Chapter-VI

SUPPRESSED PERSONALITY OF OLIVER TWIST DUE TO MALTREATMENT IN HIS CHILDHOOD: A PORTRAYAL OF CHILD-ABUSE

Charles Dickens tried to relive his lost childhood through the numerous child characters whom he made to live in his novels. He not only had immense sympathy for children but also felt great concern about the state of affairs in his contemporary society. He emphasized the irresponsibility toward children through his works. Society is largely responsible for the condition of its members. In the nineteenth century industrialization and progress, the conflict between money and love eventually took its toll on the welfare of children. The situation was grim, particularly for those who were orphan, poor, destitute and downtrodden. *Oliver Twist* is regarded as a Victorian era text book of Child Abuse. As the novel progresses the drawbacks of the workhouses and the underworld of the nineteenth century society are exposed. The child protagonist experienced an extremely harsh life under very difficult conditions until he finally found a benefactor.

The question of how men are to live in a world which seems so little geared to their accommodation is of primary concern in all Dickens’ novels. It is not a matter of physical or economic survival that is at issue, though failure in both may also occur, but it is rather the human need to reconcile a widely cherished dream of what life ought to be like with the apprehension of what it really is. By the nineteenth century the world which had once seemed a sphere turning in accord with some celestial music had become a battleground where the forces of order and chaos appeared locked in
tenebrous conflict. The gap between the individual and the universal appeared to be unbridgeable. In *Oliver Twist* the disparity between the real and the ideal is delineated in the simple, and often simplistic, lines of the moral fable. Even the reader who knows the tale well experiences in re-reading the obsessive appeal of a fabulous recital which defines antinomies of black and white in human affairs. Since the characters of Oliver Twist are unmistakably stamped with marks of good and bad, the audience is not perplexed by subtleties of motive and action in the story. In order to attain this effect of simplicity, the representation does not include any significant ambivalence of character or incident. For modern readers who are attached to the craft of character development, such a figure as Oliver may seem stiff and sentimental and Fagin hysterical and grotesque. These representations are as stylized, however, as the masks of tragedy or, better still, as the masks of tribal dancers. Because Oliver does not speak in the ordinary manner of children (or anyone else), his portrayal may seem to be preposterously stilted:

>'No, no, sir,' sobbed Oliver, clinging to the hand which held the well-known cane;... I will be good indeed; indeed, indeed, I will, sir! I am a very little boy...'So lonely, sir- so very lonely,' cried the child. ‘Everybody hates me. Oh! sir, don’t be cross to me. I feel as if I had been cut here, sir, and it was all bleeding away; ' and the child beat his hand upon his heart, and looked into his companion's face with tears of real agony. (32)

But Oliver is not a replica of a real child in his speech and action; like the children in Blake’s poems whose songs are equally removed from natural speech, he is an emblem of vulnerable and threatened innocence. Oliver is the reverse of the idealized figure of a child. Oliver is like an object that is taken up, handled, and put in
place rather than an individual who controls his own movement. He is introduced to this world of sorrow and trouble as an item of transience who will be a new burden for the parish; in boyhood he is advertised as a commodity with a five pound bounty attached available to the businessman who will relieve the public of his presence. Society with its money ethics recognizes the orphan in no other terms than as a liability or an asset, for as a pauper he has nothing to do with soul or spirit. In novel after novel, Dickens traced the effects of this system on those who suffered from the world’s great exclusion. Initially not at all lacking in soul or spirit, the children of poverty are, like most children, susceptible to adult influence and adult experience for the development or erasure of that spirit. If they have been completely remote and have never had comprehensible acquaintance either with cruelty or affection, they become what would now be called autistic. In some cases they may be trained to become part of the social organization: they are passed through a rigidly practical and emotionally insensitive educational process and are turned out as frosty moral and emotional geldings like Bitzer in *Hard Times* who is appropriately light-eyed, light-haired, and pale or like Charley Hexam in *Our Mutual Friend* who advises his sister, Lizzie, to control her fancies and look into the real world. Already shunned by the respectable world, these children may become outcasts like the derisive goblins who enjoy the perverse freedom of Fagin’s postlapsarian Eden. Sometimes a nearly dehumanized child, as Jo in *Bleak House*. To a great extent Oliver’s history is determinedly the accident of his birth which accounts both for Fagin’s persecution and Brownlow’s concern. In addition, during the time of the novel he is faced with the threat of Fagin’s malign influence and he also enjoys the protective affection of the Maylies and of Brownlow. As an unesteemed orphan the boy may, to the official mind, have nothing to do “with soul or spirit.” At
the same time the circumstances imposed upon him in the city and the country are so unique and extreme that his person is potentially a rare environment for the cultivation or the blighting of such spirit.

Oliver is subjected to serendipitous and adventitious experience, and the contest for his life seems to be waged outside of himself. When Oliver is put out into the world as a piece of chattel for exploitation, he is saved by the authorities from Gamfield, the chimney-sweep, as fortuitously as he is handed over by Bumble to Sowerberry, the undertaker. On the road after his flight Oliver meets up with John Dawkins who leads him to Fagin; he is in turn taken from Fagin through Brownlow, abducted back by Nancy, and finally rescued by the Maylies. Managed almost by anyone who comes in contact with him, the boy is like a puppet plucked by strings manipulated above and beyond his view. But a puppet has both the security and bondage of his strings while Oliver does not know who he is or, often, where he is. At both the literal and the metaphorical level he can't find his way on his own. He is lost within the strangeness of Fagin’s den, wakes up baffled in Brownlow’s home, and falls unconscious at the Maylie threshold. Although children usually have minimal freedom in settling the direction of their lives, Oliver seems more liable than most to the caprice of circumstance, to the chance benevolence or cruelty of his elders, and, importantly, to the uncommon helplessness of his own nature. Oliver's latent humanity is used with rough indifference by those who represent the rule and custom of the social order. At the workhouse he is one among many charges who are confined and abused by supervising moral derelicts; and at the Sowerberrys’ he is fed a dog’s leavings, bedded down among the coffins, and persecuted for his social inferiority by the charity-boy, Noah Claypole, who at least is not an orphan. The cruelty of the Fagin world is much
sharper and more personal but also more confusing because it is ambiguously mingled with the articulation of boyish fellowship and with comic affection as well as suddenly fervid tenderness on Fagin’s part. Oliver’s position is so strange that there seem to be no advances he can make either of language or gesture that will enable him to communicate to others his dimly-felt identity or to understand and define theirs. He only feels the profundity of his isolation from the ordinary world, the numbing quality of his ignorance, and the indefinable danger in his weakness. Oliver gazes drearily out at a world which mirrors nothing of himself that will help him to know it better or his own disposition:

