Textual Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rtpr20

Oliver Twist: The narrator's tale
Karín Lesnik-Oberstein

Available online: 05 Nov 2010

To cite this article: Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (2001): Oliver Twist: The narrator's tale, Textual Practice, 15:1, 87-100

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502360010013875

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher
shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
Critic Steven Bernstein argues of *Oliver Twist* that ‘narrative is of even greater concern when it is seen as the subject of the entire novel’.¹ To Bernstein, a ‘consistent orientation around narratives and narrative processes’² is especially linked to the aspect of mystery in *Oliver Twist*: the question of Oliver’s parentage and heritage can be seen, as D.A. Millar writes, as ‘an effort “to articulate an original ‘story’ over the heterogeneous and lacunary data provided in the ‘plot’ . . . [which] will entitle [Oliver] to . . . a full integration into middle-class respectability”’.³

Millar’s link between narration and class is one made by several critics of *Oliver Twist*: Jonathan Grossman, for instance, argues of the forcefully present third-person omniscient narrator that ‘when Oliver’s perspective comes into alignment with the narrator, the narrator removes to a perspective more critical of the middle class’, and that ‘Dickens might be using the narrator to draw his middle-class readers away from their own perspective and their own happy ending, to a more self-critical perspective and a more ambivalent ending’.⁴ In these types of argument the third-person omniscient narrator is defined as an instrument in and for the novel: he is a tool for conveying ideological positions⁵ and for recounting Oliver’s tale as a discovery of status and inheritance, whether seen as resulting in an unequivocally happy ending or, as we saw Grossman arguing, ‘in a more ambivalent ending . . . though the novel’s punishment of the underworld might be read simply as the successful completion of a middle-class victory, the narrator’s shifted perspective helps elucidate why that punishment hardly seems a victorious celebration or a happy ending’.⁶

In this article I would like to argue, however, that this third-person omniscient narrator is not so much an instrument in and for the novel as that the novel is a tool or instrument for him: that he in fact creates the narrative to tell his own tale, the tale of how he exists as narrator, what it means to be a ‘narrator’. Even when critics do allocate a major role to the topic of narration and narrative within *Oliver Twist*, as with the critics mentioned,
the third-person narrator retains his position intact as the teller of Oliver’s story and as the commentator on the events in the plot of Oliver’s life. In other words, he is allocated a double status in being, on the one hand, of primary importance as the necessary conduit of, and commentator on, the tale, but, on the other hand, of secondary importance to Oliver himself who remains seen as the focus and heart of *Oliver Twist*: the character on which the narrator and narrative centre. This doubleness is embedded in the language itself: ‘narration’ is the telling of something, that ‘something’ constituting the narrated as the ‘subject’ – in both senses of this word: as the ‘topic’ and as a ‘self’ – of, and in, the novel. But one of the most noticeable aspects of *Oliver Twist*, as Anny Sadrin also points out, is in fact the frequent absence of Oliver – whether asleep, in a faint, ill, locked-up or kidnapped – in contrast to the strong and constant presence of the narrator. Now of course third-person omniscient narrators of novels are omnipresent as they are omniscient: they have to be present because and as they convey the narrative. I will argue here, however, that the absences of Oliver and the specific kinds of presence of this narrator may alert us to problems with viewing Oliver as the subject – in the literal and figurative senses – of the novel at all, and in questioning the subjecthood of Oliver and his story we question too the status and role of the narrator as ‘narrator’.  

Why, then, is Oliver Twist so often absent from *Oliver Twist*, and how? How does this relate to the narrator and narration? The first thing to note is that this is above all a problem of language: as Anny Sadrin also notes, Oliver is curiously silent within his own story. In this tale of narrators and narration Oliver narrates perhaps least of everybody. He does not ‘tell’ his own story, even when he is present to do so. He hardly ‘speaks’ at all, at least rarely through verbal language. For instance, when Mr Brownlow asks Oliver: ‘Let me hear your story; where you came from; who brought you up; and how you ... and carried to the workhouse by Mr. Bumble, a peculiarly impatient little double-knock was heard at the street-door.

