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In nineteenth-century England, incarceration was 'a matter with which few were unacquainted', either through personal experience, public reformist discourse or literary depictions.[1] In the case of Charles Dickens, it was a combination of all three. Philip Collins locates the novelist's sustained fascination with carcerality in a number of factors: the childhood trauma Dickens suffered on account of his father's imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea prison; the topicality of the issue; the literary models the novelist adopted; and the suitability of the subject for his 'melodramatic taste for powerful emotions'.[2] David Paroissien supplements this already extensive list with the influence of the 'formative years' of Dickens's journalistic activity, which 'introduced him to the reformist penal discourse of the 1830s and […] court practices that prevailed in the same decade'.[3] It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the subject of imprisonment features in Dickens's writing with such prominence. One of the earliest prison scenes in his oeuvre occurs in *Oliver Twist; or, The Parish Boy's Progress*, Dickens's second novel, recounting the story of an orphan boy born in the workhouse who has the misfortune of falling in with a gang of criminals led by the fiendish Fagin. Though righteousness eventually triumphs and Fagin's misdeeds are punished – he is brought to court and sentenced to death – the account of his 'last Night alive' in a Newgate cell is remarkable insofar as the choice of narrative perspective aligns the reader sympathetically with a man otherwise branded as an intrinsically evil villain. This intriguing contradiction raises a number of questions. Why this sudden shift? Is it just inconsistency? Can it be explained in relation to the

1 Jan Albert and Frank Lauterbach, 'Introduction', in *Stones of Law, Bricks of Shame: Narrating Imprisonment in the Victorian Age*, ed. by Jan Albert and Frank Lauterbach (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 3-24 (p. 3).
2 Philip Collins, *Dickens and Crime*, Third Edition (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 1994), p. 30.
3 David Paroissien, 'Victims or Vermin?: Contradictions in Dickens's Penal Philosophy', in *Stones of Law*, ed. by Albert and Lauterbach, pp. 25-45 (p. 25).

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larger issues at stake in *Oliver*, or should it rather be read as an expression of the author's personal convictions about the need for prison reform?

According to Monika Fludernik, Dickens's 'obsession with carcerality haunted him as an aspect of his social concerns'; she argues that after *The Pickwick Papers* he moved away from the eighteenth-century model of writing about prisons 'as a site of sentimentality that is meant to provoke the reader's tears', and began exploiting it to 'probe the psychological terrors of the inmate and to analyse the stultifying and demoralizing atmosphere of incarceration'.[4] Following Fludernik's suggestion, the prison scene in *Oliver* could be interpreted as an early manifestation of Dickens's scepticism about the functioning of correctional facilities, expressed notably in his condemnation of solitary confinement in *American Notes*.[5] However, I would argue that with regards to the author's attitude towards the penal system, the chapter ought to be considered in light of an earlier piece, 'A Visit to Newgate', one of the sketches Dickens produced under the pen-name Boz at the beginning of his writing career, in which he describes the notorious prison, its inmates and – crucially for the matter at hand – offers an imaginative insight into the mind of a convict facing the certain prospect of execution. The article serves as an illuminating context for 'The Jew's last Night alive' for several reasons. Firstly, seeing as it predates *Oliver*, it reduces the risk of imposing the denunciatory attitude the author exhibited later in life onto the chapter which was, after all, written by a young man who had not necessarily yet evolved into Dickens the prison reformer; secondly, it bears a striking similarity to the depiction of Fagin's incarceration; finally, it contains elements of penal critique which are also present in *Oliver*, but undermined by the fact that Fagin, unlike the unnamed convict in the article, is depicted as irremediably nefarious. Given this contradiction, which complicates the reading of 'The Jew's last Night alive' as an exemplar of the reformist penal discourse which 'A Visit to Newgate' seems to anticipate, I will locate the chapter in the tradition of moralistic crime literature represented by *The Newgate Calendar*, ostensibly invoked by the author's Preface to the 1841 edition of the novel, to suggest a possible reading of the scene as an illustration of the inhibitory, society-improving rhetoric that nevertheless stands in tension with *Oliver*'s status as a Newgate novel. Thus, this essay will

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4 Monika Fludernik, 'The Eighteenth-Century Legacy', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by David Paroissien (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 65-80 (p. 71).

