the religious drama of the 14th century, danced foully around the Cross and who, in mythology, functioned as bugaboos to frighten little boys . . . [Dickens] has come up with some prehistoric fiend, an aging Lucifer whose depravity explains him wholly."

The spectral image of "the Jew" may indeed be "prehistoric" in the sense that it abides in the timeless space of myth, but it is also very much part of a continuous Western history. The image of the fiendish Jew has survived with remarkable persistence through the Christian centuries. Like Judas, Fagin has red hair, and like Satan, he is compared to a serpent. "As Fagin 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." Whenever we encounter such overripe language, Fagin expands into a figure other than human: he becomes a monster drawn from the bad dreams of Christianity.

Novels are composed by individual writers, but in some sense they also derive from the cultures in which these writers live. Collective sentiments, collective stories, enter the most individual of fictions. Imagining a world, the writer must draw on the substance of his culture, and thereby, so to say, the culture speaks through and past him. All great writers are in part ventriloquists of myth—some inferior writers, nothing else. Fagin the individual figure was conceived by Dickens, but Fagin the archetype comes out of centuries of myth, centuries, too, of hatred and fear.

The power of Fagin is a collective, an anonymous power. Once we realize this, the question of what "to do" about Fagin comes to seem hopelessly complicated—as if there were something one could "do" to expunge the record of the deepest biases of Western culture! as if one could somehow cancel out the shadowy grotesques of Satan and Judas, Shylock and the Wandering Jew! There is nothing to "do" but confront the historical realities of our culture, and all that it has thrown up from its unsavory depths. That this can lead to reflections exceedingly somber, I would be the last to deny.

IV

The ending of *Oliver Twist*, like the ending of that far greater book *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, is a mess. Theme and plot, uneasily stitched together for the bulk of the novel, are ripped apart at the end. Dickens rushes his plot to a neat conclusion that lifts Oliver to suburban security while, in effect, abandoning the theme of the book—which is simply the condition of all the Olivers.

Mark Twain, having launched his adolescent hero on a journey that washes away, in the sublime waters of the Mississippi, all signs of race and caste, has no plausible resolution for his story. For the idyll of Jim and Huck cannot last, the problems they have "transcended" on the raft

persist on shore. Dickens, having launched his child-hero on a terrifying journey through the city, keeps accumulating social difficulties and contradictions that his plot cannot cope with. "Until Oliver wakes up in Mr. Brownlow's house," remarks Arnold Kettle, "he is a poor boy struggling against the inhumanity of the state. After he has slept himself into the Brownlow world he is a young bourgeois who has been done out of his property." Oliver's troubles are miraculously disposed of, through the generosity of Mr. Brownlow—a convenience for the plot and a disaster for the theme. But no serious reader is likely to be satisfied, for the difficulty is not just that the issues cast up by Oliver's story are left hanging in the air, it is that even if we confine ourselves to the narrow boundaries of Dickens's plot, the ending must seem weak and willed. Falling back on Mr. Brownlow, that is, on the individual benevolence of a kindly gentleman, Dickens could not confront the obvious truth that a Mr. Brownlow is utterly unequipped to deal with the problem of Oliver. Nor could Dickens confront the truth already prefigured in Blake's lines:

Pity would be no more,
If we did not make somebody Poor:
And Mercy could no more be,
If all were as happy as we . . .

Dickens's imagination had led him to a point where his mind could not follow. Endings are always a problem for novelists, and the problem for the young Dickens wasn't simply that he lacked the courage to see his story through to its bitter end, it was that he didn't really know what that bitter end might be. So he wound up, in the person of Mr. Brownlow, with that "Pity" and "Mercy" about which Blake had written so scornfully.

Even writers determined to show things as they really are, often have no choice but to leave us anxious and uncertain. Why should we expect "solutions" in their books to problems we cannot manage in our lives? Whatever is vibrant and real in *Oliver Twist*, every reader will recognize; the rest is the filler of literary convention, here a sign of the evasions a writer must turn to when his imagination, overextended, is finally balked.

PREFACE

Once upon a time it was held to be a coarse and shocking circumstance, that some of the characters in these pages are chosen from the most criminal and degraded of London's population.

As I saw no reason, when I wrote this book, why the dregs of life (so long as their speech did not offend the ear) should not serve the purpose of a moral, as well as its froth and cream, I made bold to believe that this same Once upon a time would not prove to be All-time or even a long time. I saw many strong reasons for pursuing my course. I had read of thieves by scores; seductive fellows (amiable for the most part), faultless in dress, plump in pocket, choice in horse-flesh, bold in bearing, fortunate in gallantry, great at a song, a bottle, pack of cards or dice-box, and fit companions for the bravest. But I had never met (except in HOGARTH) with the miserable reality. It appeared to me that to draw a knot of such associates in crime as really did exist; to paint them in all their deformity, in all their wretchedness, in all the squalid misery of their lives; to show them as they really were, for ever skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great black ghastly gallows closing up their prospect, turn them where they might; it appeared to me that to do this, would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society. And I did it as I best could.

In every book I know, where such characters are treated of, allurements and fascinations are thrown around them. Even in the Beggar's Opera, the thieves are represented as leading a life which is rather to be envied than otherwise: while MACHEATH, with all the captivations of command, and the devotion of the most beautiful girl and only pure character in the piece, is as much to be admired and emulated by weak beholders, as any fine gentleman in a red coat who has purchased, as VOLTAIRE says, the right to command a couple of thousand men, or so, and to affront death at their head. Johnson's question, whether any man will turn thief because Macheath is reprieved, seems to me beside the matter. I ask myself, whether any man will be deterred from turning