In all the rooms the mouldering shutters were fast closed, and the bars which held them were screwed tight into the wood; the only light which was admitted, making its way through round holes at the top, which made the rooms more gloomy, and filled them with strange shadows. There was a back-garret window, with rusty bars outside, which had no shutter; and out of which Oliver often gazed with a melancholy face for hours together; but nothing was to be descried from it but a confused and crowded mass of house-tops, blackened chimneys, and gable-ends. Sometimes, indeed, a ragged grizzly head might be seen peering over the parapet-wall of a distant house: but it was quickly withdrawn again; and as the window of Oliver’s observatory was nailed down, and dimmed with the rain and smoke of years, it was as much as he could do to make out the forms of the different objects beyond, without making any attempt to be seen or heard—which he had as much chance of being as if he had been inside the ball of St. Paul’s Cathedral. (146)
Because of its dimness, its stillness, and its silence, the city outside appears shut in, and empty. Alone in the quarters to which he had been so mysteriously confined, Oliver glimpses a shadowy chaos of forms which seem to be a dismal extension of the already sombre object world within Fagin’s tenement where the weaving of indefatigable spiders and the scampering of terrified mice are the only evidence of life. What living elements exist outside are probably more portentous than reassuring: the quick surreptitious appearance and withdrawal of the ragged grizzly head is a rodent-like movement. Life in the city so diminishes its inhabitants that the slum-dwellers are like rats and Fagin like a reptile and man like a dog or dog like a man in the Sikes relationship with his cur. As a composition of molecules occupying space Oliver must have some conviction of his reality, but otherwise, melancholy in appearance, his thoughts still, usually crouched in the corner of the passage by the street-door, to be as near living people as he could, the boy is experiencing a lack of relationship to other beings so complete as to annihilate his personal identity. Another aspect of this record of Oliver’s lonely vigil is its dream like quality. Oliver in his observatory is as unreal as the world upon which he looks—or as real. Again and again in the novel the dream as fact or metaphor is used to describe the insubstantial character of Oliver’s existence. The dream state may be actual as is the case during the boy’s illness at Brownlow’s when it is benign and peaceful and so like death as to make death seem a gracious release from care:

Gradually he fell into that deep tranquil sleep which ease from recent suffering alone imparts; that calm and peaceful rest which it is pain to wake from. Who, if this were death, would be roused again to all the struggles and turmoils of life, to all its cares for the present, its anxieties for the future, and, more than all, its
weary recollections of the past! It had been bright day for hours when Oliver opened his eyes; and when he did so, he felt cheerful and happy. The crisis of the disease was safely past, and he belonged to the world again. (89)

Here, as elsewhere in Dickens, death, the ultimate insubstantial state, is a urge to a man in the midst of life: it is not a summons to perfected being, but a deliverance from consciousness which always nags man into knowing his present misery. Because reality is so vivid, so energetic, so much larger and more powerful than human feeling, and so indifferent to it, a man or a boy is apt to shatter his heart against the hardness of the actual world—and he is always tempted to seek an anodyne rather than submit to this heavy fate. The dream of heaven, the careless life of childhood, sleep, and death are all corresponding modes of security in Dickens’ fiction. Emerging from sleep to the consciousness of Fagin’s room, Oliver watches through half closed eyes the old man examining his stolen wealth:

Although Oliver had roused himself from sleep, he was not thoroughly awake. There is a drowsy, heavy state, between sleeping and waking, when you dream more in five minutes with your eyes half open, and yourself half conscious of everything that is passing around you, than you would in five nights with your eyes fast closed, and your senses wrapt in perfect unconsciousness. At such times, a mortal knows just enough of what his mind is doing, to form some glimmering conception of its mighty powers, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the irksome restraint of its corporeal associate. (67)
It is better to lie in bed, safe from the urgencies of time and dreamily suspended above the menace of the actual. When Oliver creeps into his “narrow bed” at the Sowerberrys’, he wishes that that were his coffin; and that he could be laid in a calm and lasting sleep in the churchyard ground: with the tall grass waving gently above his head: and the sound of the old deep bell to soothe him in his sleep. The quiet orderly routine of the Brownlow household resembles the peace of heaven:

They were happy days, those of Oliver’s recovery. Everything was so quiet, and neat, and orderly, everybody so kind and gentle, that after the noise and turbulence in the midst of which he had always lived, it seemed like heaven itself. He was no sooner strong enough to put his clothes on properly, than Mr. Brownlow caused a complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes, to be provided for him. As Oliver was told that he might do what he liked with the old clothes, he gave them to a servant who had been very kind to him, asked her to sell them to a Jew, and keep the money for herself. This she very readily did; and, as Oliver looked out of the parlour window, and saw the Jew roll them up in his bag and walk away, he felt quiet delighted to think that they were safely gone, and that there was no possible danger of his ever being able to bear them again. They were sad rags, to tell the truth; and Oliver had never had a new suit before. (106)

When, therefore, Oliver stands observing the city from his confinement at Fagin’s, the enveloping and claustral moodiness of this scene is complexly relevant to the point of view of the novel. Oliver has only his thin and splintered layer of past memory and murky apprehension of the present to serve him in identifying himself and in relating that self to the object world outside. But here the unaccompanied orphan can
only be identified as another object and not defined as a person; he too is opaque as are
the grotesque shapes he sees. Perhaps no more can be said of the real world of people
and places than that it is a jumble of objects which can be ordered only as in a dream
arranged and shaped by the fancy.

