

The Absent Jew in Dickens: Narrators in *Oliver Twist*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *A Christmas Carol*

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The Jew is one whom other men consider a Jew: that is the simple truth from which we must start. . . . for it is the anti-Semite who *makes* the Jew.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*

From Fagin in *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) to Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65), Dickens' depiction of Jews has been seen as proceeding from an anti-Semitic stereotype to an apology.¹ However, this understanding of Dickens' Jews elides how Dickens' *narrators* engage the problem of narrating this racial and religious other. This elision has most obviously resulted in an institutionalized disregard for Dickens' final 1867 revision of *Oliver Twist*, in which he only selectively deleted the term "the Jew." Even the recent Norton Critical edition of *Oliver Twist* treats the 1846 edition of the text as authoritative, following the precedent established by the variorum Clarendon edition in 1966. If Riah is often misconstrued as the end point of Dickens' treatment of Jews, it is because Dickens' Jews have been mistakenly judged solely on mimetic grounds. In his novels, Dickens never constructs a Jewish character like his other more mimetic characters, who exist in context, which, in Dickens, means within a home or a community. In his scattered allusions to Jews, like the one waiting for Mr. Jaggers in chapter 20 of *Great Expectations*, the Jew is invariably in a public place.

In his extended depictions, Dickens explores Jewish identity not by attempting to depict Jewish life as George Eliot does in *Daniel Deronda*, but rather by constructing and deconstructing the problem of narrating (representing) a Jew. He repeatedly poses what Michael Ragussis calls "a question of

the *representation* of the Jew and thereby recognizes the immense power of representation in shaping the English response to Jews."² Dickens' exploration of Jewish identity eventually comes to center not on his Jewish characters, but on his middle-class Christian characters and, finally, on his narrators' interaction with the represented Jew, on the narrating itself.

I

In *Oliver Twist*, the narrator introduces Fagin as "a very old shrivelled Jew, whose villainous-looking and repulsive face was obscured by a quantity of matted red hair."³ Beyond physically characterizing Fagin as a villain, this introduction labels Fagin a "Jew" and then conjures up the evil stage Jew through the metonymic cue "red-hair," effectively directing the reader to a stereotype. Though Fagin is finally too complicated a character to be equated with the simplified stage Jew, the anti-Semitic sentiment persists with the narrator's incessant repetition of the epithet "the Jew" for the demonic Fagin. "Fagin, I fear, admits only of one interpretation," wrote Eliza Davis, an Anglo-Jew, to Dickens.⁴ She left it to the literary critics to consider the nuances of this interpretation, which has generally meant pondering questions such as how Fagin relates to the possibility that Dickens himself might be anti-Semitic or how Fagin fits the Jewish stereotype or breaks with it. It almost seems tautological to say that the interpretations of Fagin as Jew invariably focus on Fagin. Yet, this critical assumption that Fagin should be the subject under inspection elides the differentiated dynamics of anti-Semitism within the novel, as presented by the rest of the characters, including the narrator. If Fagin admits only one interpretation, *Oliver Twist* as a whole presents a different textual problem for the interpretation of "the Jew." Beginning with an examination that applies to all the editions, including Dickens' 1867 revision, I will argue that *Oliver Twist* presents a system of anti-Semitism in which what is at stake is the naming of Fagin as "the Jew," rather than any references to what this label might mean.

At that same moment when Fagin is first introduced to the reader as a red-headed Jew, he is also frying sausages over a fire in his den, while several boys smoke and drink at the table. While the devilish toasting fork with which he cooks might reenforce a certain Jewish stereotype, the sausages distance Fagin from kosher Judaism. As it turns out, Dickens separates Judaism as a religion from Fagin's character.⁵ More importantly, the odd, but cozy domesticity of the scene indicates how Fagin, in his "little community" (OT, 293)

is not defined against the (underworld) society in which he lives. In contrast, other fictional Jews, such as Shakespeare's Shylock, Scott's Isaac, or even Dickens' Riah, are sharply defined as Jews by being outsiders to a Christian community. Fagin also never particularly identifies with other Jews. When the Jewish character Barney first appears, Fagin carries on silent communication with him as if they were in league, but, then, in the same scene, Fagin performs similarly covert signalling to Nancy (OT, 94-95). In fact, the lack of connection and association (only physical) between Barney and Fagin underscores Fagin's distance from a Jewish world. For Edgar Rosenberg, the distance of Fagin from a Jewish context dehistoricizes Fagin, making him timelessly terrifying, a "more nearly archetypal Jew-villain."⁶ We might, however, also say that the distance between Fagin and Jewishness makes Fagin less Jewish, and therefore less an archetypal Jewish villain, than a Jewish cypher.

Filling in this cypher, this blank, the narrator employs the term "the Jew" to mean "Fagin." The narrator's perpetual references to Fagin as "the Jew" overwhelmingly outnumber the times Fagin is called by his actual name, so that by dint of repetition, the narrator effectively renames Fagin with this epithet.⁷ Even though throughout the novel the narrator often modifies "the Jew" with denigrating adjectives like "wily" (OT, 120), the narrator circumscribes the Jewish renaming of Fagin to "the Jew," never straying into related tags for Fagin's Hebraism. Most importantly, Dickens restricts the term "the Jew" almost completely to the province of the narrator. The underworld characters call Fagin by his name. When Sikes first appears in the novel after being soaked offstage by a pitcher of beer, he growls out the one and only vocalization of the narrator's standard name for Fagin in the first thirty-five chapters:

I might have know'd, as nobody but an infernal, rich, plundering, thundering, old Jew could afford to throw away any drink but water; and not that, unless he done the River Company every quarter. Wot's it all about, Fagin? (OT, 76)

Sikes uses "the Jew" here as his lead-off oath, rather than as a renaming *per se*. In contrast to the narrator, the term carries no more weight with Sikes, who never uses it again, than his many other curses of Fagin. For Sikes, "the Jew" is one descriptive term among endless derogatory and entertaining variations, not an alias. For the first thirty-five chapters, *Oliver Twist* establishes "the Jew" as a name for Fagin shared particularly between the narrator and the reader, indicative of a privileged, knowledgeable viewpoint (over the

more limited viewpoint of the characters). Through repetition and limited circulation, the narrator's renaming of Fagin as "the Jew" becomes a charged, meaningful act, not because it particularly describes Fagin, but because it connotes an authoritative viewpoint, power.