This knock heralds the arrival of Mr Grimwig, and the telling of Oliver’s story is deferred. Oliver’s story, then, is mainly told by others, or we might say, as is suggested by Bernstein and Millar’s analyses, that various stories about Oliver are told by others. The narrator, on the other hand, is verbal language: fluent, confident, and playful. He puns, parodies, satirizes, criticizes and digresses self-confessedly, but can also – as with all omniscient narrators – not be described as being ‘outside’ his own text of himself: he is not seen
or ‘told’ by any other text, and is therefore constituted as himself by himself in the novel (which is what I mean to suggest by writing that the narrator is language).

If the problem is one of language, why does Oliver not speak? Or why, at least, is he constituted in the text as largely speechless (although not necessarily without other forms of expression, as we will see)? The answer obviously has to do with Oliver’s being a child in the text. The issue of childhood raises many critical problems which must first be addressed in their own right, for they have a direct bearing on the question of narration and language in *Oliver Twist*, as well as being at the core of issues of language, identity and meaning in many other texts. Children in texts are still often regarded as portrayals of real children which should be gauged by critics for their accuracy, often described in terms of some (usually unspecified) ‘psychology’ or ‘biology’. In other words, the critic will put forward a view of what children are ‘like’, and then judge whether accuracy has been attained in the novel. If this is judged not to be the case, the child in the text is seen to be either ‘idealized’ or ‘sentimentalized’ or as simply ‘unrealistic’ in some other way. A good example here is John Carey’s discussion of ‘Dickens’ children’ in his book *The Violent Effigy*. Carey remarks that

We think of Dickens as a manufacturer of model children, pious little monsters, moribund and adult. In this context the Rochester scene [from Dickens’ childhood] is refreshing. . . . [It] reminds us how unlike human beings children are. . . . The extreme tenderness of a child’s skin, plus the fact that he is always being handled by gigantic anthropoids, makes him discriminate between people by touch as much as by sight. . . . The child’s sense of smell is also inordinately sensitive, and having his nose two or three times nearer the ground than an adult he takes in the smells of floor coverings, plants and furniture much more readily.  

We can see, however, that this way of working with ‘childhood’ raises questions around fictionality (are children the ‘truth’ in fiction?) and definitions of identity (is ‘childhood’ simply psychologically or biologically determined? According to which ‘biology’ or ‘psychology’?). Instead I want to use here the approach which sees ‘childhood’ and the ‘child’ as cultural and historical *constructions*, subject to changing and varying definitions and uses. If we employ this idea we are free to ask in what ways Oliver is constructed as ‘child’ in the text, as well as the ways in which the other ‘children’ (Dick, Charley, The Artful Dodger) are made to function.

The narrator of *Oliver Twist* informs us throughout the novel of the factors which determine Oliver’s role and status as ‘child’, and specifically as ‘good’ child. As I have already indicated, the central issue is bound up with
the narrator describing language as a problem: directly at the start of the novel, for instance, the narrator tells us that if Oliver had not lived, ‘it is somewhat more than probable that these memoirs would never have appeared; or, if they had, that being comprised within a couple of pages, they would have possessed the inestimable merit of being the most concise and faithful specimen of biography, extant in the literature of any age or country.’ The comment here is ironic and plays off the already-present longer novel, but it none the less also links with ongoing disparaging comments on prolixity and verbosity throughout the novel. In discussing the escape of Charley and the Dodger while Oliver is pursued, for instance, the narrator satirically attributes to them the status of philosophers, of whom he then writes that ‘I do not mean to assert that it is usually the practice of renowned and learned sages, to shorten the road to any great conclusion (their course indeed being rather to lengthen the distance, by various circumlocutions and discursive staggerings, like unto those in which drunken men under the pressure of a too mighty flow of ideas, are prone to indulge).’ This passage itself is preceded and followed by further animadversions on these ‘philosophers’ and the joke is further, of course, that it itself is a ‘circumlocution and discursive staggering’ in the middle of the narrative of Charley and The Artful Dodger’s escape from the pursuit. However, aside from being a joke, it also serves as an overt example of the narrator being implicated in the very practices he condemns: just as his narration is the lengthy ‘biography’ he pretends to abhor, so he creates what he himself defines and then condemns as digressions or ‘circumlocution’.