In his perplexed captivity, Oliver can only wait to be moved from the limbo of
his present by some external force. At this point in the novel that force is Fagin who
restores the boy to the company of thieves. Fagin was now slowly instilling into his
soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue forever. At first
Oliver Twist is not at all aware of himself or of his situation. He is simply a kind of
animate object, inhabited by a will to live. But self-awareness does come to Oliver
eventually; and it returns intermittently even in the midst of his life of animal-like
suffering and abjection. When it does come it appears spontaneously in a form which is
simple and all embracing. It is a consciousness of his total solitude: "I am a very little
boy, sir; and it is so — so — ...'So lonely, sir-so very lonely,' cried the child." (32)
Oliver’s desolation is the absence of a primary human essential, some relation to
something human or material outside oneself. His interior life is, as a result, formless. It
is nothing but the prolonged monotonous reiteration of a moment which is simply
emptiness. Oliver’s story begins and the moment of his becoming potentially human
occurs when he becomes aware of his solitude and in the same moment becomes
instinctively aware that it is intolerable to him. Oliver’s experience of solitude is not
posited upon a prior experience of its opposite. He has never known any other
condition:

The boy had no friends to care for, or to care for him. The regret of no recent
separation was fresh in his mind; the absence of no loved and well-remembered
face sunk heavily into his heart. But his heart was heavy, notwithstanding; and he wished, as he crept into his narrow bed, that that were his coffin, and that he could be laid in a calm and lasting sleep in the churchyard ground. (34)

It is only because Oliver’s heart is heavy notwithstanding, only because he has an awareness of his state which does not depend on anything outside himself, that he can turn now to the outside world and demand from it some form of that love which he feels to be his natural right as a human being. But when he turns to the world he finds something very different from the first undifferentiated gloom. He finds that the world does not simply leave the outcast in the open to die. It aggressively addresses itself to the ruination of the helpless being to which it gives no place. Once the decision is made that the outcast has no reason for existing, the world sets about deliberately to fill up the emptiness it has created by a legislative fiat. For even the space he takes up is needed. The world rushes violently in to bury him away out of sight, to take back, the volume he occupied, and even to consume the very substance of his body. The characters of *Oliver Twist* find themselves in a world in which they are from the first moment and at every moment in extreme danger. Not how to succeed or how to rise in the world but how to live in this world at all, is their problem. Neither the social world nor the world of Nature is willing to give them the means of life. The thieves would have starved to death either in or out of a workhouse if they had not turned to crime, and Oliver’s most pressing need is not the status and comfort of a recognized place in society but simply breathing room and food.

The outcast is likely to be starved or smothered or crushed to death by only accident, for the world goes on as though he were not in it. So parish children are often overlooked in turning up a bedstead, or inadvertently scalded to death when there
happens to be a washing. And so Oliver is in danger of being beaten or crushed to
death. ‘Grind him to ashes!’ says Monks. The fame of the scene in which Oliver asks
for ‘more’ derives, one feels, from the way it expresses dynamically Oliver’s revolt
against the hostile social and material world. Oliver’s request is total. He demands not
simply more food, but recognition of his right to live. The workhouse authorities
respond to his demand by imprisoning him in a dark and solitary room. Later on, when
Oliver revolts again, he is again assigned to windowless underground room. In the
windowless room, one may suffocate. The fear of enclosure and the fear of choking to
death are closely related motifs in the central imaginative complex of *Oliver
Twist*. Parish children are often turned up in beds and smothered by accident,
and Oliver is nearly apprenticed to Mr. Gamfield, a chimney sweep, who reluctantly
admits that- “young boys have been smothered in chimneys before now” (21).

The characters in Oliver Twist are obsessed with a fear of being hanged, a fear
which is expressed with hallucinatory intensity; the motif of hanging is merged with the
image of a dark suffocating interior. Hanging is a frightening mixture of two fears
which operate throughout *Oliver Twist*—the fear of falling and the fear of being crushed
or suffocated. A man is hanged out in the open, in full view of the crowd, and the
executioner drops him into the air. But beneath his black hood the victim is as
completely alone, enclosed in the dark, as if he were in the depths of a dungeon. And
what more proper symbol of the crushing, suffocating violence of the hostile world than
the instantaneous tightening of the noose? Fagin and Sikes merely act out the death
which has threatened Oliver from the beginning, and has, in his case too, been
connected with the image of close imprisonment in a dark room. Enclosure in an
absolutely dark underground room is, paradoxically, not total imprisonment. For if one
is wholly alone in the dark and cannot even see the surrounding stone walls, it is as if there were no walls there and one were suspended in nothingness or even falling endlessly through an indistinguishable gloom. One reaches out to touch even the imprisoning walls. They are at least something solid, something which will support, however coldly, the isolated being. The following lines reflect the same atmosphere:

> When the long, dismal night came on, he spread his little hands before his eyes to shut out the darkness, and crouching in the corner, tried to sleep: ever and anon waking with a start and tremble, and drawing himself closer and closer to the wall, as if to feel even its cold hard surface were a protection in the gloom and loneliness which surrounded him. (18)

The image of the dark, dilapidated house which strives constantly to fall of its own weight is one of the recurrent configurations of the imagination of Dickens. Apparently there is no escape. No novel could be more completely dominated by an imaginative complex of claustrophobia. No other novel by Dickens returns so frequently to images of dark dirty rooms with no apparent exit. At various times Oliver is imprisoned in the coal-cellar. The exterior confusion of sights and sounds is matched by an interior bewilderment. Oliver’s state of mind as prisoner of the thieves in these underground interiors is usually that of semi-conscious anxiety. He has little awareness or understanding of his plight. He has merely a indistinct knowledge that he is living in a kind of earthly hell, not the least unpleasant part of which is the fact that he does not comprehend most of what is going on around him. This failure to understand actually protects Oliver from the complicity of too much knowledge of the thieves’s world. But this is another of the things he does not know, and he remains aware only of the confusion itself and of his failure to understand it:
Oliver tried to reply, but his tongue failed him. He was deadly pale; and the whole place seemed turning round and round. . . (83)

Oliver looked at Sikes in mute and timid wonder, and, drawing a stool to the fire, sat with his aching head upon his hands, scarcely knowing where he was, or what was passing around him. . . (177)