"The Jew! the Jew!" (OT, 229) a frightened Oliver bawls after Fagin in the beginning of chapter 35. He has just seen Fagin spying in the window of the Maylie's country home. By this point in the novel, Oliver has already been kidnapped by Fagin once and has reason for his terror of "the hideous old man" (OT, 228). Oliver's terrified cry—"The Jew! the Jew!"—hardly surprises the reader; we understand his fear, and we know, through the narrator, who he means. Yet, when Oliver yells after Fagin "The Jew! the Jew!" what has been restricted for thirty-five chapters to the authoritative and omniscient province of the narrator prominently and loudly crosses over into the characters' milieu. Oliver, like the narrator, renames Fagin. Certainly, this slippage between the narrator's and Oliver's discourse reflects the narrator's close alignment with Oliver's perspective. More importantly, however, Oliver's cry reveals that he has knowledge without any apparent source, much like Oliver's knowledge of standard English. Until this point in the text, Oliver has only called Fagin "sir," and none of the other characters have referred to Fagin as Jewish, or "the Jew," in Oliver's presence. Yet, Oliver knows Fagin is Jewish, and he knows to rename Fagin as "the Jew." With his denomination of Fagin as "the Jew," Oliver claims his position in the middle class, with Mr. Brownlow, who also later deploys the term "the Jew" rather than Fagin's name.⁸

Responding to Oliver's shout, Harry Maylie "who had heard Oliver's history from his mother, understood it at once" (OT, 229). This understanding suggests either that Oliver called Fagin a Jew at the moment when he told his story earlier to a middle-class audience (consisting of the Doctor, Rose, and Mrs. Maylie) or that he was taught the epithet (by them) when he told his story. In either case, the renaming traces back to the first re-telling of Oliver's story, to its translation into a middle-class narrative for a middle-class audience. The reader is subtly assured that what Oliver recounts to his audience is no different than what the narrator recounts to the reader; in this story, "the Jew" is a token indicating knowledge of the story. When the servant Mr. Giles, who does not know Oliver's story, responds to Oliver's shout, he "was at a loss to comprehend what this outcry meant" (OT, 229). Though admittedly Giles would not have recognized the cry "Fagin!" either, "Fagin!" is not the cry; Giles' failure hinges on not knowing how the epithet "the Jew" functions in Oliver Twist's story. For the middle-class characters,

"the Jew" becomes a shibboleth, a token, the possession of which indicates what the Doctor calls "possession of the boy's real story" (OT, 199), privileged knowledge, shared with the narrator.

When the middle-class characters evince their knowing solidarity with the narrator by calling Fagin "the Jew" and thereby announce their privileged possession of Oliver's story, the story, however, presents a mystery for both them and the reader. The mystery, appropriately, is that the cypher Fagin, "the Jew" after whom Oliver cries out, disappears completely. Before Oliver's outcry, at the end of chapter 34, Oliver drifts in that hazy state between sleep and waking, where "reality and imagination becomes so strangely blended that it is afterwards almost a matter of impossibility to separate the two" (OT, 228). With Oliver's perspective in this state of confusion, the narrator separates Oliver's dream from reality for the reader. Using the free indirect style, in which a character's private thoughts spill into the discourse of the narrator, the narrator follows Oliver into what is demarcated as a brief nightmare in which Oliver returns to Fagin's den. At this point, the text then presents two utterances from "the Jew" and "the other man" (Monks) that could either form part of Oliver's dream, or, what seems more likely, be "actual" quotations, which Oliver is incorporating into his dream. Indeed, the narrator reports that when Oliver awakes, "there stood the Jew!" (OT, 228). For the moment, the occurrences of the scene seem to be settled from the reader's perspective: Oliver drifts off into a nightmare and awakes to see Monks and Fagin in the window.

Yet, the first half of chapter 35 is taken up with an extensive description of exactly how impossible Oliver's visions could have been.⁹ The evidence accumulates suggesting that Oliver dreamed the entire episode, and the mystery is perfunctorily dismissed by the narrator with the words, "after a few days, the affair began to be forgotten, as most affairs are" (OT, 231). At first, this strange reversal of Oliver's story seems rather pointless. The mystery never returns in the novel, and it is rather feeble to account for the enigmatic disappearance of Monks and Fagin as an attempt to portray their extraordinary powerful criminal capabilities. The episode goes on too long and is pursued too minutely, and no argument can support the idea that the novel actually abruptly crosses into the genre of the fantastic here. All that is left is that the reader is uncertain about the truth of the episode. By creating this uncertainty, this little, unexplained "affair" not only casts doubt upon "the accuracy of what [Oliver] said" (OT, 230), but also upon the trustworthiness of the narrator that shares so deeply in Oliver's perspective. It is not that the narrator suddenly becomes untrustworthy. Rather, the narrator subtly signals that what

seemed accurate before, might now be reinterpreted as part of Oliver's limited and uncertain perspective. The seemingly incongruous second half of chapter 35 bears out the narrator's shift away from Oliver's perspective, leaping abruptly from Oliver's story to a traditional, sentimental love scene between Rose and Harry. As soon as Oliver and the middle-class characters announce their alignment with the omniscient narrator by renaming Fagin "the Jew," the perspective of the narrator changes, broadening the story of *Oliver Twist* from Oliver Twist's story to a perspective that critically encompasses, rather than identifies with, these middle-class characters.