5 Nancy Aycock Metz, 'Dickens and America', in *A Companion to Charles Dickens*, ed. by Paroissien, pp. 216-27 (p. 224). It is worth noting that immediately after his visit to the Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia in 1841, Dickens 'expressed no reservations' about solitary confinement; he came to disparage it only in retrospect (p. 219, 224).

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propose to see 'The Jew's last Night alive' as ambiguously poised between Dickens's incipient penal criticism and the moralistic legacy of *The Newgate Calendar*.

The chapter in question is related to 'A Visit to Newgate' not just on account of Dickens's emotive treatment of the subject of the convict in his death-cell evidenced by the two texts, but also because both operate on similar principles. According to Collins, 'the two closing pages of the essay, prompted by [the] inspection of the condemned cells, are the most dramatic and emotional in the whole book' of sketches.[6] It is hard to disagree with this appraisal of the affective power of the final section of the article, which invites the reader to place themselves in the position of a man about to be executed and vividly conveys the terror he experiences at the unavoidable prospect of hanging. This strategy is mirrored in the description of Fagin's incarceration. Additionally, the prison scene in *Oliver* reworks a somewhat provocative notion which Dickens submits to his audience in 'A Visit to Newgate', namely that the psychological distress preceding the execution is substantially worse than the execution itself. Reflecting on the condemned pew, where 'the wretched people, who are singled out for death, are placed' on the Sunday before their hanging 'to join in the responses of their own burial service', the author passionately exclaims: 'Think of the hopeless clinging to life to the last and the wild despair, far exceeding in anguish the felon's death itself, by which they have heard the certainty of their speedy transmission to another world […]!'.[7] The idea that death pales in comparison with the harrowing experience of imprisonment is the principle that animates the final part of the sketch, as well as 'The Jew's last Night alive', providing both with considerable emotional impact.

The *Oliver* chapter opens in court, where Fagin, standing in a 'glare of living light', is being minutely scrutinised by what appears to him as 'a firmament all bright with beaming eyes'.[8] This disquieting, oppressive image already suggests the kind of narrative punishment he will be subjected to throughout the chapter, that is, the emotional torment evoked in 'A Visit to Newgate'. The verdict is soon enough pronounced – 'Guilty.' – and the convict is led away to the condemned cell, where he is left alone with the sinking realisation that the end that awaits him is '[t]o be hanged by the neck till he was dead […].' (*Oliver*, pp. 442, 445).

6 Collins, p. 40.
7 Charles Dickens, 'A Visit to Newgate', in *Dickens' Journalism. Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers, 1833-39*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Phoenix, 1996), pp. 199-210 (p. 206). Further references to this edition will be given after quotation in the text.
8 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 441. Further references to this edition will be given after quotation in the text.

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The acute awareness that death is inescapable, indicated by the repetition, transforms the cell into a nightmarish setting, 'strewn' with the bodies of men whose hangings Fagin witnessed or facilitated, and who now come back to haunt him, not as immaterial spectres but rather as fragmented corpses: 'the pinioned arms – the faces that he knew even beneath that hideous veil' (*Oliver*, p. 445). Adding to the terror of the 'dark, dismal, silent night' is Fagin's relative perception of time, which seems to him to be rushing at an unnatural speed: '[t]he day passed off – day, there was no day; it was gone as soon as come – and night came on again' (*Oliver*, p. 445). The knowledge of impending doom, moreover, invests every sound with the echo of mortality:

> [t]he boom of every iron bell came laden with the one deep hollow sound – Death. What availed the noise and bustle of cheerful morning, which penetrated even there, to him? It was another form of knell, with mockery added to the warning. (*Oliver*, p. 445)