Over and over again we see Oliver simply falling asleep in these foul and frowsy dens, where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn. Cut off altogether from the past and the future, enclosed in a narrow shadowy present which does not make sense, he loses consciousness altogether, so exhausted is he by anxiety and by his failure to comprehend what is happening to him. More precisely, he is reduced to the simplest and most undifferentiated form of consciousness, sleep- "He was sick and weary, and soon fell sound asleep." (134). There is another quotation for the validation of aforesaid point-"The boy was lying fast asleep on a rude bed upon the floor, so pale with anxiety, and sadness, and the closeness of his prison, that he looked like death; not death as it shows in shroud and coffin, but in the guise it wears when life has just departed." (219)

But Oliver is unable always to escape by sleep or bewilderment. As he slowly becomes acclimated to his new environment he comes to acknowledge that, for its inhabitants, this underground world has a certain logic and a certain coherence. Even in his very first glimpse of this world there was visible, along with the dirt and closeness, another quality, a quality which makes life to some degree tolerable and even pleasant for these outcasts:
The walls and ceiling of the room were perfectly black with age and dirt. There was a deal-table before the fire, upon which was a candle stuck in a ginger-beer bottle; two or three pewter pots, a loaf and butter, and a plate. In a frying-pan which was on the fire, and which was secured to the mantel-shelf by a string, some sausages were cooking; and standing over them, with a toasting-fork in his hand, was a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair. (64)

There are two contradictory values in this passage: Fagin’s den is both a dungeon and a place of refuge. It is dark, dirty, and utterly shut off from the outside world, but it is also a burlesque, at least, of a home, that place where one lives safely by one’s own fireside, protected from the outer world, and where one has food, light, warmth, and a circle of other human beings with whom one feels at ease. Fagin’s den is a ‘snug retreat’ and inside its walls we find a society leagued for common defence against the hostility of the outside world. It is a situation well imaged by the single candle which so often appears shifting dimly in the gloom. Fagin’s gang is an authentic society and provides the security and sense of belonging to a community which Oliver has never before known, but these goods are not won without a price. The price is the permanent loss of the kind of life among honest men of which Oliver instinctively dreams. Oliver among the thieves is, in fact, totally excluded from the life of protected security he desires. He is as truly outcast as if he were starving in the open, however warm and comfortable and even cheerful the interior of Fagin’s den may be. Oliver’s situation in the world is to be at once hedged round and round and forsaken in the open. But it is in Dickens’s treatment of the lives of the thieves themselves rather than in his treatment of Oliver that it can be seen most- clearly why he rejects the attempt by the
outcasts, to create an autonomous society of their own. In the first place, the thieves’
society is unstable. It is built on the principle of internal treason, and it is constantly
threatened by destruction from the outside. If the least chink in the walls lets the beams
of the hidden candle out into the night, the society of the upper world will rush in and
destroy the hidden society of outcasts. The two qualities of disloyalty and danger from
without are causally related. It is because the thieves live through raids on the world of
honest men that they are, ultimately, disloyal to one another. They are inevitably
disloyal because only by caring more for their own individual safety than for their
common safety can they survive. It is Fagin who lives most deliberately by a
philosophy of ‘every man for himself,’” and it is Fagin, consequently, who lives longest.

Fagin’s apparent philosophy of one for all hides an actual philosophy which
sacrifices all for one. He lives only by condemning others to death. If he does not do
this, they will turn him in. Just as he moves from den to den, so he must constantly
replace the members of his gang. A society defining itself as evil, that is, as the denial
of all social laws, can only live by perpetual metamorphosis. Fagin is accordingly a
shape-changer, a master of disguise, but his best disguise is the constantly changing
membership of his gang. He can only survive by being nothing and by doing nothing
himself, that is, by committing his crimes only by proxy and remaining himself the
empty center of all this crime, the void of evil itself. For positive evil in this world is
inevitably punished; the man who sets himself up against society always comes to be
hanged. The periphery around Fagin, all the boys and adult thieves who work for him,
are one by one plucked away and hanged or transported. It is only by maintaining this
concrete Swall of active evil committed by others between himself and the world of
good that Fagin can continue to live at the center of his dark hollow den.
The true relation of the thieves to one another is given not by the image of a mutually loyal group crouching around their single candle in an underground room, but by the recurrent motif of spying. Fagin himself spies on Oliver and on other members of his gang; Nancy finds out the secrets of Oliver’s birth by spying on Fagin and Monks; Nancy herself is spied on by Fagin’s representative. Her betrayal of the thieves is thus discovered and her death brought about. And Oliver is spied on by Fagin and Monks as he dwells in what he assumes to be the total security of Mrs. Maylie’s country home. All the thieves are in constant fear not only that someone in the outside world will observe and identify them but that they will be observed and betrayed by one of their own number. Oliver’s share in this general fear of the unseen look that steals one’s secret is a measure of the degree of his participation, in spite of himself, in the thieves’ psychology. For the world of honest men the thieves’ world is invisible. The thieves, then, are constantly threatened, within and without, by the possibility that their secret will be revealed. But the attempt to assume one’s isolation publicly and thereby make it the source of one’s identity is equally unsuccessful. The dinginess and murkiness of the surrounding is reflected through the following lines:

It was a very dirty place; but he room upstairs had great high wooden mantel-pieces and large doors, with paneled walls and cornices to the ceilings, which, although they were black with neglect and dust, were ornamented in various ways; from all of which tokens Oliver concluded that a long time ago, before the old Jew was born, it had belonged to better people, and had perhaps been quite gay and handsome, dismal and dreary as it looked now:”....and often, when it grew dark, and he was tired of wandering from room to room, he would
crouch in the corner of the passage by the street-door, to be as near living people as he could. (145)

This passage marks Oliver’s transition to an active search in the exterior world for the meaning of his plight and for the identity and security he obscurely seeks. He has been recaptured by Fagin and locked all alone in an empty house. He has had a brief glimpse of the world of honest people, and has been strangely moved by the sight of a picture which is, although he does not know it, a portrait of his mother, who died when he was born. Apparently his new prison is merely a repetition of all the interiors he has already known, interiors which offer no avenue of escape and which contain no clue whatsoever as to the meaning of his suffering. Oliver studies his new surroundings with a child’s wonder. Everything seems larger than life-size. The chimney-pieces are high, the doors large, and the perspective is that of someone looking upward. But this interior is different. Oliver is no longer at the very center of the darkness. He can watch from the outside as the mice “scamper across the floor, and run back terrified to their holes”. It is as though he were a good man watching the thieves run for cover in their secret dens. Moreover, his new prison is not only dirty and enclosed. It also contains the decayed signs, almost the archeological remains, of another way of life.

