Oliver Twist

OLIVER TWIST, the novel which perhaps more than any other was in later years to be associated with Charles Dickens's name, began almost by accident. The circumstances were these: he had already written some eight monthly instalments of *The Pickwick Papers* when a publisher, Richard Bentley, approached him with the offer to edit *Bentley's Miscellany*; this was to be a monthly magazine which would publish the best of contemporary writing and, since Dickens was now widely regarded as the most promising novelist of his day, he was in a sense the most obvious choice. He had no real experience of editing but, as usual, nothing hindered his self-confidence or his energy; he readily agreed, and almost at once resigned from his post as a newspaper reporter on the *Morning Chronicle*. He was always very practical in financial matters, and no doubt he calculated that his income as an editor would be a reasonable substitute for his income as a journalist. He was not at this point banking, literally or otherwise, on his reputation as a creative writer.

Nevertheless he had also agreed to contribute to the new magazine he was about to edit and in its first number, published in January 1837, there appeared a sketch with the title, 'The Public Life of Mr Tulrumble'; it is an entertaining satire on the idiocies of those who wish to set themselves up in 'authority', and showed Dickens's usual command of idiom as well as his gift for satire at the expense of pride and hypocrisy. It was set in the fictional town of Mudfog which, to all appearances, is a veiled version of Chatham – the naval town where Dickens himself grew up. It was in Mudfog, too, that the

second story began in the next month's issue of *Bentley's Miscellany*; more specifically it began in the workhouse at Mudfog, with the birth of an infant boy, and this similarly short sketch was entitled 'Oliver Twist'. And so it began. The famous novel started life as one of a series of fictions, although almost at once it occurred to Dickens that he had hit upon a 'capital notion' in his picture of Oliver himself – the workhouse boy who is farmed out to a disagreeable employer before running off to London and unwillingly entering the life of Fagin's den.

George Cruikshank was the illustrator of *Bentley's Miscellany*, and was in later years to claim that it was he who originated the idea of little Oliver and who suggested the plot of this parish boy's 'progress' through all the wickedness of London before his eventual rescue and redemption. In fact this is highly unlikely – Dickens, of all writers, was not the kind to take ideas from other people, however distinguished they might be, and in any case all the forces of his own life would have prompted him into the creation of just such a novel and just such a hero. He hardly needed the advice of anyone else – for he was set to write a parable out of his own childhood.

It has been well said that *Oliver Twist* is the first novel in the English language to take a child as its central character – and how could it not be so, when the author's own childhood still simmered just below the surface of his adult career, and was to remain his most prominent memory? It may be as well to remember a few facts about that childhood in order properly to understand the adventures of little Oliver in his search for love and security.

Dickens had been brought up in Chatham (the birthplace of Oliver Twist himself, as we have seen), and his early life seemed as stable and as peaceful as that of any other child from a 'respectable' family; he went to a local school with his sister, was devoted to such books as *The Arabian Nights* and *Roderick Random*, and by his own account harboured dreams of growing up to be a famous and successful man. Then every-

thing was taken away from him, and at the age of ten his happy childhood was torn in half. His father was compelled to move to London, in order to take up a new post in the Navy Pay Office where he worked, and the young boy found himself in a narrow house beside the straggling fields of Camden Town. There was no longer any chance of an education for him and he spent his time acting as a sort of unpaid servant for a household which now contained some five children. But worse was to follow: his father was always notoriously impecunious and, when the opportunity came for the young boy to earn a salary of six or seven shillings in a blacking factory, it was taken at once. So it was that the young Dickens went to work at Warren's Blacking just off the Strand – a decrepit and crumbling warehouse beside the dirty river at Hungerford Stairs, filled with rats, which was later transformed into Fagin's own house in *Oliver Twist*. But the shillings which the boy earned were not enough to save his father from impending bankruptcy, and only a few days after his arrival at Warren's Blacking John Dickens was incarcerated for debt in the Marshalsea Prison beside Borough High Street. Lodgings were found for Charles Dickens close by, while the rest of the family stayed with the father in the gaol itself. Now Dickens's young life took on a new and sombre pattern: he had his breakfast with the family within the very walls of the prison and then walked to work in the crumbling warehouse. In the evening he returned to the prison for his evening meal. How great a change it was from his happy and relatively prosperous childhood at Chatham and, indeed, Dickens was to write in his autobiographical account of these dolorous London experiences that 'my old way home by the Borough made me cry, after my eldest child could speak'.

It is not hard to understand, therefore, why the sudden creation of the workhouse boy, Oliver Twist, should at once appeal to Dickens as a 'capital notion', for all the sorrows of his own childhood could be placed somewhere in the history of this sad child, reduced to beggary and want in London be-

fore being rescued by Mr Brownlow – and then (in perhaps the most painful episode of the novel) lost again and consigned to Fagin and darkness before being finally redeemed. It is as if Dickens could not conceive of this fictional infant without letting loose upon him in exaggerated form all the indignities and injustices which he believed to have been heaped upon his own younger self.