‘Circumlocution’, then, is one aspect of the narrator’s problematic view of language in *Oliver Twist*. Much of the humour throughout the novel turns on people saying what they do not mean, or meaning what they do not say. Besides the philosophers, almost every other character is also somehow involved in this linguistic hypocrisy, from Mrs Mann’s ‘well-affected ecstasies of joy’ at the sight of Mr Bumble, to Mr Bumble’s own ‘oratorical powers’ and pompous self-satisfaction; from Mrs Corney’s simperings to, of course, Fagin’s ‘blending truth and fiction together, as best served his purpose; and bringing both to bear, with so much art’.

Most involved with this strategy again, however, is the narrator himself: saying what is not meant and meaning what is not said are the core manoeuvres of irony and sarcasm, and therefore also play a large part in the structuring of parodic and satiric sections of the novel. Consider, for instance, the passage where the narrator presents the placement of baby Oliver at a ‘farm’:

the parish authorities magnanimously and humanely resolved, that Oliver should be ‘farmed,’ or, in other words, that he should be despatched to a branch-workhouse some three miles off, where twenty
or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor-laws, rolled about the floor all day, without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing, under the parental superintendence of an elderly female, who received the culprits at and for the consideration of sevenpence-halfpenny per small head per week. Sevenpence-halfpenny’s worth per week is a good round diet for a child; a great deal may be got for sevenpence-halfpenny, quite enough to overload its stomach, and make it uncomfortable.20

The narrator here adopts the register of pompous hypocrisy that he has allocated earlier to the parish officials, interwoven with emphases and repetitions, which produce the satire and sarcasm. The slipping in of a non-satiric register of pathos – ‘per small head per week’ – further protects the narrator from being attributed with the views that he is presenting through the adoption of the officials’ language.

Nevertheless, the narrator’s play with these strategies throughout Oliver Twist reveals that he is the producer and user of all the languages that are present. This necessitates his building in of protective moves – such as the use of the register of pathos described above – to attempt to preserve his own moral position within those carried in the languages of hypocrisy. However, protective moves cannot erase the revelation of the narrator’s knowledge and command of all the languages used in the novel. In describing a discussion between Bill Sikes and Fagin, for instance, the narrator concludes: ‘He then, in cant terms, with which his whole conversation was plentifully besprinkled, but which would be quite unintelligible if they were recorded here, demanded a glass of liquor.’21 The narrator here suggests that he can both identify and understand the ‘cant terms’, as in other sections where he ‘translates’ language for the implied readers. The narrator’s setting up of the implied reader as needing to be protected from a language defined as contaminated and contaminating while he himself already possesses this knowledge serves a dual function: it defines the language of gentility as inadequate; gentility ‘blankets’ evil through euphemism or hypocrisy, or it is ‘blind’ to evil; and yet the narrator’s parody upon the incomprehension of gentility is itself used as a tool to define what might be called a ‘darkness beyond’: evil, chaos, the incomprehensible. Either way the narrator’s knowledge and control is confirmed: while claiming the moral higher ground he is also always already contaminated and contaminating. This is clear also in his descriptions of ‘the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants.’; but he knows, and after uniting his vision and that of the implied readers’ in that of ‘the visitor’ who ‘has to penetrate through a maze of close, narrow, and muddy streets’, so do the readers, who have to ‘penetrate’ the descriptive passage which uses an accretion of details to
function as ‘every imaginable sign of desolation and neglect’. The problem of language seen as an infection of knowledge, and as therefore in turn infectious – the view that the narrator himself has promulgated – cannot be escaped by him.

The narrator’s involvement in enacting the very linguistic practices he claims a suspicion of produces even further paradoxes through him and for him: the ‘philosophers’ described in *Oliver Twist*, for instance, are not just prolix, they are defined throughout the novel as examples of rational self-justifiers, as when the narrator wishes that

some well-fed philosopher, whose meat and drink turn to gall within him; whose blood is ice, whose heart is iron; could have seen Oliver Twist clutching at the dainty viands that the dog had neglected. I wish he could have witnessed the horrible avidity with which Oliver tore the bits asunder with all the ferocity of famine. There is only one thing I should like better; and that would be to see the Philosopher making the same sort of meal himself, with the same relish.