The combination of these elements – the haunted cell, the rushing clock, the ominous sounds – augments the sense of trepidation that eventually drives Fagin into a mad frenzy. 'Those dreadful walls of Newgate, which have hidden so much misery and such unspeakable anguish, not only from the eyes, but too often and too long from the thoughts of men, never held so dread a spectacle as that,' the narrator remarks. 'The few who lingered as they passed and wondered what the man was doing who was to be hung to-morrow, would have slept but ill that night, if they could have seen him then.' (*Oliver*, p. 446) This passage seems similar to the judgement pronounced by the narratorial voice on the murder of Nancy:

> Of all bad deeds that under cover of the darkness had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst; - of all the horrors that rose with an ill scent upon the morning air, that was the foulest and most cruel. (*Oliver*, p. 397)

In both cases, the thing in question – Fagin in his cell or Sikes's savage deed – is set against a broader background: of the miseries of Newgate and all other criminal acts which took place that night, and referred to in the superlative, as the worst case in its respective category.

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There is no doubt that the narrator unequivocally condemns Sikes's crime – the use of words such as 'bad', 'ill' or 'foulest' does not leave room for doubt. Similar vocabulary is used for Newgate, figured as a 'dreadful' repository of misery and anguish, and instantiated with such emotional force by Fagin. Given this marked (albeit not necessarily deliberate) parallel between the two statements, 'Fagin's Last Night Alive' seems to be moving towards a denunciation of the penal system.

Such appraisal of the scene is congruous with the fact that, when Fagin's hour finally comes, Dickens omits the description of the hanging, and merely hints at the inevitable with the image of the gallows, unnervingly out of place against the background of the lively crowd who have come to witness the execution: '[e]very thing told of life and animation, but one dark cluster of objects in the very centre of it all – the black stage, the cross-beam, the rope, and all the hideous apparatus of death' (*Oliver*, p. 450). Since the hanging, the anticipated climax of the fear the reader witnesses mounting gradually throughout the chapter, is not described, the court-ordained punishment – death – is narratively obscured by the harrowing experience of confinement; 'the wild despair' of the preceding imprisonment, to recall a phrase from 'A Visit to Newgate', becomes the (narrative) penalty. No longer a villain to be condemned, Fagin becomes a victim to be pitied.

At least initially, this reading appears to be supported by the chapter's affinity with 'A Visit to Newgate', which, contrary to what Collins argues, neither lacks criticism nor is a failed attempt to convey it if that was Dickens's intention.[9] Although the article hardly includes direct critical commentary, the author's scepticism is nonetheless evinced through the same stylistic means which are at work in *Oliver*, namely the cultivation of empathetic identification with the prisoners and the incrimination of the institution through derogatory vocabulary. As Paroissien observes:

> Dickens's invitation to readers to respond subjectively clearly signals his rhetorical purpose. 'A Visit to Newgate' remains a brilliant piece of affective commentary, a classic exercise in sympathy, as readers respond to small, particularized details designed to move their imaginations and bring them into emotional intimacy with the psychological state of a man sentenced to die.[10]

9 Collins, p. 34.
10 Paroissien, p. 29.

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By soliciting the reader's compassion, the article victimises the convict, thus making the institution which subjects him to such mental suffering appear cruel and villainous: '[p]unishment and repentance [...] fade into abstraction' as the focus shifts towards 'the consequences of judicial murder, of a system that puts its victims to death with ritualistic precision'.[11] The same effect is achieved in *Oliver*: the scene is focalised predominantly through Fagin, and this particular choice of narrative perspective 'aligns us sympathetically with [him]', making 'the trial that throws him into such a state feel brutal and inhuman'.[12]

Accordingly, both 'A Visit to Newgate' and 'The Jew's last Night alive' figure the prison as a sight of concealed misery rather than justly administered punishment. In the earlier piece, Newgate is described as 'a gloomy depository of the guilt and misery of London', which ordinary people pass by, blissfully unaware of the pitiable situation of the prisoners 'whose miserable career will shortly terminate in a violent and shameful death' ('A Visit', p. 200). Let us recall a strikingly similar statement in *Oliver*: the 'dreadful walls of Newgate' are described as obscuring misery and 'unspeakable anguish, not only from the eyes, but too often and too long from the thoughts of men'. Both texts, then, associate prison with despair instead of justice, which breeds suspicion about its legitimacy and, by extension, indicates the possibility of a reformist agenda on the author's part.