Furthermore, this prison, unlike the others, lets in a little light from the outside. It has a tiny aperture through which Oliver may dimly descry the world of freedom and study it:

In all the rooms, the mouldering shutters were fast closed: the bars which held them were screwed tight into the wood; the only light which was admitted, stealing its way through round holes at the top: which made the rooms more
gloomy, and filled them with strange shadows. There was a back-garret window with rusty bars outside which had no shutter; and out of this, Oliver often gazed with a melancholy face for hours together; but nothing was to be descryed from it but a confused and crowded mass of house-tops, blackened chimneys, and gable-ends. Sometimes, indeed, a grizzly head might be seen, peering over the parapet-wall of a distant house: but it was quickly withdrawn again; and as the window of Oliver’s observatory was nailed down, and dimmed with the rain and smoke of years, it was as much as he could do to make out the forms of the different objects beyond, without making any attempt to be seen or heard,—which he had as much chance of being, as if he had lived inside the ball of St. Paul’s Cathedral.(146)

If there is any single image which we remember longest from *Oliver Twist* it is the picture of the lost boy, deprived of all knowledge of his forebears, imprisoned all alone in a labyrinthine ruin of a house, peering with a melancholy face for hours together through a high clouded window at a world he cannot understand, and with which he has seemingly no chance of making direct contact. Oliver’s exploration of the outside world is here only that of passive and detached observation. There is an obscuring veil, the deposited layers of the rain and smoke of years between him and the world outside, so that he can hardly distinguish one object from another. What has cut him off from the past, the years of which he has no knowledge and cannot break through, cuts him off also from the outside world by depositing a veil of dust and cobwebs on the window. And, if the inside world is dark and unintelligible, if it offers to his gaze merely the same blank walls, black with age and dirt, or glistening with subterranean moisture, the outside world is unintelligible because of its jumbled
multiplicity. Oliver sees only a “confused and crowded mass of house-tops, blackened chimneys, and gable-ends.” There seems to be no order in this confusion, and it seems to be related in no significant way to himself. It is simply there before him, a bewildering collection of objects in the midst of which the figure of another human being makes a brief and mysterious appearance only to be “quickly withdrawn again.”

But, even though Oliver has no chance at all of being seen or heard, of making contact with this world, he is at least aware now that he is not buried deep underground out of all proximity to the outside world. He is as near to it, as close and yet as far, as if he were enclosed not underground but high in the air—as if he were enclosed in the ball of St. Paul’s Cathedral. He spends long hours studying this disordered world, as if he had some faint chance of forcing it to yield up its secret, a secret which might be his secret too, the secret of his identity and the meaning of his life.

More than once Oliver does escape and is able to explore the external world, to make an active search for its meaning. Does this world have the same hostility that the walls of the dark interior world possessed? The windowless room corresponded to Oliver’s interior darkness, to the semi-conscious stupor which was his initial condition. Perhaps the exterior world may be controlled by understanding it. Perhaps it may be held at arm’s length, may be comprehended, may even be forced to correspond exactly to his inner state and thus to offer an escape from the total separation between inner and outer worlds imaged in Oliver’s melancholy gaze.

In this obscurity, one is aware that what one sees is as much a projection of one’s fear as an accurate perception of objects in the external world: ‘Every object before him, substance or shadow, still or moving, took the semblance of some fearful thing’ (312). But the mist may be simply opaque and impenetrable, and perhaps this is
even more frightening. The fog simply mirrors back to the lost boy his own lostness, his total inability to understand where he is or who he is or what is the meaning of the objects which surround him:

The night was dark and foggy, and it was just beginning to rain. The lights in the shops could scarcely struggle through the heavy mist, which thickened every moment and shrouded the streets and houses in gloom, rendering the strange place still stranger in Oliver’s eyes, and making his uncertainty the more dismal and depressing. (125)

But when the obscurity gives way somewhat to light, when the objects which had looked dim and terrible in the darkness, grow more and more defined, and gradually resolve into their familiar shapes, the hero can look around him for the first time. The first thing he observes is that he is apparently totally alone in a world of objects which are closed to him or which exist statically at an unattainable distance:

"The window-shutters were closed, the street was empty, not a soul had awakened to the business of the day. The sun was rising in all its splendid beauty; but the light only seemed to show the boy his own lonesomeness and desolation." (59)

This new state of separation and alienation is in a way more desperate than the first. The walls of Oliver’s prison were at least close to him and were a kind of comfort in themselves. And the outcast can no longer be consoled by the idea that everything will be all right if only he can escape from his prison. The outside world is revealed as simply the opposite extreme from the inside world. Instead of being close and suffocating it is absolutely open. And what can be seen at a distance in the clear light forms a kind of solid barrier just as hostile as the damp walls within which Oliver has
been immured. It is now hostility of withdrawal and silence rather than of active violence against Oliver. The world constitutes itself still as a solid wall, but it is now a wall of indifference rather than of hate. It is an isolation which is both material and social. There is only one avenue of action left, only one thing the hero can do now that he could not do when he was locked in: he can run hurrying the through a labyrinth of streets seeking some escape from his exclusion. The urban labyrinth turns out to be nothing more than an endless daedal and intricate prison. As in a dream, Oliver wanders through intricate streets which are different but which do not seem to lead anywhere. And the darkness, narrowness, muddiness, crookedness of this urban maze make it difficult to distinguish it from the underground prison in which the hero first found himself. The hero is as much lost and as much enclosed outside as he was inside, and there is repeated over and over the sequence of a rapid walk, sometimes a flight, through streets:

He kept on his course through many winding and narrow ways, until he reached Bethnal Green; then, turning suddenly off to the left, he soon became involved in a maze of the mean and dirty streets which abound in that close and densely-populated quarter. . . . He hurried through several alleys and streets, and at length turned into one lighted only by a single lamp at the farther end. At the door of a house in this street, he knocked, and, having exchanged a few muttered words with the person who opened the door, walked up stairs. (153)

Dickens had been reading Defoe’s History of the Devil with great interest while he was writing Oliver Twist, but his reading, it seems perceptible, only reinforced the image of the archetype of evil which was already present in his imagination. Fagin is
imagined too vividly in his combination of supernatural and animal qualities to be the mere copy of traditional and literary representations of the devil:

Fagin sat watching in his old lair, with face so distorted and pale, and eyes so red and bloodshot, that he looked less like a man than like some hideous phantom, moist from the grave, and worried by an evil spirit. He sat crouching over a cold hearth, wrapped in an old torn coverlet, with his face turned towards a wasting candle that stood upon a table by his side. His right hand was raised to his lips, and as, absorbed in thought, he bit his long black nails, he disclosed among his toothless gums a few such fangs as should have been a dog’s or rat’s.