Throughout *Oliver Twist*, the narrator sets up and maintains this division between feeling or experience and rationalized self-justification. This division is then linked to verbal language: the rationalizing self-justifiers make use of language as a tool for hypocrisy and as a distancing of themselves from experience and suffering, while feeling and experience are speechless authenticity. The narrator is caught right in the middle of this self-created division: he has to claim a knowledge of feeling and experience as being authenticity beyond language, but since – as we have seen – he is in every respect every language of the novel, he is as much one of his ‘philosophers’ as any of the other self-rationalizers in the text. We might formulate this in another way to say that the narrator demonstrates a paradox of liberal humanism: the recounting of a suffering portrayed as unable to speak for itself – speaking on behalf of the speechless – carries with it the danger of being or becoming itself a lie, unable to know if it is in fact speaking the speechless others’ ‘truth’. Taking a further step we may say that in such a situation speech is by definition a lie with regard to speechlessness: it belies the very truth that it has itself allocated to ‘speechlessness’.

If verbal language is therefore, to the narrator, inherently suspicious – contaminated and contaminating – we can now see that Oliver’s speechlessness is an essential attribute, or constitutive component, of his goodness. He is the ‘good’ child because both goodness and childhood are defined in the text as silent. Oliver cannot really speak directly in the text because speech would, by the narrator’s definitions, implicate him in lying. This holds true too for the other ‘good’ characters in the text: if they are ‘speakers’ then the narrator – as with himself – attempts to build in measures to make their

92
speech as free as possible from danger. A key move in this is to link authenticity with impetuosity: Mr Brownlow and Mr Losberne, for instance, are both described as of ‘corresponding violence ... of an irascible temperament ... hotbrained’, and of Mr Losberne, the narrator says,

the fact was that the excellent doctor has never acted upon anything but impulse all through his life, and it was no bad compliment to the nature of the impulses which governed him, that so far from being involved in any peculiar troubles or misfortunes, he had the warmest respect and esteem of all who knew him.

Impetuosity here is the attempt to minimize the suspicion of the intent, ‘feigning’ or lying associated with verbal language. With regard to Oliver himself, one of his few but most famous pieces of direct speech is, in fact, also produced under ‘protective’ circumstances: ‘Please, sir, I want some more’ is not a spontaneous expression of need or desire on the part of Oliver, of course. He is elected by fate – the casting of lots – to speak on behalf of all the workhouse children, and he only speaks after the prompting of his neighbours and while ‘desperate with hunger, and reckless with misery ... [and] somewhat alarmed at his own temerity’.

When Oliver speaks at any other time his speech is, with few exceptions, brief and conventional: a language of piety and sentimentality recognizable from evangelical religious tracts and evangelical (children’s) novels. As Sara Thornton notes for related examples:

the language used by Dickens’s children in [The Old Curiosity Shop, Dombey and Son and David Copperfield] reveals a sparing and direct quality in their remarks, a frugal use of words which suggests the expression of universal truths. The forms of the adage and the aphorism and even the more ingenuous haiku are found in the speech of Nell and Paul.

This is clear in Oliver’s dialogue with another good child, Dick, where they both ‘speak’ in this way:

‘You mustn’t say you saw me, Dick,’ said Oliver. ‘I am running away. They beat and ill-use me, Dick; and I am going to seek my fortune, some long way off. I don’t know where. How pale you are!’

‘I heard the doctor tell them I was dying,’ replied the child with a faint smile. ‘I am very glad to see you, dear; but don’t stop, don’t stop!’

‘Yes, yes, I will, to say good-b’ye to you,’ replied Oliver. ‘I shall see you again, Dick. I know I shall! You will be well and happy!’

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

It is no coincidence that the narrator consistently labels Dick ‘the child’ here: he is indeed the essential ‘good child’. He dies too, which protects him in the ultimate sense from ever being corrupted – as is so often the case with saintly children in evangelical texts.

The definition of the ‘child’ through (near) speechlessness also accounts for the different roles played by the already corrupted ‘bad’ children – who do speak – such as The Artful Dodger and Charley Bates: they are indeed not so much ‘bad’ children as not ‘children’ at all by the definitions of the novel, a point that Sara Thornton also argues in relation to Thackeray’s Becky Sharp:

Becky Sharp in Vanity Fair reveals herself to be a master of languages, mother and foreign, and has a panoply of registers and styles at her disposal which she uses as arms in her battle with the world. . . . Sexual precocity in characters goes with linguistic ability in the texts of both Thackeray and Dickens. . . . In the Dickensian text, silence and asexuality and innocence are maintained or purchased at the price of the death of the child.