The middle-class characters continue to refer to Fagin as "the Jew," but now their renaming, rather than just straightforwardly aligning them with the omniscient narrator, also signals the use of "the Jew" as a badge of middle-class authority. When Nancy, an underworld character, meets Brownlow, a middle-class character, the naming of Fagin as "the Jew," "Fagin," "that man," and "this Jew," overtly operates to register the speaker's position:

"But if—if—" said the gentleman, "he [Monks] cannot be secured, or, if secured, cannot be acted upon as we wish, you must deliver up the Jew."

"Fagin!" cried the girl, recoiling.

"That man must be delivered up by you," said the gentleman.

"I will not do it! I will never do it!" . . .

"You will not?" said the gentleman, who seemed fully prepared for this answer.

"Never!" . . .

"Then," said the gentleman, quickly, as if this had been the point he had been aiming to attain; . . .

"Then," pursued the gentleman, "this Jew shall not be brought to justice without your consent. . . ." (OT, 313-14)

In 1867, Dickens revises only the final "this Jew" to "this Fagin," tellingly leaving the initial occurrence of "the Jew," so that when Brownlow agrees to Nancy's request, he marks his acquiescence to her by referring to Fagin by name, while keeping the distancing modifier "this." These subtle name changes for Fagin underscore the chilling indications that (in any edition) Brownlow is manipulating Nancy here: he is not only "fully prepared" for her answers, it is even "as if this had been the point he had been aiming to attain." While Nancy acts, or rather speaks, in naive good faith, Brownlow uses rhetorical ploys to achieve his aims, wielding his anti-Semitic labels to master Nancy. Moreover, Brownlow's game is not given a moral justification here, as reflected by the neutral tags of "the gentleman" and "the girl" that mark the narrator's perspective. Though the narrator is hardly celebrating the

underworld in this scene, the narrator no longer engages in the more dualistic moral judgments that characterize the narrator's earlier alignment with Oliver. Instead, the text explicitly represents the renaming of Fagin as "the Jew" as an act that does not carry any particular meaning in reference to Fagin himself, but rather that marks an authoritative, middle-class discourse of dubious trustworthiness.

In contrast to the middle-class characters, the underworld characters might play with an anti-Semitic stereotype, but they are not concerned with denying Fagin entrance to their drawing room. They do not use "the Jew" as a shibboleth. Earlier, when the middle class and underworld meet amicably for the first time, Nancy uses the epithet "the Jew" twice, but she makes it clear, as she does in the interview with Brownlow discussed above, that "the Jew" is not *her* name for Fagin. First, Nancy identifies herself to Rose as "the girl that dragged little Oliver back to old Fagin's, the Jew's" (OT, 271), apparently employing the term "the Jew" to identify Fagin for Rose. Even this occurrence is, however, excised in 1867, leaving Sikes as the only one of Fagin's intimates to refer to him as a Jew. Later in this conversation, Nancy uses the term "the Jew" when she quotes Monks, an occurrence that is appropriately not revised in 1867: " 'In short, Fagin,' he says, 'Jew as you are, you never laid such snares as I'll contrive for my younger brother, Oliver' " (OT, 272). Monks announces that being a "Jew" is irrelevant here. However, his own use of the term "Jew" (like his almost middle-class English) suggests an alignment with the middle-class characters, betraying his middle-class origin, but his mention of Fagin's name in the same breath serves to solidify his bond with the underworld. In a parallel moment later in the novel, Mr. Brownlow reminds Monks of his "own words to [his] accomplice the Jew" (OT, 336, also not revised in 1867). However, in contrast to Nancy, when Brownlow quotes Monks, the reference to "the Jew" is his own, a renaming and a signal—like the quotation of Monks with which he follows it—of his own perfect knowledge of the story and, thus, his own power over Monks. In contrast to the underworld characters, the middle-class characters use the term "the Jew" as an anti-Semitic badge of both their knowledge of the "truth" about Fagin and their own middle-class identity.

Dickens' revision of "the Jew" in 1867 confirms both the middle-class characters' use of "the Jew" as a shibboleth and the narrator's critical distance from their perspective. It is no accident that Dickens begins his revision with the first occurrence of "the Jew" after Oliver first recounts his story to a middle-class audience, consisting of the Doctor, Rose, and Mrs. Maylie. Dickens begins revising "the Jew" as soon as the middle-class characters

share Oliver's story with the narrator and the reader, indicating that from thereon the epithet "the Jew" no longer distinguishes the perspective shared solely between the narrator and the reader. This beginning point shifts the epithet "the Jew" out of the narrator's province at the moment when the middle-class characters take possession of it. All the earlier editions depict only the shift of "the Jew" into the middle-class characters' discourse beginning with Oliver's cry "The Jew! the Jew!" Appropriately, Dickens refrains from revising any occurrences of "the Jew" at this second moment (of Oliver's cry), when the text depicts the token "the Jew" moving into the middle-class character's discourse, completing the exchange. In general, Dickens' revision of the epithet "the Jew" is not readily apparent in the text until Fagin himself first reappears, in chapter 39, after the shifts in the novel's system of anti-Semitism are already completed. Though the frequent excisions of "the Jew" (and insertions of "Fagin") from thereon do serve to humanize Fagin, they do not result from a change in Fagin, who continues his devilish machinations, such as recruiting Noah Claypole and encouraging Sikes to murder.¹⁰ The change in the narrator's terminology is also certainly not characterized by a sudden shift away from the anti-Semitism of calling Fagin "the Jew" as if an abrupt self-conscious enlightenment occurs. The narrator continues to call Fagin "the Jew" occasionally. Instead, Dickens' 1867 revision confirms how, in all the editions, when Oliver's perspective comes into alignment with the narrator, the narrator removes to a perspective more critical of the middle class.