However, 'The Jew's last Night alive' complicates such an interpretation owing to the fact that prior to this chapter, Dickens is at pains to establish Fagin as irredeemably evil. The novel introduces him as 'a very old shrivelled Jew' with a 'villainous-looking and repulsive face […] obscured by a quantity of matted red hair' (*Oliver*, p. 73).[13] Just as Oliver's countenance betrays his innate goodness (which, ironically, makes him a perfect tool for Fagin's wicked purposes), so the Jew's outward appearance signals his vile nature (*Oliver*, p. 160).[14]

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11 Ibid., p. 29. It is worth noting that in 'A Visit to Newgate' compassion is extended to all inmates, described as 'fellow creature[s], bound and helpless' (p. 200) rather than men who transgressed the law, having thus placed themselves outside the polite society the reader (presumably) functions in, which incriminates the institution even further.
12 Susan Meyer, 'Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's Oliver Twist', in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (2005), pp. 239-252 (p. 246) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25058705> [accessed 27 March 2018].
13 On the subject of Dickens's hotly debated attitude towards Jews, which lies beyond the scope of this essay, see Harry Stone, 'Dickens and the Jews', in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Mar., 1959), pp. 223-53 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3825878> [accessed 28 February 2019]. For a more recent analysis of the symbolic significance of Dickens's anti-Jewish feeling in *Oliver* for the social commentary the novel offers, see Meyer, 'Antisemitism and Social Critique in Dickens's Oliver Twist'.
14 Fagin claims that with Oliver 'properly managed, my dears, I could do what I can't with twenty' other boys whose 'looks convict 'em when they get into trouble'.

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As Lisa Rodensky observes, Dickens tends to maintain congruity between the inner and outer manifestations of his characters, and even if '*Oliver Twist* is more experimental' in this regard, this is still true in Fagin's case.[15] Furthermore, throughout the novel, Fagin is consistently dehumanised through the use of 'metaphors that immediately criminalize [him] in such a way as to remove [him] from empathetic consideration'.[16] Dickens likens him to an eerie phantom, 'a [sic] ugly ghost just rose from the grave', or a beast, a 'loathsome reptile, engendered in the slime and darkness' he moves through, 'crawling forth by night in search of some rich offal for a meal' (*Oliver*, pp. 153-54). The latter analogy produces a particularly disturbing effect, implying that Fagin is not just a creature of the night, but one produced by it, and so utterly deprived of a human dimension. In case these evocative images fail to alert the reader to the man's foul nature, the omniscient narrator also affords us an insight into his consciousness, 'representing [him] as internally and intentionally vile'.[17] After he learns of Nancy's betrayal, Fagin contemplates the precarious situation he finds himself in with 'every evil thought and blackest purpose [...] working at his heart' (*Oliver*, p. 391). This hyperbolic statement implies that both Fagin's rational and emotional faculties – his thoughts and his heart – are committed to evildoing. As Rodensky argues, the access the reader is granted to the workings of Fagin's mind makes it impossible to question whether or not he is a criminal (in terms of character), even if the specific charge that leads him to the gallows is downplayed or altogether absent from the text.[18] Lastly, seeing as the novel is organised chiefly through 'the use of comparison and contrast', in the symbolic scheme of *Oliver* Fagin functions as the counterpart to the eponymous hero.[19] Whereas Oliver incarnates 'the principle of Good surviving through every adverse circumstance', Fagin can be seen as the principle of evil, seeking to instil in the boy's 'soul the poison which he hope[s] would blacken it and change its hue forever'.[20] According to Lauriat Lane Jr., the 'plot relation between' the two 'exactly parallels that traditionally existing between Satan and mankind'.[21] He is not the only