At the center of the labyrinth, then, is Fagin, the personified principle of the world cut off altogether from the light and the good. There he crouches, greedy to possess Oliver altogether by making him a thief, but hiding, perhaps, the secret that will make possible Oliver’s enduring escape from the labyrinth. The only escape from the prison, it may be, is to descend into its very heart and to wrest from the darkness its secret. Oliver does not know this, of course. He only knows that there is a centripetal force which seems to pull him toward the center of the labyrinth, however hard he tries to escape. When Oliver flees from his living grave at Sowerberry’s it is not outward through the maze to freedom but into the intricacy of London, toward the dark center of the labyrinth—Fagin’s den. And when Oliver’s rescuer sends Oliver out on an errand he has only to turn down a bystreet by accident to be plunged back into the labyrinth and recaptured by Fagin.
The true meaning of the labyrinth image is perhaps revealed in a phrase Dickens uses about Nancy: "Fagin ... had led her, step by step, deeper and deeper down into an abyss of crime and misery, whence was no escape" (370). Movement in the Dickensian labyrinth is always inward and downward toward the center, and never outward toward freedom. The labyrinth is really an abyss, a bottomless pit of mud and darkness in which one can be lost forever, forever separated from the world of light and freedom. And the labyrinth is also a moral abyss. It is the world into which Oliver will be permanently plunged if the thieves succeed in hardening him and making him into one of themselves.

But there are several labyrinthine progressions in *Oliver Twist* which replace the journey through intricate streets to a grave like interior with a journey through the obscurity of fog into streets that are at first empty but are then gradually filled up with a great crowd, a crowd either of distinct objects or of human beings. The blank walls take on distinct features and the visual field becomes a variegated mass of details rather than a single analogous and homologous smudge:

In its filthy shops are exposed for sale huge bunches of second-hand silk handkerchiefs of all sizes and patterns - for here reside the traders who purchase them from pickpockets. Hundreds of these handkerchiefs hang dangling form pegs outside the windows or flaunting from the door-posts; and the shelves within are piled with them. . . stores of old iron and bones, and heaps of mildewy fragments of woollen-stuff and linen, rust and rot in the grimy cellars. . . (204)
To reach this place, the visitor has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets, thronged by the roughest and poorest of water-side people, and devoted to the traffic they may be supposed to occasion. The cheapest and least delicate provisions are heaped in the shops; the coarsest and commonest articles of wearing apparel dangle at the salesman’s door, and stream from the house-parapet and windows. . . (416)

Everything is in the plural, and multiplies itself inexhaustibly. Not only are there innumerable distinct objects, there also seems to be an endless supply of each species. The cellars are stuffed with ‘stores’ and ‘heaps’ more of what is displayed outside; each house seems to contain enough unseen drunkards to fill the streets even if all the visible ones were cleared away; and the “commonest articles of wearing apparel” “stream from the house-parapet, and windows” as though flowing from a bottomless reservoir. These are scenes of profusion and excess, of the endless accumulation of heteroclite details. But in the end this multiplicity gives way to a fluidity in which everything seems to be surging liquidly up from the interior. Since each detail is multiplied indefinitely it appears to be constantly replaced by its fellows, and the entire series forms a continuous “stream” in which what had been hidden a moment ago makes its momentary appearance only to be replaced without transition by the next in line. It is consequently a world which is inside out. All that should be secret is out in the open; wearing apparel, the evidence of lawbreaking, unseemly behaviour, all is revealed.

Even if the chaotic mass remains harmlessly at a distance, its effect is malign. When Sikes takes Oliver off in the early morning to try to make a thief of him, at first the streets are empty. Gradually, though, the streets begin to fill with a motley crowd of
men and women. Oliver and Sikes move toward the center of the city, toward the dense source of all this multiplicity and movement. At the center of it all, Smithfield, the distinct sounds are so numerous that they begin to blur and swell into a roar of sound and bustle. Each sound and each sight is still distinct, but each has become exactly the equivalent of all the others and thus, in the end, fuses into a single indistinguishable blur or roar. The multitudes of distinct sense perceptions destroy one another by their very abundance, and the spectator is left face to face with a single vertiginous cacophony in which nothing can be distinguished clearly because all the thresholds of clear sense perception have been exceeded:

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 quarrelling 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. (171)

At first the tumult of discordant sounds had filled Oliver with amazement, but in the end he is 'stunned, bewildered, his senses are confounded. He is, in fact, reduced by his exploration of the exterior world to exactly the same state he was in when he lay in a half-conscious stupor in the darkness and solitude of his prison. And the world of distinct objects mingled together in an unintelligible mass is shown to be in the end the exact equivalent of the world of total darkness. A light too bright is invisible, and a
world of sheer multiplicity is shown to be the same as a world in which nothing at all exists or in which nothing at all is perceptible. Both worlds mirror back to the alienated hero his own subjective confusion, his own bewildered inability to tell where he is or who he is. Here the entire world seems to have turned animate and to be chasing Oliver down the endless dreamlike corridors of the London labyrinth. And the aim of the mob is not simply to catch him, but to “crowd” him-to death. The crowd jostles and struggles centripetally toward Oliver, and will suffocate him or crush him if it can.

It is pellucid and limpid that he did not believe the thieves were naturally evil just as Oliver was naturally good. Although the world is fallen, evil is, initially, extraneous and adventitious to any individual. There is no embrace or ratification of the doctrine of original sin in Dickens’s anthropology. Each human creature comes pure and good from the hand of God and only becomes evil through the effects of an evil domain and environs. Some are, however, like Olive, paradoxically more naturally good than others or more indestructibly so by nature or inheritance and are thus able to tolerate the pressure of evil surroundings, milieu which slowly and automatically taint, corrupt, and eventually destroy all the others who are exposed to them.