The most telling revision of 1867 occurs in the famous chapter "Fagin's Last Night alive," previously "The Jew's Last Night alive." In this chapter, which humanizes and complicates the doomed Fagin, Dickens excises every occurrence of "the Jew" except one:

"Fagin," said the jailer.

"That's me!" cried the Jew, falling, instantly, into the attitude of listening he had assumed upon his trial. "An old man, my Lord; a very old, old man!"

"Here," said the turnkey, laying his hand upon his breast to keep him down.

"Here's somebody wants to see you, to ask you some questions, I suppose. Fagin, Fagin! Are you a man?"

(OT, 363)

This brief, final, and isolated occurrence of "the Jew" in the novel specifically calls attention to how "the Jew" is not the name of Fagin, not the name the guard calls him and not the name with which Fagin identifies himself. This Jew has, after all, "driven . . . away" and "beat . . . off" the "venerable men of his own persuasion [who] had come to pray beside him" (OT, 361) earlier

in this chapter. Instead, the last occurrence of "the Jew" underscores that the use of "the Jew" throughout the novel revolves around those voices, including the narrator's, that tell Fagin's story, not Fagin, who remains a Jewish cypher. As we have seen, the shift in the novel's system of anti-Semitism centers on and occurs between Oliver and the narrator. Through this shift, the narrator creates a new perspective, replacing the perspective that was previously constructed by the shibboleth "the Jew." Not only does the shift to a new perspective sustain the illusion that somehow the whole story is being specially conveyed to the reader by the narrator, but also the new perspective suggests a position outside and above a perspective aligned with Oliver, one with a critical distance from the middle-class perspective. This shift in narrative perspective suggests 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. After all, the story goes on quite a while after Oliver is rescued, and 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.

II

In *Our Mutual Friend*, Riah, "an old Jewish man,"¹¹ is introduced by the narrator as Fledgeby's secret. The secret, which the reader is let into from the start, is that Fledgeby hides his ownership and control of the Pubsey & Co. counting house behind Riah. By using terms such as a "venerable" and "graceful" to describe Riah, the narrator constructs the initial moral terms of the scenario: mercenary and "mean" (OMF, 328) Fledgeby is exploiting kind and humble Riah, or, more specifically, Riah's obvious Jewishness. By leading the reader into knowledge of Fledgeby's secret, the omniscient narrator allies the reader, implying that the reader, too, is in possession of the truth of this matter. Initially then, Dickens constructs a narrow moral perch from which the reader, aligned with the narrator, must condemn not only the stereotyping of Riah as Jew by Fledgeby's customers, but also the self-conscious exploitation of that stereotype by Fledgeby.¹²

Up until near the end of the third volume, both narrator and narrative contribute to exonerating Riah, opposing a villainous, selfish Fledgeby to a spiritual, altruistic Riah. However, the initial scenario Dickens constructs is

ultimately complicated by Riah's complicity in Fledgeby's scheme. The actual moral complexity of the situation is brought to a climax when a reluctant Riah performs his role as ruthless moneylender in front of his young friend Jenny Wren. Jenny Wren is an appropriate audience because she assumes the simple fairy-tale opposition between evil and good, naming Riah her fairy "godmother" (OMF, 492), which has previously marked the narrator's judgment. In this scene, Fledgeby, once again enjoying his "secret joke" (OMF, 484), pretends to beg for clemency for his "friend" Twemlow while actually instructing Riah through word-cues, glances, and other clues that he "meant him to be racked" (OMF, 636). Though Riah searches "for any sign of leave to be easy with Mr Twemlow" (OMF, 636), Riah "read his master's face, and learnt the book" (OMF, 637). At this point, Riah's clear moral position in the novel clouds as he clashes with the reader's and narrator's united moral condemnation of Fledgeby, and he is instead placed in the ambivalent role of a reluctant participant in Fledgeby's crime. The moral terms that have been employed to describe Riah are exposed as simplistic, and Dickens personifies their shallowness in Jenny Wren. Acting as audience to Riah's performance, she presents the one possible reaction based on the old terms by fleeing the scene with the parting words: "You are not the godmother at all! . . . You are the Wolf in the Forest, the wicked Wolf!" (OMF, 638).

The reader, in firm possession of Fledgeby's secret, knows that Jenny Wren's moral outrage is a misreading of the scene. She mistakenly abandons her understanding that Fledgeby is master of Pubsey and Co. and accepts that Riah is acting on his own (evil) behalf. Her reaction to the scene is a mistake, which is pointed out by the narrator, who indicates the injustice of Jenny's outrage by noting that she equates the sympathetic Riah with her unredeemable, drunkard father. Jenny's misreading of the scene cannot then be accepted by the reader, who has trusted to the narrator. The reader is thus left wavering between condemning Riah for his role as front man and exonerating him because he is exploited by Fledgeby.