There are closer associations, too. The insidious and avaricious Fagin, one of the author's greatest monsters, took his name from a certain Bob Fagin – a boy of Dickens's age who was one of his working companions in the warehouse. But the real Bob Fagin was in Dickens's own account a kindly and sympathetic child – and that is the point. He was turned into the hideous Fagin precisely because his kindness and fellow-feeling threatened to bring the young Dickens down to the level of what he called 'common men and boys', towards the disorder and the dirt and the darkness which he spent the rest of life trying to escape. It might be remembered here that, throughout his ordeals, young Oliver Twist behaves and sounds like the little gentleman he seems implicitly to have believed himself to be – and indeed, by the end of the novel, in a dénouement which was as difficult for Dickens to arrange as it is for the unwary reader to unravel, he is proved to be a gentleman after all.

It is not at all clear, however, that Dickens realised that he was working through the memories and fantasies of his own childhood; in many ways, despite the great self-control he exerted within his art, he always remained on one level an instinctive and fluent writer – a novelist who had to work himself up into a kind of passion before he could compose effectively, who could no more have stopped himself from creating Fagin than he could have stopped breathing, who in fact at a later date explained how that character plucked at his sleeve and would not let him rest. That is why *Oliver Twist* has the clarity yet lack of definition which is customarily associated with the fairy-tale. It is the strangest amalgam of dream and reality,

fantasy and truth, in part a reworking of his childhood fears and in part a direct transcription of them, that is why it is also so peculiar and yet seductive a combination of the theatrical and the real – precisely because Dickens could scarcely, at this stage in his life, recognise the difference between them. In his waking life there was no more practical and realistic person, and yet he was always intensely theatrical in his dress and manner: he was always busy, active, business-like, and yet he was often helplessly ensnared in his memories of the past and willingly cast himself into a dream-like state of writing when all the buried fantasies and fears of his life return in powerful form. All these things were blended together, to make him what he was and to make *Oliver Twist* so wonderfully heterogeneous an achievement.

And yet it would be wrong to suggest that this novel was a wholly private or self-communing statement. It was in fact caught up in the most pressing issues of the day, and indeed was seen by many of its first readers (especially the newspaper reviewers) as a direct assault upon the provisions of the New Poor Law – specifically in the attempt of that legislation to break up poor families in order to discourage them from claiming relief. Oliver Twist's request, 'Please, Sir . . . I want some more', was in fact a direct satire upon the dietary provisions for the inmates of workhouses, and suggests that Dickens was deliberately attacking what *The Times* called 'BENTHAMITE cant'; that was also why the same newspaper published extracts of the novel alongside its editorial comments. So Charles Dickens was working both as a journalist and as a novelist, just as he had in *The Pickwick Papers*, but perhaps most importantly he was for the first time adopting a role as a social commentator who through his fiction might help to alleviate the nation's ills.

He knew of these ills at first hand, and not just through the medium of his own unhappy childhood. Soon after beginning *Oliver Twist* he had moved to Doughty Street, with his wife and first child; it was an imposing house in a fashionable street

and was very much in keeping with Dickens's own astonishing rise to public prominence, but its relative grandeur did not militate against the fact that it was only three or four minutes' walk away from Field Lane and Saffron Hill – one of the very worst spots in all of London, and the precise area where Dickens had located Fagin's den. Everything was close to him: his own childhood in his imagination, and the doomed children of the urban poor all around him. He saw all the misery and disease like a miasma in the streets so close to his own; then he sat in his study in Doughty Street and fashioned out of them the London scenes of *Oliver Twist*. Yet he was not only working on that novel (or, rather, what at this stage we should still call a series for his magazine). Even as he composed *Oliver Twist*, he was also writing his monthly instalments of *The Pickwick Papers*, and one of the most astonishing features of this astonishing writer is the fact that, so early in his writing career, he should have been able to produce two novels at once – one of them broadly tragic or melodramatic, one of them essentially comic (although of course the moods interpenetrate each other, and cannot really be separated), and both of them among the most famous novels in the English language. And he was still only twenty-five years old.