The main axis of the nuclear structure of *Oliver Twist* is a fear of ostracism and exclusion which alternates with a fear of the state of being enclosed. Between these two poles the novel oscillates. On the one hand there is the consternation and fear that one will be completely cut off from the world and from other men. Thrust into an empty world from which everything has receded to an unattainable distance, one is left only with a need, a lack, the need to be related to the world, to find a ground to stand on and a roof over one’s head. On the other hand, there is the fear that the world will approach too near, that one will be buried alive, squashed to death, or suffocated, that freedom
and even life itself will be crushed out. At a level beneath the exterior and extrinsic clarity of narrated events, at a level where all the characters reduce themselves into isomorphic delineations of a few basic possibilities, *Oliver Twist* is the search for a way of life which will escape from these two extremes. For the extremes of enclosure and ostracism come in the end to the same thing, from the point of view of individual existence. They are the fiasco (abortion) to be someone, and to have that identity recognized by the outside world, to be someone in security and without iniquity. The extreme of expulsion and eviction images that failure in a total evaporation of the self into a tenebrous (murky) world where, nothing can be distinguished clearly or where everything has retreated to an unreachable distance. The extreme of enclosure images the loss of identity in a narrowing down of the limits of individuality until finally one ceases altogether to exist—like a dampened and snuffed candle flame. Oliver requires some inflexible and refractory ground to stand on and a warm protective covering, material or human; around him and above him. In a world in which there is nothing but himself and a dark flimsy and visionary mist he is nothing, and he would rather be related to the world as a slave among slaves than not be related at all. But on the other hand the world must not approach too close. It must be a defensive and approving gaze, not a suffocating intimidation and coercion, a secure foundation, not the solid enclosure of the prison, or the grave: “Mother! dear, dear mother, bury me in the open fields—anywhere but in these dreadful streets. I should like to be where you can see my grave, but not in these close crowded streets; they have killed me.” The passage is from the *Sketches by Boz* but there, as in *Oliver Twist*, the city is the place where one is deformed and pulverized to death by the walls and the crowds or suffocated by the closeness.
Oliver’s forage and hunt, then is for a physical and social world which will offer support but not coercion, protection but not imprisonment, which will be palpably there, but there at a certain safe distance. It is a world of which he has had no apprehension except in his dreams. Instantaneously Oliver is liberated and disentangled. He wakes to find himself in a kind of world he has never known. Both times when Oliver is taken into the good world there is an interval of unconsciousness between, followed by a period of serious illness. When he sinks into unconsciousness from the strain of his unendurable and insufferable life there seems no possible escape. When he comes to his senses again he is in a transmogrified world. There is an absolute disruption and disconnection between the two worlds. The movement from the bad world to the good one is as enigmatic and as unforeseeable as his initial imprisonment and internment in the dark world or as his redescent into the inferno when Fagin recaptures him. He simply finds everything suddenly changed. At first he does not know where he is, and the absolute transformation of scene makes possible an absolute conversion of self. All his past life seems a type of ephialtes and incubus from which he has finally awakened to a life anterior to anything he has known in his actual life.

“Weak, and thin and pallid, he awoke at last from what seemed to have been a long and troubled dream.” (87) What are the features of the new world in which Oliver so suddenly finds himself? Is it simply the opposite of the dark world of his initial entombment? Is it freedom, openess, light, comprehensible and lucid order rather than darkness, enclosedness, and incoherence? Oliver falls asleep one evening in his little cottage room, sitting close by the lattice window from which he can see so much without being seen. There follows an exposure which seems to prove the total insecurity of Oliver’s present happy state. It is a passage which is, for Dickens,
strangely intentional, purposeful and logical. Apparently it is the statement of a doctrine about dreams, or, more squarely and exactly, about a certain state between sleep and waking in which the figmental and unreal world of dreams is not cut off from the real situation of the sleeper but is mingled with it:

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes which, while it holds the body prisoner, does not free the mind from a sense of things about it, and enable it to ramble as it pleases. So far as an overpowering heaviness, a prostration of strength, and an utter inability to control our thoughts or power of motion, can be called sleep, this is it; and yet we have a consciousness of all that is going on about us, and even if we dream, words which are really spoken, or sounds which really exist at the moment, accommodate themselves with surprising readiness to our visions, until reality and imagination become so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two. (281)

Earlier in the novel an almost entirely and absolutely similar experience, defined in the same way—"There is a drowsy state, between sleeping and waking, when you dream more in five minutes ... than you would in five nights with your eyes fast closed." (67)—had been graphically and vividly defined as proof of the mega power of the human mind to surpass its wonted barrier to a single time and a single space. “At such times, a mortal knows just enough of what his mind is doing, to form some glimmering conception of its mighty powers, its bounding from earth and spurning time and space, when freed from the restraint of its corporeal associate." (67). For a moment, while such an conversance lasts, a mortal is freed from his mortality and from his imprisonment in his body and in the present moment.
But the spesh and notable interest of this state for Dickens is that it links an imaginary world to the actual present world, while on the contrary an ordinary dream is entirely free, and has no direct relation whatever to the present. Even if we are not at all aware through sensation of what is there in reality as a "mere silent presence" (281), it will magically determine the nature of our dream:

It is an ascertained fact, that although our senses of touch and sight be for the time dead, yet our sleeping thoughts, and the visionary scenes that pass before us, will be influenced and materially influenced, by the mere silent presence of some external object which may not have been near us when we closed our eyes, and of whose vicinity we have had no waking consciousness. Oliver knew perfectly well that he was in his own little room, that his books were lying on the table before him, and that the sweet air was stirring among the creeping plants outside,- and yet he was asleep. (281)