In this context it is interesting to note that John Carey does not refer to Charley or The Artful Dodger in his discussion of children in Dickens’ work, even though obedience to his own critical stance on ‘childhood’ as effectively a ‘biologically’ different species (‘unlike human beings’) would require them to be included in this category. These points make clear again, theoretically speaking, that ‘childhood’ cannot be retrieved from texts as ‘real’, a consistent, ahistorical, determinate ‘psychological’ or ‘biological’ identity – an inevitable attribute of a certain chronological age – but that it consists instead of variable ideological attributions of states of consciousness and morality.

If Oliver does not speak much, then, he does express in another way, and this is not through verbal language but body language: tears, blushing, turning pale, fainting, illness, facial expressions. I deliberately do not write that Oliver expresses himself in this way, for removal of will and intent – even of selfhood therefore – in this expressiveness is of the essence. In this sense Oliver is deliberately not given ‘subjecthood’, but instead is an ‘object’, an object for others’ vision and interpretation (and desire, as it is now almost a critical commonplace to observe). Expression or speaking through the body is set up to remove the possibility of lying through being unwilled, unintended, spontaneous (this is also what ‘impetuosity’ is supposed to
guarantee, as mentioned earlier), and through being observed and attributed with meaning by the viewer/voyeur. Of Mr Giles’ crying, for instance, the narrator claims ‘that the honest fellow had not been feigning emotion, was abundantly demonstrated by the very red eyes with which he regarded the young gentleman’.\textsuperscript{31} The primary viewers/voyeurs are the narrator or other characters in the novel who describe the body expression to the readers: the readers are viewers/voyeurs at one remove. We are familiar with this argument about the role of the ‘speaking body’ in the analysis of gender too, and indeed in \textit{Oliver Twist} Rose Maylie also speaks primarily through her body.

The speaking body, allocated authenticity and spontaneity – speaking the more truthfully the more unwilled its expression is – is in this way attributed with a greater power than speech within the novel. As Sara Thornton writes of another instance of this in \textit{Dombey and Son}: ‘The moral comment supplied by “innocent” characters on Dombey’s evil is not as powerful as Paul’s speechless gaze.’\textsuperscript{32} We can also obviously see this in Mr Sowerberry’s idea of Oliver as an ‘undertaker’s mute’:

‘It’s only about young Twist, my dear,’ said Mr. Sowerberry. ‘A very good-looking boy, that, my dear.’

‘He needs be, for he eats enough,’ observed the lady.

‘There’s an expression of melancholy in his face, my dear,’ resumed Mr. Sowerberry, ‘which is very interesting. He would make a delightful mute, my love.’ . . .

‘I don’t mean a regular mute to attend grown-up people, my dear, but only for children’s practice. It would be very new to have a mute in proportion, my dear. You may depend upon it, it would have a superb effect.’ . . . many were the mournful processions which little Oliver headed, in a hatband reaching down to his knees, to the indescribable admiration and emotion of all the mothers in the town.\textsuperscript{33}

Famously too Oliver for once defies Fagin – again unintentionally:

‘Is Oliver a-bed? I want to speak to him,’ was [Fagin’s] first remark as they descended the stairs.

‘Hours ago,’ replied the Dodger, throwing open a door. ‘Here he is!’

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; when a young and gentle spirit has, but an instant, fled to Heaven, and the gross air of the world has not had time to breathe upon the changing dust it hallowed.

‘Not now,’ said the Jew, turning softly away. ‘To-morrow. To-
morrow.’\textsuperscript{34}
Oliver’s power to express without speaking, then, is set up as a paradox: on the one hand this type of expression relies on an elimination of subjecthood, leaving him open to the interpretations of the viewers, but on the other hand the very power given to this form of expression controls the viewers, and preserves Oliver’s identity – and true self – above all.\textsuperscript{35} This is clear from the way his likeness to the portrait at Mr Brownlow’s house is the first indication of his parentage.