15 Lisa Rodensky, *The Crime in the Mind. Criminal Responsibility and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 38.
16 Paroissien, p. 31.
17 Rodensky, p. 38.
18 Ibid., pp. 38, 57, 48-49.
19 Robert Butterworth, *Dickens, Religion and Society* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 54.
20 Charles Dickens, 'The Author's Introduction to the Third Edition', in *Oliver Twist*, pp. 456-460 (p. 457); *Oliver*, p. 173.
21 Lauriat Lane Jr., 'The Devil in *Oliver Twist*', in *Dickensian*, LII (1956), p. 134.

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one to have remarked on the affinity between Fagin and the Devil. Tracing the parallels between *Oliver* and Daniel Defoe's *History of the Devil*, Mary Hamilton Law argues that in Fagin 'is revealed a character truly satanic' according to Defoe's conception of Satan not as a physical being assuming a visible form, but rather a spirit 'manifest[ing] himself through human agency' – 'working through men' to secure his own nefarious ends.[22] Therefore, considered in relation to the rest of the novel, the sympathy the penultimate chapter generates for Fagin, the very man implicitly and explicitly branded as a bestial villain, produces a contradiction.

This is symptomatic of Dickens's ambivalent attitude towards crime and criminal offenders, which allows for a coexistence of 'passages that depict criminals as beasts prone to acts of violence' alongside 'informed, sympathetic commentary'.[23] However, it also creates a revealing discrepancy between the prison scene in *Oliver* and its counterpart in 'A Visit to Newgate' seeing as the felon in the sketch, unlike Fagin, is given redeeming qualities. Although the article suggests he has been altered by 'vice' and hints at the 'unkindness and cruelty' with which he treated his wife, it also characterises him as repentant. When the woman appears in the 'unsettled' dreams he has the night before the execution, he emphatically

> does NOT strike her now, nor rudely shake her from him. And oh! how glad he is to tell her all he had forgotten in that last hurried interview, and to fall on his knees before her and fervently beseech her pardon for all the unkindness and cruelty that wasted her form and broke her heart! ('A Visit to Newgate', p. 210)

This emotive passage powerfully suggests the convict's wish to repent. The genuflection is a symbolic act through which he willingly surrenders the power he previously held over his wife – power articulated through physical violence – by assuming a position of inferiority. It is also a gesture of respect and reverence, which stands in contrast to the striking and shaking that defines their relationship. Additionally, the use of exclamations, as well as the word 'fervently' convey the intensity of the man's guilt and the urgency of his desire to make amends.

22 Mary Hamilton Law, 'The Indebtedness of Oliver Twist to Defoe's History of the Devil', in *PMLA*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1925), pp. 892-97 (pp. 893-94) < https://www.jstor.org/stable/457529> [accessed 28 February 2019].
23 Paroissien, p. 27.

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While there is no room to doubt the convict's culpability, he cannot be classified among those 'insensible and callous natures' which, as Dickens categorically asserts in the introduction to *Oliver*, 'do become, at last, utterly and irredeemably bad' ('The Author's Introduction', p. 460). Even if one concurs with Rodensky's thesis that Fagin is punished for who he is rather than what he does, the prison scene in *Oliver* does not lend itself to being interpreted as a critique of the penal system in the same way 'A Visit to Newgate' does seeing as the novel, unlike the earlier sketch, does not leave room to doubt Fagin's incorrigible wickedness.[24] Notwithstanding the felon's criminal actions, he is not only capable of love but also has the moral capacity to recognise the error of his ways, which makes his execution seem even more like an arbitrary act of cruelty.[25] Fagin, on the contrary, never betrays any traces of remorse; there is no sign of a better nature buried somewhere in his black heart. In his last moments, his 'mind wander[s] to his old life' as he continues to enact the role of the chief of the criminal gang, and the only coherent thoughts he formulates concern evading punishment (*Oliver*, p. 449). He rejects Oliver's invitation to say a prayer – that is, divine redemption – 'except as a ruse for possible escape'.[26] As Robert L. Patten aptly points out, Fagin 'has lived without mercy' and, accordingly, 'he dies without any expectation or hope of it'.[27] His evildoing has gone as far as to erode even the possibility of receiving God's grace. Therefore, although Dickens's incipient scepticism about the institution of prison may be part of the explanation as to why he employs such an emotionally affective narrative device in 'The Jew's last Night alive', it is hardly an unequivocal one.