Notwithstanding, the most important particularity and distinction of this half-waking state is not, it turns out, that it links a real state to an imaginary state, but that it links a present state to a past state. In the earlier experience Oliver was perfectly aware of what was going on in the room around him and yet the self-same senses were mentally engaged, at the same time, in busy action with almost everybody he had ever known. In fact, what was perceived by Oliver’s half-closed eyes was not only an immediate reality but a reality which seemed to contain, although Oliver was only dimly aware of it, a hidden remembrance and reminiscence, extending even prior to everybody he had ever known. The past permeates and altogether replaces a present which it is like. Or rather, the two times, past and present, are stratified (superjacent) and inextricably mingled, and Oliver for a moment lives in a time which is neither past
nor present but is somehow a universal and timeless experience of being imprisoned by Fagin and subjected to his look. It is an experience which sums up his entire life since his birth. But what Oliver experiences is a very special variant of affective memory. Oliver has known no blissful infancy, and the past which comes back to dominate and to destroy his present happiness is the past of his concealed life. Even though. Oliver had secure in his new life with the Maylies, Fagin now reappears in the very midst of his most secure moment and invades his most secure place. Fagin comes as if to reclaim Oliver, as if to remind him that he really has belonged perpetually and indelibly to the dark underground world from his birth, and has never really escaped: “It was but an instant, a glance, a flash, before his eyes, and they were gone. But they had recognised him, and he them; and their look was as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth”. (283)

Only Oliver is perpetually insecure because that past is as firmly impressed upon his memory, as if it had been deeply carved in stone, and set before him from his birth. Oliver’s past is invariably and persistently part of him and cannot be escaped by any movement into the future in the retrospectively oriented world of the novel. Oliver knows now what he wants—a present which will be a protected relaxation and quietude combining freedom and enclosure. But he does not know how to possess this fairyland on earth in permanent security. It seems to be in perpetual danger of being at any moment overrun and replaced by the dark past. The present, then, is altogether unendurable for Oliver, whether he is in the midst of a dark enclosed world which is stimulating and advancing toward his demolition and devastation or whether he is in a calm protected world which may at any time be invaded and annihilated by the other world. The present in Oliver Twist is characterized by a failure to know who one is or
to attain any justifiable identity. It is also specified by a failure to understand the outside world. Oliver can only submit passively to a succession of present moments which do not relate logically to one another. The world imposes a random rhythm of escape and capture. Oliver has only his vigorous spirit to defend himself, and because of the proscription and prohibition against taking matters into his own hands he can use that spirit only to keep himself alive by passive resistance. Time in this unrelieved present either steals delinquently and eventually, slows down, curdles, solidify and freezes into an endless present of suffering, perplexity, bemusement, puzzlement, obfuscation, bamboozlement, and interior emptiness, or, like a broken clock, it accelerates madly under the impulsion of fear toward the death that seems rushing out of the imminent future.

But still Dickens can be caught up in the vision of a natural innocence which is brought into this world at birth, from a prenatal heaven and which is regained at death after passing through a world which is primarily evil:

Alas! how few of Nature’s faces there are to gladden us with their beauty! The cares, and sorrows, and hungering of the world change them as they change hearts, and it is only when those passions sleep, and have lost their hold for ever, that the troubled clouds pass off, and leave heaven’s surface clear. It is a common thing for the countenances of the dead, even in that fixed and rigid state, to subside into the long-forgotten expression of sleeping infancy, and settle into the very look of early life. (192)

Heaven, then, is the place where all that has been lost in this fallen world is regained, and it is a place of which one may have glances fleetingly athwart the almost
totally monotonous gloom of this world. There seems no escape from this world but by
death. However, one final form persists and tarries of the reiteration (repetition)
through memory of a past state: one may find signs in the present of a secret past life
which existed on this earth before one was born. When those signs are comprehended
and grasped, their divulgences may be accepted as a definition of what one really is.
Then it will be possible to live ever afterward in a kind of paradise on earth, a paradise
reconquered which is the present lightened and spiritualized because it is a repetition of
one’s prenatal earthly past. If Oliver Twist is in one sense Oliver’s yatra through a
sequence of opaque and meaningless present moments, it is in another sense the slow
discovery, in the midst of that confusion, of a secret which will make all seem
organized and remarkable. As in all of Dickens’s novels, there is a conundrum and
quandary at the center apparently unrelated events which will make them turn out in
retrospect to be orderly and intelligible. Here the mystery is the secret of Oliver’s birth.
When it is solved he can live happily ever after because now he knows who he is. He
discovers his essence, his inherent nature, and with it acquires a place in society.

But the total dramatic pattern of Oliver Twist suggests that Oliver can have
happiness so thoroughly and absolutely in the end only because he has lost it so
completely at the beginning. If there had not been an absolute break in the chain of time
which determines each person’s present identity by an inescapable and inevitable series
of causes and effects, and if there had not been an absolute break in the chain of clique
associations and correlations by which parents and adults own, control, and judge, as
well as protect, their children, would the secure life Oliver covets have been so
desirable after all? Does not Dickens secretly enjoy the situation of the outcast, with an
enjoyment nonetheless intense for being hidden far beneath the surface? If the outcast
is, in one sense, entirely constrained and pressurized, in another sense he is entirely free, entirely unhampered by any direct ties to any other human being. It depends only on Oliver himself for its existence. And Oliver can claim his legacy and hereditament only after he has proved that he really is who he is in a world which does not give him any reflection or validation and certification of that identity. Oliver can only become himself by forming a relation between what he is initially, a wholly independent self, depending on and sustained by nothing external, and the self he discovers himself already to be. The interspace between these two selves is utterly necessary. Hence the extreme importance of the clause of Oliver’s father’s will providing that he shall inherit the money “only on the stipulation that in his minority he should never have stained his name with any public act of dishonour, meanness, cowardice, or wrong. Dickens, then in a manner contrives to have both his contradictory needs simultaneously. Oliver is self-determining in that, without any knowledge of who he really is, he has had to defend his ethos and nucleus from the world that tries to make him a thief. But in the end he is entirely the fosterling of the outside world, and submits without quarrel to a life under the approving eyes of Mr. Brownlow and the Maylies. Finally, when all the secrets are out, having been wrested by force from the heart of the dark world, Mr. Brownlow adopts Oliver as his son, and Oliver has what he wants at last as a member of a little society, whose condition approached as nearly to one of perfect happiness as can ever be known in this changing world. Mr. Brownlow fills the empty spirit of Oliver with those stores of knowledge which will make him an authentic member of the middle class, but this education only reveals that Oliver has been all long possibly what Mr. Brownlow wants to make him in actuality.
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