The paradox of the body’s expressions being ‘truth’, while at the same time being the object of others’ vision and depending on their interpretation, is maintained too in the case of Nancy. In life Nancy’s speech is initially as problematic as that of the other characters, but her move towards redemption culminates after her death, when her body too begins to ‘speak’ more powerfully than words, and most of all to Bet – who goes mad at the sight of the dead Nancy – and to Bill Sykes’s vision: “‘The eyes again!” he cried in an unearthly screech.’\textsuperscript{36} Redemption such as Nancy’s, however, is not absolutely necessary to being able to speak through the body, as ‘bad’ characters in \textit{Oliver Twist} also go beyond language into bodily expression when their evil betrays itself most authentically:

‘[Fagin] looked fixedly at [Sikes], with his lips quivering so violently, and his face so altered by the emotions which had mastered him, that the housebreaker involuntarily drew back his chair, and surveyed him with a look of real affright.

‘Wot now?’ cried Sikes. ‘Wot do you look at a man so for?’

Fagin raised his right hand, and shook his trembling fore-finger in the air; but his passion was so great, that the power of speech was for the moment gone.\textsuperscript{37}

In the end, therefore, the most authentic good and the most authentic evil are both beyond speech within \textit{Oliver Twist} – they can only be gestured, or gestured towards.

The novel, however, in this structuring of authenticity and language, has to deal, finally, with yet another, even greater difficulty for itself: in the linking of authenticity and, primarily, goodness and the child (or woman) with silence, the narrator and narrative – constituted as speech – are defeated by it. They literally cannot continue in the face of the end of speech:

‘Your tale is of the longest,’ observed Monks, moving restlessly in his chair.

‘It is a true tale of grief and trial, and sorrow, young man,’ returned Mr Brownlow, ‘and such tales usually are; if it were one of unmixed joy and happiness, it would be very brief.’\textsuperscript{38}
In other words, we here find the reason for Oliver’s absences: the narrator has to get rid of him so he can continue with his story. The narrator, himself infected by language and proliferating language as narrative, cannot ‘write’ Oliver and goodness – and therefore, as Mr Brownlow makes clear, ‘joy and happiness’ – into the proliferation. This is abundantly confirmed by the narrator throughout the text by comments such as: ‘Oliver . . . fainted away. A weakness on his part, which affords the narrative an opportunity of relieving the reader from suspense.’ Oliver is dropped and picked up again and again. If plot is a movement of desire, then Oliver is constituted as desire deferred and desire-deferring – the desire for him can by definition never be consummated – but not the movement of desire. Therefore the plot has to go on around, over and despite him.

‘Goodness’ and ‘happiness’ in *Oliver Twist*, then, are defined as static (as Emily Dickinson writes: ‘How odd the Girl’s life looks/Behind this soft eclipse — /I think that Earth feels so /To folks in Heaven — now — /This being comfort — then/That other kind — was pain — /But why compare?/I’m “Wife”! Stop there!’). As with Oliver’s direct ‘speech’, ‘happiness’ in the novel is described in a highly conventional language of sentimental piety:

> The rose and the honeysuckle clung to the cottage walls; the ivy crept round the trunks of the trees; and the garden-flowers perfumed the air with delicious odours. . . . It was a happy time . . . the young lady would sit down to the piano, and play some pleasant air, or sing, in a low and gentle voice, some old song which it pleased her aunt to hear. . . . Oliver would sit by one of the windows, listening to the sweet music, in a perfect rapture. And when Sunday came, how differently the day was spent, from any way in which he had ever spent it yet! and how happily too; like all the other days in that most happy time!

It is notable too that in these passages of pastoral happiness there is no direct speech included at all. *Oliver Twist*, the novel, is in fact ended by the achievement of this happiness defined as the end of language. In other words, the narrator cannot solve this final difficulty, and is finally killed off by the very silence he created. It is in his own ‘death-throes’ that we see him admitting this:

> And now, the hand that traces these words, falters, as it approaches the conclusion of its task; and would weave, for a little longer space, the thread of these adventures.

> I would fain linger yet with a few of those among whom I have so long moved, and share their happiness by endeavouring to depict it . . . [but] these are all matters which need not be told. I have said that they were truly happy.
The narrator does struggle to prolong his existence in the face of the approach of death by listing the scenes and events of ‘happiness’ in Oliver and Rose Maylie’s lives, but in his very writing he reveals his impending defeat through the constant use of the optative ‘would’ (‘I would show/paint/follow her’, etc.).