But then something happened within the walls of his house in Doughty Street, something which was to change everything – change, even, the shape of *Oliver Twist* as Dickens continued upon it. His marriage to Catherine was by all accounts a happy one, and that happiness had been materially increased by the frequent presence of Catherine's younger sister, Mary Hogarth, as a guest in the house. She was seventeen years old at this time, and Dickens seems to have lavished all the affection and playfulness of his nature upon her: she had become something like a second sister, in whose company he could revive the happiness of his earliest childhood. But then, quite suddenly, in a small bedroom in Doughty Street, she died from heart failure. Dickens was devastated by the event, and it can fairly be said that he never fully recovered from the

shock of this loss. Indeed in his almost hysterical reaction to his sister-in-law's death one can sense something of his essential oddness. He put her clothes in a wardrobe and over the years took them out from time to time in order to look at them; he expressed the passionate desire eventually to be buried in her grave (in fact he ended up in Westminster Abbey); he dreamed of her every night for almost a year; and even after that dream image had disappeared, her spirit still haunted his fiction. The words 'Young, Beautiful, and Good', which he inscribed on her tombstone, were the very words he used about Rose Maylie, who was to become the heroine of *Oliver Twist*.

But he could not embark again upon that story, not yet: the shock of Mary Hogarth's death had been so great that, for the first and last time in his life, he postponed his work. No episode of *The Pickwick Papers* or of *Oliver Twist* appeared that month. Instead he went with Catherine to Hampstead, in order to rest in those rural surroundings; and when eventually he returned to his desk, his whole conception of *Oliver Twist* seems to have changed. He recreated Rose Maylie in the image of his dead sister-in-law, of course, but even before that happy resurrection much of the topical and polemical intent of the novel is abandoned and Dickens introduces a slower, more melancholy note which comes to pervade most of its subsequent pages. In fact it can be said that Dickens now introduces something of English Romantic poetry – Wordsworthian, in particular – into his fiction, and it has often been claimed that it is precisely this new presence which marks the true distinction of *Oliver Twist*. Dickens brings into his novel ideas of innate beauty, of childhood innocence, of some previous state of blessedness from which we come and to which we may eventually return. It is in these passages that his prose seems instinctively to move with poetic cadence and diction. It is as if the death of Mary Hogarth had broken him open, and the real music of his being had been released – and how powerful it becomes when it is aligned both with his helpless

memories of his own childhood and with the greatest extant tradition in English poetry.

These elements constitute the power of *Oliver Twist* but, by themselves, they do not account for its entire appeal – there is also the hysterical humour of Mr Bumble, the high spirits of the Artful Dodger, the horror of Fagin, and the brutality of Sikes. That is what Dickens meant when, in one chapter, he described the mingling of 'the tragic and the comic scenes' as resembling layers in 'streaky well-cured bacon'.

He wrote these words when he was working very rapidly indeed – it was in October of 1837, some six months after the death of Mary Hogarth; by then he seems to have recovered his verve, and the fact that he had just finished *The Pickwick Papers* seems to have added extra energy to his quill-pen. It was in this period, too, that he decided to alter the shape of *Oliver Twist*. He transformed what had been essentially a monthly series into a proper novel with a circular and, some would say, circuitous plot: it may well be that the new poetry of the narrative, as well as the care he was taking over the portraits of Rose Maylie and of the prostitute, Nancy, convinced him that it was worth reformulating the story in more serious terms. Certainly he decided that it would no longer be simply a parish boy's 'progress' but would instead be a more complex narrative which could hold together all the fears and fantasies and desires which he had been elaborating. In fact he did not finish the book until late in 1838 (characteristically by then he had started working on his next novel, *Nicholas Nickleby*), and wrote its last words only after exhausting himself over the extraordinary scenes in which Nancy is clubbed to death by Sikes. He pretended to be out of town in order to work in a continuous fashion upon these closing chapters, and he informed Richard Bentley that '. . . I am doing it with greater care, and I think with greater power than I have been able to bring to bear on anything yet . . .' Nancy is killed; Sikes flees; Fagin spends his last hours in the condemned cell.

Dickens wrote the final six chapters in three weeks and, at

the close, he did not want to leave behind any of the characters whom he had created and who had so entranced him. 'I would fain,' he wrote, 'linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long moved . . .' In a sense he did linger with them – towards the end of his life he recreated in dramatic form the murder of Nancy by Sikes, enacting both parts himself, and many people believed that it was the effort of dramatising that murder which in fact killed him. Perhaps it could be said that *Oliver Twist*, the novel of its creator's first youthful and enthusiastic creativity, eventually caused his death. Yet this was far off, in a future more mysterious and extraordinary than anything which Dickens could have imagined for himself. At this stage he was aware only of the powers he harboured within himself, and of the direction in which he ought to travel. '. . . This marvellous tale . . .' he said of *Oliver Twist* after he had completed it. For the first time he put his own name on the title page (*The Pickwick Papers* had been simply 'edited' by 'Boz') and in later years he was to revise it more often than any of his other works. He realised that the orphan boy's adventures in the world elicited all that was most powerful in his nature and his writing – his buried memories of his own childhood, his poetry, his satirical and savage humour. These are still the qualities which are to be found within it, and which ensure its permanence.