Consequently, the other context which ought to be taken into consideration is the tradition of *The Newgate Calendar* the novel explicitly evokes. In chapter twenty, Fagin gives the protagonist a volume containing 'the lives and trials of great criminals' to read; and later on, following the capture of the Artful Dodger, Charley Bates deplores the possibility that the Artful Dodger might not be memorialised on the pages of the publication: 'How will he stand in the Newgate Calendar? P'raps not be there at all. Oh, my eye, my eye, wot a blow it is!'

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24 Rodensky, pp. 37, 49.
25 Incidentally, acknowledging one's mistakes seems to be the first step towards redemption in *Oliver*. During the 'strange interview' between Rose and Nancy, the former says: 'your evident contrition, and sense of shame, all lead me to believe that you might yet be reclaimed' (*Oliver*, p. 386).
26 Rodensky, p. 37.
27 Robert L. Patten, 'Capitalism and Compassion in "Oliver Twist",' in *Studies in the Novel*, Vol.1 No. 2, CHARLES DICKENS (summer 1969), pp. 207-221 (p. 218) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29531329> [accessed 26 February 2019].

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(*Oliver*, pp. 164, 363). Extremely successful in the late eighteenth-century, *Newgate Calendars* 'were lavish collections, often illustrated with fine engravings, featuring the criminal, his or her trial, and his or her execution', which moved away from sensationalism towards a specifically moralistic purpose.[28] This was to be achieved, as the Preface to one such volume explains, by 'pointing out the consequences of guilt to be equally dreadful and inevitable', 'painful and degrading', so that 'the atrocity of vice may be abated and the security of the public promoted'.[29] *The Newgate Calendar* sought to teach by example: by presenting criminal figures whose nefarious deeds were inescapably detected and penalized by the law, it 'demonstrate[d] the efficiency of the penal system, reassuring the reader that crime could and would be contained and deterring the potential criminal with the apparent certainty of punishment'.[30]

'The Author's Introduction' Dickens added to the 1841 edition of *Oliver* suggests that his intentions mirrored those of *The Newgate Calendar*: he asserts that his aim was to depict the criminal figures 'as they really are, for ever [sic] skulking uneasily through the dirtiest paths of life, with the great ghastly gallows closing up their prospects', which, in his eyes, 'would be to attempt a something which was needed, and which would be a service to society' ('The Author's Introduction', p. 457). There are two elements in the author's claim that link *Oliver* to the rhetoric of *The Newgate Calendar*: the haunting image of the gallows which implies the inevitability of punishment, and the idea of literature as social betterment. The Preface ought to be taken with a grain of salt seeing as it was a response to the criticism Dickens received on the grounds of *Oliver*'s alleged iniquity, and so 'is best understood as a piece of literary propaganda in a local critical debate' centring around the questions of morality and realism in literature.[31] However, even bearing in mind that the Preface may not directly correlate with the novelist's intent, the fates the members of Fagin's gang meet in the novel demonstrate that Dickens is far from letting wickedness go unpunished or unreformed. Nancy, following her change of heart, is brutally murdered; Sikes accidentally hangs himself

28 Rosalind Crone, *Violent Victorians. Popular entertainment in nineteenth-century London* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 77.
29 Camden Pelham, *The Chronicles of Crime; or, The New Newgate Calendar* Vol.1 (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), pp. v-vi <https://archive.org/stream/chroniclesofcrim01pelh#page/n11/mode/2up> [accessed 9 April 2018].
30 Heather Worthington, 'From *The Newgate Calendar* to Sherlock Holmes', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 13-27 (p. 14).
31 Juliet John, *Dickens's Villains. Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 125.