Oliver Twist, then, is from this perspective neither the main topic of, nor in any unambiguous sense a ‘self’ in, the novel Oliver Twist. Instead, it is the narrator and his narration – how and why they exist – which are in the fullest sense the ‘subject’ of the text. The narrator’s self-referentiality alerts us throughout to the fact that the main story being told is the story of his story-telling. As the narrator reflects:

As I purpose to show in the sequel whether the white-waistcoated gentleman was right or not [about Oliver coming to be hung], I should perhaps mar the interest of this narrative (supposing it to possess any at all), if I ventured to hint just yet, whether the life of Oliver Twist had this violent termination or no.⁴⁴

The narrative must not be marred: Oliver is only the nominal excuse. Ostensibly the ‘hero’ of the novel, Oliver, and all his goodness and eventual happiness, are actually – ironically – the self-created enemies of the narrator and his narrative. We may then, finally, reread the heading of the first chapter – ‘Treats of the place where Oliver Twist was born, and of the circumstances attending his birth’ – as referring more importantly to the ‘birth’ of the novel Oliver Twist than to that of the character Oliver.

Notes

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
5 To many critics, indeed, the narrator seems so helpful in conveying an ideological critique of the middle class or in condemning the state of the society portrayed in the novel that he is still often simply identified as being Dickens himself (and this is true too for criticism of Dickens’ other novels). I will not, however, be using this type of argument or language: the identification of author and authorial intention with narrators creates many theoretical problems and questions, for instance, around the status of fiction.
7 Anny Sadrin, ‘The parish boy’s progress: a pilgrimage to origins’, in her Parentage and Inheritance in the Novels of Charles Dickens, European Studies in

8 Note that although Bernstein writes that ‘narrative . . . is the subject of the entire novel’ he does not include the third-person omniscient narrator and his narrating in his examination.

9 See Terry Eagleton’s article ‘Ideology and literary form: Charles Dickens’, in Steven Connor (ed.), Charles Dickens, Longman Critical Readers series (London: Longman, 1996), pp. 151–8, for an argument from a different, although related perspective on Oliver as ‘negative centre’ (p. 155). Eagleton argues that ‘the child’s very blankness brings into dramatic focus the social forces which dominate him . . . [his] effective absence from his own narrative allows him passively to focus the socially significant; yet his nullity is also determined by the novel’s ideological inability to show him as a social product’ (p. 155).

10 Sadrin, ‘The parish boy in progress’, pp. 35–6. Sadrin, however, concludes that Oliver’s absences and lack of direct speech show that he is ‘a fairy tale hero’. My argument here is concerned with different issues, several of which are also discussed by Sara Thornton in her article ‘The vanity of childhood: constructing, deconstructing, and destroying the child in the novel of the 1840s’, in Karín Lesnik-Oberstein (ed.), Children in Culture: Approaches to Childhood (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 122–50, in relation to Dickens’ The Old Curiosity Shop, Dombey and Son and David Copperfield, contrasting them with Thackeray’s Vanity Fair.

11 ‘Verbal language’ may sound tautologous, but I need to distinguish language through ‘speaking’ from other forms of ‘language’ in Oliver Twist, as will become clear later on, and I will therefore continue to use this expression.


15 Oliver Twist, p. 1.

16 Ibid., p. 103.

17 Ibid., p. 7.

18 Ibid., p. 8.

19 Ibid., p. 403.

20 Ibid., p. 5.

21 Ibid., p. 108.

22 Ibid., p. 468.
It will be clear by now that this removal of danger can never fully succeed. One of the consequences of this is that there are several analyses of *Oliver Twist* which suggest that the ‘good’ middle-class world and the ‘bad’ thieves’ world may not actually be so easy to separate; that in some ways they in fact mirror each other. I do not have the space here to elaborate fully on this aspect of the argument: see, for one example of such a reading, Joseph Sawicki, ‘Oliver (Un)Twisted: narrative strategies in *Oliver Twist*’, *Victorian Newsletter*, 73 (Spring 1988), pp. 23–7.

See Thornton’s discussion of *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Dombey and Son* (‘The vanity of childhood’, pp. 132–4) for a comparable discussion of Nell and Paul sleeping and the narrator/reader as voyeurs.