In order to pose and resolve the reader's question within the text, Dickens shifts Jenny Wren's position. Jenny Wren discovers that Fledgeby is indeed the master of Pubsey and Co., and thus she comes to occupy the same questioning, uneasy space as the reader. She seeks out Riah, "to ask [him] a question or two, to find out whether you are really godmother or really wolf" (OMF, 794), to affirm of the previous scene that "it did look bad; now didn't it?" (OMF, 795). After disappearing from the text for many pages and months (in both serial and narrative time), Riah finally has the opportunity to explain

his position before effectively disappearing again from the text. Riah replies, in his longest and most important speech by far:

"It looked so bad, Jenny," responded the old man, with gravity, "that I will straightway tell you what an impression it wrought upon me. I was hateful in mine own eyes. I was hateful to myself, in being so hateful to the debtor and to you. But more than that, and worse than that, and to pass out far and broad beyond myself—I reflected that evening, sitting alone in my garden on the housetop, that I was doing dishonor to my ancient faith and race. I reflected—clearly reflected for the first time—that in bending my neck to the yoke I was willing to wear, I bent the unwilling necks of the whole Jewish people. For it is not, in Christian countries, with the Jews as with other peoples. Men say, 'This is a bad Greek, but there are good Greeks. This is a bad Turk, but there are good Turks.' Not so with the Jews. Men find the bad among us easily enough—among what people are the bad not easily found?—but they take the worst of us as samples of the best; they take the lowest of us as presentations of the highest; and they say 'All Jews are alike.' If, doing what I was content to do here, because I was grateful for the past and have small need of money now, I had been a Christian, I could have done it, compromising no one but my individual self. But doing it as a Jew, I could not choose but compromise the Jews of all conditions and all countries. It is a little hard upon us, but it is the truth. I would that all our people remembered it! Though I have little right to say so, seeing that it came home so late to me." . . . "Thus I reflected, I say, sitting that evening in my garden on the housetop. And passing the painful scene of that day in review before me many times, I always saw that the poor gentleman believed the story readily, because I was one of the Jews—that you believed the story readily, my child, because I was one of the Jews—that the story itself first came into the invention of the originator thereof, because I was one of the Jews. This was the result of my having had you three before me, face to face, and seeing the thing visibly presented as upon a theatre. Wherefore I perceived that the obligation was upon me to leave this service." (OMF, 795–96)

For this speech and for his resignation from Pubsey and Co., Riah regains the name "godmother" from Jenny Wren. However, her simplistic resolution of the situation now appears as shallow and childish (she is, after all, a child!) as the response she gives to Riah's speech that her "idea" of Riah's situation "is as large now as a pumpkin" (OMF, 796). In fact, she has little idea of the implications of Riah's speech. For in this speech, Riah not only admits his own imperfect morality, his willingness to compromise "his individual self," but also explains how he has had to give up the possibility of acting as an individual and has had to begin performing for what he sees as Christian-prejudiced eyes, which exist even in the apparently unprejudiced Twemlow and Jenny: "I always saw that the poor gentleman believed the story readily, because I was one of the Jews—that you believed the story readily, my child,

because I was one of the Jews." What Riah discovers is that he must review the scene "as upon a theatre," that he must perform as if in the theater where the image of Shylock and the stage Jew reigns. In other words, he must act in response to a representation. In order to discover this, he has adopted the vision of the Christian onlookers, as suggested by his careful syntax: "I was hateful to myself in being so hateful to the debtor and to you." Moreover, by emphasizing again and again how he has "reflected" on the situation, how he has thought it out carefully, alone on his roof-garden, his symbolic spiritual mountaintop, he suggests the depths of his moral reasoning and considerations in opposition to Jenny Wren's quick moral conclusions, which grow in quick bounds from the size of a "marble" to an "orange" to a "pumpkin" (OMF, 794-96). Riah's speech tacitly suggests that she and society have failed him, that she has not given proper reflection (in both senses of the term) to his situation, but forced him instead to act, not as a complex individual, but as a character in a fairy tale, as a response to a representation, or, as Riah puts it, a "sample" and "presentation." Unlike Pancks in *Little Dorrit*, who, in a similar predicament, rejoins the general community simply by proclaiming in a public square his rejection of the Patriarch's secret rent gouging, Riah cannot simply rejoin the community; he was never part of it.

For Jenny Wren, Riah appears simply to have returned: "welcome back, dear godmother!" (OMF, 795). However, as Riah suggests in his speech, he can return only upon the condition that he appease her moral stance, as is quickly underscored when Jenny unwittingly confirms her own prejudices, interrupting Riah as he says "it is the custom of our people to help—" with the words "Oh! Bother your people! . . . If your people don't know better than to go and help Little Eyes [Fledgeby], it's a pity they ever got out of Egypt" (OMF, 797). Interrupting this "debating" (OMF, 797), a messenger brings a malicious, anti-Semitic notice from Fledgeby that Riah is fired. Dickens writes:

'Well, godmother,' said Miss Wren, as they remained on the steps together, looking at one another. 'And so you're thrown upon the world!'

'It would appear so, Jenny, and somewhat suddenly.'

'Where are you going to seek your fortune?' asked Miss Wren.

The old man smiled, but looked about him with a look of having lost his way in life. . . . (OMF, 797-98)

What is striking about this conversation, in which Jenny Wren echoes the melodramatics of fairy tales, is that Riah has hardly been "suddenly" thrown out, as he says. He has mentioned on just the page or so before that he has

resigned and that his last day is, in fact, the very next day (OMF, 796). Thus, Dickens complicates the assumption that it is simply through being suddenly fired that Riah has come to have "a look of having lost his way in life," for by his own account he has been waiting to leave for months. What, perhaps, is sudden and recent for Riah is the loss of Jenny Wren (and by extension Riah's Christian audience), who has failed to understand and rectify the implications of Riah's lengthy speech and with whom the "debating" is now over. What, perhaps, accounts for Riah's lost look is not the loss of his miserable, petty position from which he has already resigned, but rather his conclusion that he must act "as upon a theatre" in accordance with the audience's expectations. Through Riah, Dickens thereby paradoxically reveals that Jewish identity is, in part, formed through a response to (Christian) representations, such as his own.