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after being pursued by an angry mob; the Dodger is caught and sent abroad; Charley Bates, 'appalled by Sikes's crime', decides that 'an honest life' is better than a criminal career, and 'turn[s] his back upon the scenes of the past, resolved to amend it in some new sphere of action'; even Sikes's canine companion, Bull's-eye, is eventually annihilated (*Oliver*, pp. 396-7, 428, 452). The fact that all of the criminal characters receive some sort of narrative punishment for their actions is in keeping with the moralistic, society-improving aim Dickens belatedly ascribes to *Oliver* in the Preface. In this context, the shift in perspective in 'The Jew's last Night alive' can be explained as a means of discouraging criminal activity. By inviting the reader to imaginatively step into Fagin's shoes as he loses his mind in the condemned cell, the narrative forces them to vicariously experience just how 'painful and degrading' the consequences of misconduct can be. Arguably, the affective rhetorical strategies Dickens deploys to stir the reader's imagination serve this moralistic purpose more effectually than sounding a condemnatory note in the narrator's voice would. Rather than standing in uneasy tension with the rest of the novel, such a reading makes the scene fall neatly into the overall scheme of *Oliver*, in which goodness prevails and evil is punished.

Nevertheless, the fact that Dickens felt compelled to vindicate his novel suggests that even if his objective was to vilify crime, the text nevertheless has the potential to produce slippage. This is evidenced by the fact that both Dickens's early reviewers and contemporary scholars classify *Oliver* as an example of so-called Newgate fiction. This umbrella term is used to denote crime literature 'that drew characters directly from publications of criminal biography such as *The Newgate Calendar*, or introduced fictional characters who could have appeared in such publications' and was the subject of great moral controversy in the 1830s and 1840s owing to 'the sympathy which [it] seemed to elicit from readers for its criminal characters'.[32] Lauren Gillingham points out several features that align *Oliver* with the Newgate school: the favourable portrayal of Nancy; the 'irresistible appeal' of the Artful Dodger; and, notably, the fascination with criminal psychology manifested in the exploration of 'the perceptual and emotional experiences' of evildoers, such as Fagin.[33] Thus, the empathy evoked for the villain in the condemned cell pulls the chapter in opposite directions: towards the staunchly moralistic rhetoric of the *Newgate Calendar* on the one hand, and the potentially corruptive allure of Newgate fiction on the other, and as such it resists being thoroughly

32 Lauren Gillingham, 'The Newgate Novel and the Police Casebook', in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. by Rzepka and Horsley, pp. 93-104 (pp. 93-94).
33 Gillingham, p. 99.

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reconciled with either the assertions made in the Preface or the overriding message of the novel.

I am not suggesting that the two readings I have discussed are mutually exclusive, or that one is more accurate than the other. My aim was to demonstrate that both reformist penal discourse and the legacy of *The Newgate Calendar* are contexts within which 'The Jew's last Night alive' can be productively located, and whereas neither allows for a thoroughly consistent explanation of the chapter's shift in perspective, considering both can lead to a more comprehensive – if inevitably ambiguous – understanding of the issues at stake. Paroissien has proved Dickens to be a master of contradictions on the subject of carcerality: '[t]hat sympathy and concern jostle with horror and condemnation remains perhaps the only final truth about Dickens's penal philosophy'.[34] The same can be said of the prison scene in *Oliver Twist*. Maybe that was the author's intention: after all, he insists that 'an anomaly, an apparent impossibility' only confirms the truth-value of his narrative ('The Author's Introduction', p. 460). Whether this claim bears scrutiny, or whether it rings as a hollow justification for a novel that 'lacks a stable argument',[35] is another matter. In any case, it is precisely the chapter's perplexing inconsistencies that make it such an intriguing read.

34 Paroissien, p. 43.
35 Rodensky, p. 42.

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