Dickens’s Public Readings and the Victorian Author

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Charles Dickens’s public readings, performances in which he took up his own novels before audiences composed primarily of readers and brought the characters to life through his impersonation of them, invented a new genre of performance, one we now take for granted. But what were these performances actually like? And what do they mean to our understanding of Dickens, the man, the actor, and the writer? Available to us only through eyewitness accounts, prompt copies with their scribbled notes and Dickens’s own remarks about them, the readings are difficult to analyze. Clearly the work of a performer, a man with theatrical experience and talents, the readings were, however, much more than monologues based on the novels. They were “readings,” presentations done from a book, and they were “by the author,” an innovation both in theatrical performance and in the role of novelist.

In order for us to gain a sense of how these events participated in the shaping of Dickens’s public persona and of the idea of the “author” more generally in the Victorian period, we need to consider what we know of these performances in detail.1 What is the significance of Dickens’s deliberately simple staging of the performances, without costumes or props? What should we make of the fact that Dickens always spoke with a book before him, but sometimes closed the book before beginning to “read”? And what does it mean for a novelist to perform scenes of reading from his or her own novels for an audience? According to Michel Foucault, readers, scholars, and others seek out authors in order to...

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“reveal, or at least display the hidden sense pervading their work.”2
In his unprecedented public display of himself as the author of his works in the readings, was Dickens responding to public demand of the sort Foucault identifies, and if so, how?

My method in this essay is to bring forward, in succession, three different perspectives on the readings—focusing in turn on Dickens as actor, Dickens as reader, and Dickens as author. My synthetic analysis of these different perspectives ultimately concludes that Dickens, writing at a time when the primary models for the author as public figure were Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, and Thomas Carlyle, found—and, in a sense, founded—a more intimate notion of the author.3 Though based on the idea of the author as a widely known public figure, this new idea is that the author is every reader’s domestic companion and friend. Dickens’s readings, while theatrical, enacted a drama in which the author took on the role of reader. In this role, he performed a scene in which the characters took central stage, thereby creating a bond with the audience as one among a fellowship of readers with a mutual affection for the characters. The drama of the readings was thus the drama of a particular kind of Victorian reading. How Dickens’s public readings participated in the construction of both this idea of reading and a new idea of the author as intimate companion forms my central topic.

**DRAMATIC DICKENS**

Dickens performed about 472 public readings in Great Britain and America between 1853 and 1870, the year of his death.4 The first readings, in Birmingham, were done in aid of charity; the public readings done for Dickens’s own profit began in London in 1858. The readings, emerging out of Dickens’s popular success as a novelist, were extraordinarily celebrated and profitable: Dickens drew large audiences, including both those who enthusiastically endorsed other Victorian theatrics and those who ordinarily eschewed the theater as improper or even morally corrupting.5 And the readings were, without question, dramatic performances by a man with a deep love for the theater. Dickens had, as scholars have thoroughly documented, extensive theatrical experience and abilities.6 In 1832, when he was twenty years old, he almost embarked on an acting career, but missed the audition and, finding his newspaper reporting successful, did not reschedule.7 He wrote six plays, including *The Frozen Deep* (with Wilkie Collins), and was a player, director, and producer of ama-
teur theatrics throughout his adult life. He was apparently highly talented. As Philip Collins recounts in detail, reports from contemporary critics of Dickens’s abilities as an actor in the readings were predominantly positive—an assessment confirmed by Dickens’s ability to pack the house night after night.

As theater, the readings were an important innovation based on several types of performance developed during the century. Various Victorian authors, including Carlyle, had done lectures, and some actors and actresses had found success in doing dramatic readings of others’ works. The most significant influence on the theatrical format of Dickens’s readings, however, was probably the performance style known as the “monopolylogue,” popularized by an actor Dickens admired in his youth, Charles Mathews, and by Albert Smith. Influenced particularly by Mathews’s “At Homes” (one-man shows mixing comedy, narrative, and song, and relying heavily on Mathews’s abilities as an impersonator), Dickens too performed alone, using voice, gesture, and physical expression to enact various characters, and designing his shows to move from comedy to pathos and back to comedy over the course of a scene or of an evening.