When Dickens suggests that Riah is doomed to act as a sample, he has, in a sense, constructed within his novel a microcosm of his own literary predicament as an author in relation to the Jews. For much as Fledgeby effectively and authoritatively narrates Riah's actions, creating a fiction of Riah for his Christian audience, Dickens also constructs Riah for the reader. Caught in the same exploitative mode as Fledgeby, Dickens subverts it by portraying it. Dickens does not make a mimetic attempt to construct a Jew, as George Eliot does in *Daniel Deronda* by "realistically" depicting multiple Jewish personalities and milieus. Instead, he personifies his novelistic and linguistic dilemma in Riah. Dickens' audience seems to suffer for it; the common reaction to Riah as a character is that he is hollow and artificial. However, disdaining Riah's artificialness and judging him as unconvincing (unrealistic) misses the point. Paradoxically, Riah's failure to be convincing can be seen as something of a success in terms of Dickens' attempt not to depict a Jew, but rather to represent the impossibility of doing so. Riah, representing Dickens' Jews, will always be both literally and metaphorically in public spaces; the home of the Jews remains off-stage, a vague place where Lizzie Hexam can find refuge, but the narrator cannot follow.

III

Inasmuch as Fagin is a cypher and Riah is a representation of the impossibility of depicting Jews, Dickens does not construct a realistic Jewish character in his novels. It is not that he never depicts some single perfect Jewish character, as if some kind of absolute, essential Jewish character exists, but

rather that he never constructs a Jewish character like his mimetic characters, who exist in the context of a home or a community. Unless, perhaps, ironically a Jew at home and in the community is suggested by the character Ebenezer Scrooge.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is never referred to as Jewish.¹³ Yet, more than just the overall scenario of a conversion at Christmas time suggests that Scrooge's Jewishness might haunt this text. In *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge*, Paul Davis quite rightly points out how the naming of the characters links Ebenezer and Jacob to the Old Testament, and the Cratchits to the New Testament.¹⁴ The awkward twists in the text are even more suggestive. For example, in the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, the following cryptic exchange takes place after Scrooge rudely rejects his nephew's invitation to Christmas dinner:

"But why?" cried Scrooge's nephew. "Why?"
 "Why did you get married?" said Scrooge.
 "Because I fell in love."
 "Because you fell in love!" growled Scrooge, as if that were the only one thing in the world more ridiculous than a merry Christmas.¹⁵

In this exchange, Scrooge seems to answer his nephew's question with a non sequitur—"Why did you get married?" However, the exchange makes sense if Scrooge is Jewish: a Jewish uncle sees his (Jewish) nephew's celebration of Christmas dinner as a direct result of his marriage to a Christian. Certainly, missing Christmas dinner was a regular event for Scrooge, who never went home for the Christmas holidays as a child. Though the text suggests that his father's heartlessness kept little Scrooge in school, Scrooge's Jewishness would explain not only why he never went home, but also why he tells the Ghost of Christmas Present that he has *never* celebrated Christmas. Moreover, at that most tragic moment, which is also presumably the most guilty moment for Scrooge as a Jew, when Scrooge enters the Cratchit's home with Christmas Future and the death of the Christ-figure Tiny Tim is revealed, Peter Cratchit is (mis)reading from the Bible:

"And He took a child, and set him in the midst of them."
 Where had Scrooge heard those words? He had not dreamed them. The boy must have read them out, as he and the Spirit crossed the threshold. Why did he not go on?
 (CC, 75)

In this interrupted Biblical quotation, Peter substitutes "He" for the King

James's "Jesus," changing the quotation so that it reads as if it were about God setting Jesus "in the midst" of the Jews, placing Scrooge in the position of the Jew who should profit by it. More to the point, the interruption pointed out by the odd question "Why did he not go on?" is completed:

And said, Verily I say unto you Except ye be converted and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 18:3)

The instruction off the page is to "be converted." As Marley advises Scrooge in the beginning, suggestively closing the difference between "regions" and religions: "it [comfort] comes from other regions, Ebenezer Scrooge, and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men" (CC, 20).

The text's suppression of Scrooge's Jewishness would also help to explain why Scrooge's conversion is incomplete. In the end of *A Christmas Carol*, the persistence of Scrooge's dark sense of humor reveals his continued difference, qualifying his supposedly successful conversion. Before his conversion, Scrooge exhibits nervously sarcastic humor, as when he says to Marley's Ghost, "You're particular—for [to] a shade" (CC, 17). This dark sense of humor persists in the end colored only by the fact that if Scrooge is depressive in the beginning, he is manic in the end. His final, frightening, ferocious joke on Bob Cratchit, in which he comes in early to work in order to catch Bob coming in late, reveals just how different he still is from Bob. After "giving Bob such a dig in the waistcoat that he staggered back,"

Bob trembled, and got a little nearer to the ruler. He had a momentary idea of knocking Scrooge down with it; holding him; and calling to the people in the court for help and a strait-waistcoat. (CC, 86)

Bob is clearly not attuned to Scrooge's merry making. Scrooge's jokes are still not meant for the amusement of others, but rather for himself. His jokes, articulating the uneasy space between himself and society, reflect in their nervous releases how Scrooge's isolation from the novel's community is unbridgeable and, perhaps, partly unwritten. Perhaps because the possibility of Scrooge's Jewishness troubles, but never enters, the narrator's discourse, the narrative cannot fully resolve Scrooge's predicament. For while Scrooge's conversion is supposed to make him one with the Cratchits, in the end, like Riah, he cannot join the community, suggesting that there is more to the

narrator's conception of Scrooge's isolation than can be rectified by simply changing his miserly, selfish ways.

