

*Oliver Twist*

To the Editor:

William T. Lankford's "The Parish Boy's Progress": The Evolving Form of *Oliver Twist* (*PMLA*, 93 [1978], 20–32) does much to elucidate the source of what "modern critics" have termed its "problematic form": the polarization of good and evil that orders early and middle chapters of the novel seems inconsistent with the narrative's later assertion of the thieves' essential humanity, in the presentation of the consciousnesses of Fagin et al. But I am not sure that this is a real problem any more or that Lankford is talking about the true form of *Oliver*.

Lankford frequently refers to a "breakdown" in the original narrative mode of the novel and explains that new narratives of middle and later chapters "undermine" the moral values implicit in the novel's beginning. But in citing Dickens for a failure to achieve harmonious form, Lankford does not consider—or even mention—*Oliver's* original serial publication. Dickens composed his second novel for a medium in which the opportunity to develop new and more complex narrative modes is great, in part simply because the reader has time between numbers to forget the exact nature of earlier narration. And, during twenty-four or more months, the serial reader is surely more receptive to new inflections in the narrative voice than the modern reader (let alone critic), whose expectations of formal unity in fiction are not the same as Dickens' in 1837. The shifts in the nature of Dickens' narrative are not so much "breakdown" or "undermining" as intelligent use of the more than two-year length of the novel's true form.

The fact that novel reading is, after all, a temporal experience, though the words themselves may exist in a spatial framework, is one of the good things recent reader-oriented criticism has recalled for us. It is primarily when we stand back from the novel after reading it, as Lankford's article and perhaps too much modern criticism encourage us to do, and view it only in spatial terms that we are aware of a "problem" in the form of *Oliver*. When, on the other hand, we view the novel as a dynamic event, an "evolution" (Lankford does use the right word, it seems to me) of a structure and a narrative voice capable of presenting a complex vision of the interrelationship of good and evil, then the true form of *Oliver* is discovered. The "incoherence of thought and form" (p. 20) objected to by modern criticism is as much a product of our concern with esthetic consistency as a failure on Dickens' part to sustain a literary experience.

Lankford is on surer ground in complaining that a return in the concluding chapters to the novel's earlier external point of view confuses the reader's sympathy for the thieves, inspired by the narrative's direct presentation of their consciousnesses. But picking on a novel's ending is too easy; any conclusion of a fiction requires a technical trick or two whose neatness belies earlier complexity (even an author's claim that endings are artificial must itself remain artificial). I applaud Lankford's tracing of the evolving structure and narrative mode of *Oliver* but wish he had not suggested that Dickens threw up his authorial hands in confusion at his own creation. In the form of the conclusion, Dickens may have, as Lankford worries, allowed himself to retreat "from the consequences" of his narrative's discoveries; he may have given "in to the repression" (p. 31) of the humanity of evil in order to put some kind of end to a two-year experience. But Lankford's article also shows a development of technique that makes possible the later *Bleak House*, that predicts future attempts to involve the complexities of Dickens' imaginative vision in appropriate temporal as well as spatial forms.

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To the Editor:

William T. Lankford's article on *Oliver Twist* contains a number of acute observations on the relationship between theme and form in the novel. Unfortunately, however, it also contains a major misreading of a crucial episode in the book. "Monks's desire to seduce Oliver into crime," Lankford tells us, "makes the analogous threat to innocence in Harry's proposal to deflower Rose seem almost equally criminal" (p. 22). But Harry Maylie's proposal, as Dickens develops it in Chapter xxxv, is in no way a threat to innocence and has nothing criminal about it: it is a proposal of marriage, not the proposition of a seducer. It is one of those scenes dear to the intensely class-conscious Victorian reading public, in which hero and heroine alike nobly offer to sacrifice themselves—the hero by offering marriage to a young girl of dubious parentage, the heroine by refusing to degrade the hero whom she loves by acceptance of the offer.

The situation is made absolutely clear in the conversation between Harry and his mother, in which he reveals his intention of proposing marriage to Rose (Ch. xxxiv). Mrs. Maylie, in a fruitless attempt to dissuade him, argues: "If an enthusiastic, ardent,