IV

Paradoxically, the Jewish figures in Dickens turn out to be more like Jewish silences than Jewish constructions. Yet, the absence of mimetic Jews in Dickens is not a lack, to be mourned as a failure of representation. Dickens' constructions of Jews should be understood as meaningful and complex Jewish silences. When Fagin acts as Jewish cypher, his silent Jewishness forms the center for an entire structure of anti-Semitism. When Riah acts as Jewish sample, his apparently loud Jewishness actually announces Dickens' complex silence on Jewishness, his paradoxical inability to portray a Jew, even as he portrays a Jew. The possibility of Scrooge's Jewishness exists only under erasure, but this silent Jewishness might haunt the narrator's discourse, complicating Scrooge's "full" conversion. Jewishness does not enter Dickens' text in mimetic form, but rather as silence that generates meaning.

Considering Dickens' treatment of the Jew chronologically reveals an increasingly sophisticated use of a narrator who paradoxically does not narrate the Jew. Certainly, the original edition of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) shows Dickens at his most unsophisticated; despite the complex circulation of the token "the Jew," it still serves as a persistent, racist label for Fagin. Then, in 1843 in *A Christmas Carol*, traces and hints of Dickens' suppression of a racist construction of Scrooge perhaps disrupt his narrative. The creation of Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), though traditionally considered merely Dickens' beneficent portrayal of a Jew, actually reveals and portrays Dickens' attempt to confront his own authorial position in relation to portraying exploiting the Jew. Finally, the 1867 revision of *Oliver Twist* suggests that rather than simply saving his narrator (and himself) from charges of racism by excising every occurrence of "the Jew" in the novel, Dickens manipulates the naming and narrating of "the Jew" to construct a system of anti-Semitism within the novel, hinging on a shift in the narrator's perspective that calls attention to this anti-Semitism, to the use of "the Jew," even as it fails to escape it.¹⁶ As a group, these different narrators present increasingly complex representations of the power of narrating a racial and religious other. By returning full circle to the revising of *Oliver Twist*, Dickens ends his major considerations of the Jew with the hopefulness implied by revision. However, he also ends up rather reconditely, centered on his narrator, at the level at

which representation is constructed. For at the same time that Dickens' novels rightly reveal that the representation of Jews is what shapes British understandings of Jewish identity, they also naively suggest that their readers must pay careful attention to the manufacturing of that representation over the representation itself, to the story of the production of the image over the image, an unlikely focus in the chilling daily economy of anti-Semitism.¹⁷

NOTES

1. See, for example, Edgar Rosenberg's authoritative work *From Shylock to Svengali* (1960) or Deborah Heller's more recent "Jews in Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and *Our Mutual Friend*" in *Jewish Presences in English Literature* (1990).
2. "Representation, Conversion, and Literary Form: Harrington and the Novel of Jewish Identity," 115. In this important article, Ragussis revises the "critical position accepted for several decades now . . . that the tradition of Jewish portraiture in English literature is consistently naive and unself-conscious in its production of stereotypes" (113-14). However, for Ragussis, "the novel of Jewish identity" attempts to articulate, investigate, and subvert *The Merchant of Venice*'s function as the English master text for representing 'the Jew' and in doing so "exposes the ideology of conversion, both as literary strategy and cultural institution" (114). I am not concerned here with understanding Dickens' narration of Jews as part of a novelistic tradition that self-consciously re-views Shakespeare's Shylock, nor am I concerned with the trope of conversion, which Ragussis authoritatively explores in *Figures of Conversion*, the book that follows up this article.
3. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 50. All further references will be cited in the text, indicated by an "OT." This edition has the textual variants of different editions footnoted. My quotations and references to chapter numbers will follow the 1846 edition that the Clarendon presents. Though I ignore several very minor differences, such as the omission of the article "a," my quotations of the 1846 edition always appear the same in the 1867 edition, unless I specify otherwise. For my references to Dickens' revisions in 1867, see the footnotes of the Clarendon edition.
4. From Cecil Roth, *Anglo-Jewish Letters*, 305. Ironically, this Jewish woman's criticism of Fagin eventually contributes to Dickens' creation of yet another Jewish man (Riah). Though Riah is called a "godmother," the truly absent Jew in Dickens is female.
5. Dickens points out this separation in his reply to Eliza Davis, writing that Fagin "is called 'The Jew', not because of his religion, but because of his race." See Roth, 306.
6. *From Shylock to Svengali*, 116.
7. I am not claiming that other name substitutions are not made. However, even when the narrator is employing other names, "the Jew" is usually more prominent, as in this passage:

From this day, Oliver was seldom left alone; but was placed in almost constant communication with the two boys, who played the old game

with the Jew every day: whether for their own improvement or Oliver's, Mr. Fagin best knew. At other times the old man would tell them stories of robberies he had committed in his younger days: mixed up with so much that was droll and curious, that Oliver could not help laughing heartily, and showing that he was amused in spite of all his better feelings.

In short, the wily old Jew had the boy in his toils. Having prepared his mind, by solitude and gloom, to prefer any society to the companionship of his own sad thoughts in such a dreary place, he was now slowly instilling into his soul the poison which he hoped would blacken it, and change its hue for ever. (OT, 120)

The narrator is literally split into the two voices in the two contrasting paragraphs here, as reflected in the naming of Fagin. Two alternative names for Fagin, "Mr. Fagin" and "old man," overwhelm the term "the Jew" in the first paragraph, but when the narrator re-interprets the picture of Oliver in less sympathetic and less complicated terms in the second paragraph, "the Jew" returns to its dominant position. In this paragraph, the narrator dubs Fagin "the wily old Jew," leaving little doubt as to whether the narrator's use of "the Jew" is anti-Semitic.

8. In a related scene earlier in the novel, Oliver reveals that he understands that middle-class identification is predicated on not just a certain treatment of Jews, but on their exclusion. After Mr. Brownlow marks Oliver entrance into his middle-class home with "a complete new suit, and a new cap, and a new pair of shoes" (OT, 83), Oliver himself establishes his middle-class identity by giving his old clothes "to a servant who had been very kind to him: and ask[ing] her to sell them to a Jew: and keep the money for herself" (OT, 84). As he watches "the Jew" through the "parlour-window," Oliver (mistakenly) feels he is finally safe, his insider status defined by the outsider, Jew (OT, 84). He must, however, still exorcise Fagin, his own Jew.
9. In brief: (1) Fagin and Monks could not have fled without being seen by Harry (OT, 229-230); (2) "in no direction were there any appearances of the trampling of men" (OT, 230); (3) two days of "inquiries" after anyone having seen the men around the neighborhood surprisingly turns up nothing. "It must have been a dream" and "This is strange!" (OT, 230) comments Harry appropriately.

Even George Cruikshank's sketch is situated between the two readings of Oliver's story. Cruikshank draws Oliver *sleeping* at his desk, with Monks and Fagin looking in the window, rather than Oliver actually seeing Monks and Fagin. If his sketch at first seems to confirm the presence of Monks and Fagin while Oliver dreams, by the middle of chapter 35, the picture can only be said to confirm his dreaming.

10. Harry Stone rightly criticizes the idea that Dickens' excisions of "the Jew" were part of an attempt to humanize Fagin that occurs in the chapter "Fagin's Last Night Alive." In "From Fagin to Riah: Jews and the Victorian Novel," he writes:

Dickens' excisions of "the Jew" were not confined to the penultimate chapter of *Oliver Twist*, but were a consistent feature of his revision from Chapter XXXIX on—almost forty per cent of the chapters in which Fagin takes an active part. As a matter of fact, Dickens was exercising "the Jew" in many of the scenes . . . [regarded] as Fagin's most demoniacal

and archetypal. The changes in the penultimate chapter of *Oliver Twist* therefore have nothing whatever to do with Dickens' supposed shift, in the condemned-cell scene, from an archetype [stereotype of a Jew] to a human figure; either the shift occurred two-thirds of the way through the book (an untenable assumption in the light of Fagin's actions in the last third of the novel) or the changes must be explained by something other. . . . (251-252)

What matters is not so much that Stone mistakenly suggests that Dickens' revision of "the Jew" begins in chapter 39, an error Tillotson points out in her introduction to the Clarendon edition (OT, xxxix), but that Stone writes of this "something other":

As for the excision of "the Jew" in *Oliver Twist*, I can give no conclusive explanation of why they suddenly begin when they do, although I suspect the answer is biographical and bibliographical rather than archetypal. (252)

He goes on to "conjecture" about the timing of the printer's proofs and speculate about other incidental possibilities that might have reduced the starting point of Dickens' change to a matter of happenstance. However, he presents no evidence that Dickens began his revision randomly. It is unlikely that Dickens would deem it acceptable to revise radically a random section of his novel, making it inconsistent with the rest of the novel, without some thought as to the placement of his change—even if he only had part of the proofs.

11. Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (New York: Penguin, 1981), 328. All further references will be cited in the text, indicated by an "OMF."
12. Some critics, such as Harold Fisch, read Riah as an apology for Dickens' anti-Semitic characters simply by noting that Dickens presents a benevolent Jewish character in Riah. Focussing on the type of relationship Dickens constructs for Fledgby and Riah, Fred Kaplan moves beyond this formulation, pointing out that "Reversing the historical stereotype, [Dickens] depicts Christianity as responsible for the fiction of the materialistic perversion of the Jew in Christian culture" (472). As I will show, the text goes on to complicate even this complex, initial reversal of an anti-Semitic stereotype.
13. Investigating the possibility that Scrooge is a Jewish character lacking only the explicit appellation implies that other characters in Dickens might be thinly veiled caricatures or portraits of Jews, for example, Uriah Heep. However, because characters with stereotypically Jewish traits that are Christian, like Fledgby, do more to subvert anti-Semitic stereotyping than confirm it, seeing a veiled Jew or a racist portrait in every character with stereotypical Jewish traits is incorrect. Therefore, my consideration of Scrooge avoids equating the stereotype of a Jew with the representation of a Jew. Scrooge's miserly ways are suggestive of a racist Jewish stereotype, but the occasional clues and cues for reading Scrooge as a Jew that the text of *A Christmas Carol* provides are what suggest how this text, like all texts, operates through silence and effacement as well as explicit description.
14. However, in Davis's interpretation, Scrooge is not a Jewish figure, except as "an imitation of Christ," and the story is a "retelling of the original Christmas story" (80, 81).

15. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (New York: Bantam Books, 1986), 9. All further references will be cited in the text, indicated by a "CC."
16. I am not actually concerned with the extent to which Dickens was self-aware or simply acting "unconsciously" in his textual manipulations. Whether his progressively complex narrators are a conscious or unconscious product makes little difference, it seems to me. Our unconscious behavior and judgments amount to nothing less than the unquestioned and larger part of our personality and are equally, if not more, that which we call our "selves."
17. I am grateful to Nina Auerbach and Elisa New for their comments on this article.

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