There were, however, two crucial—and related—differences between Dickens’s performances and Mathews’s. First, Dickens’s performances occurred without the elaborate changes of costume and props Mathews used. And second, Dickens’s performances were not simply of his characters, but of himself, or, more accurately, of his public persona as the author of the novels from which the characters came. It is, I suspect, because of the importance of this second distinguishing characteristic—that Dickens was himself a figure audiences wanted to see—that he decided to use an extremely simple style of staging without costumes and with few props. As Paul Schlicke describes it, Mathews’s “monopolylogue” was “a stage farce in which, by means of quick changes of costume, ventriloquism and sharp differentiation of character, Mathews played all the roles.” Unlike Mathews, Dickens designed his set to make his uncostumed body the center of visual attention. Both in Britain and in America, he had large screens covered with maroon cloth arranged, and he had gas lighting set up to illuminate his face and body as clearly as possible. As Dickens’s manager George Dolby explains, the lighting was done “so that the reader’s face and figure were fully and equally distinct to the vision of the audience, and no effects were marred either by too much light overhead or by a super-effulgence from below.” Whereas Mathews used a variety of props to sup-
port his characterizations, Dickens had on the platform only the props of a reader: a small reading desk, a book, and, on at least some occasions, a glass and a pitcher of water, his handkerchief and gloves, and a paper knife. The author remained largely in one place throughout the reading, usually standing behind the table and reading desk; the dramatic element of the readings was conveyed primarily through effects of the voice, face, and hands. One description of a reading in Philadelphia explained the scene this way: "On the table were a pedestal ten inches high for his books, and a pitcher and a glass. Illuminated by the bright lights, framed and thrown into relief by the dark backdrop, and obstructed little by the table and its appointments, he could register on the audience every movement in all his body."\(^\text{14}\)

In addition to influencing the staging, Dickens’s role as author appearing before his readers also made the textual basis of his performances significantly different from Mathews’s. While Mathews was performing a dramatic show of his own invention, Dickens performed scenes from already-published novels, scenes familiar to many in his audiences. So while one basis for the public readings was the theatrical background Dickens brought to the podium, a second basis was the dramatic nature of the novels themselves. The theatricality of Dickens’s novels particularly and of the Victorian novel more generally has been widely discussed by scholars.\(^\text{15}\) Sue Lonoff provides a good explanation of the importance of the drama to the Victorian novel: “Dickens, Reade, and Collins wrote plays as well as novels, and incorporated into their fiction many of the staple ingredients of melodrama: the curtain lines, the emotional exchanges, the direct appeals to those beyond the footlights.” She continues: “The conversational tone of Victorian fiction suited the tastes of families who gathered to listen to the stories and make the acquaintance of the characters. The very prevalence of dialogue, much of it colloquial, encouraged the habit of reading aloud and of identifying with the characters by speaking in their voices. The speeches also provided psychological clues, signaling a character’s moods and motives as they brought him vividly to life.”\(^\text{16}\) That Dickens’s revisions of his texts for the readings were relatively slight demonstrates the theatrical potential Lonoff, among others, discusses.

Thus, in this first phase of consideration, we see that Dickens’s public readings were, in many respects, theatrical performances drawing both on Dickens’s experiences with the Victorian theater as spectator, playwright, amateur director, and actor, and on the dramatic nature of the novels themselves. It is this aspect
of the readings, that which recognizes the dramatic Dickens, which has been most clearly established in earlier critical discussion of the readings. Philip Collins, for instance, in his essential introduction to his edited volume of Dickens's readings, first recalls the famous story Dickens's daughter recounted of witnessing her father acting out his characters before a mirror while in the process of composition; Collins then concludes that the readings were a product of Dickens's lifelong commitment to the theater. Collins writes that "his fiction partook—in no pejorative sense—of the theatrical; and in giving Readings from that fiction ([a substitution of a lower for higher aims], as Forster regarded it), he was both adopting a variant of that 'lower calling' to which he had been so drawn, and also demonstrating his long-standing debt, as a writer, to it." Similarly, J. B. Van Amerongen concludes that the most important reason why Dickens pursued the readings was "that the actor in him was simply claiming his due." But there is more to the readings than this. While Dickens loved the theater and was apparently an actor of some talent, the readings were not plays and the part Dickens played was not only that of actor. He also played the reader in what was effectively staged as a scene of reading.

PLAYING THE READER

In a work about the relationship between theater and reading, David Cole argues that, for the playwright, the actor as an intermediary between writer and public proves indispensable. As Cole explains, "It is not just that the actor stands always between [playwright and audience]; his standing always between is, itself, the key to the relation. In fact, the audience-playwright transaction can only occur as a transaction between the audience and the actor, on the one hand, and the actor and the playwright, on the other." Despite Dickens's connection to the theater and the theatrical, his public readings are thus as much evidence of his distance from theatrical performance as of his involvement with it.

A clue to how to unravel this apparent contradiction—that Dickens's performances both emphasize the dramatic and yet undermine the basis of traditional theater—lies in a consideration of the particular style of performance Dickens chose, the "monopolylogue," in which, as Schlicke notes, Mathews "played all the roles." Cole suggests that this desire to "play all the parts" in a story or script—that is, the desire Dickens demonstrates in choosing something resembling Mathews's monopolylogue as his
format—is the ambition of the reader, and not of the actor.\textsuperscript{20} It is to this alternative view of Dickens's performances, as enactments of reading, rather than as performances in the dramatic tradition, that I now turn.

To begin, I want to emphasize that among the simple set of props—"only a reading desk, a book, a glass of water, and his handkerchief and gloves" as well as, on some occasions, a paper knife—Dickens invariably included a book, presumably the book from which he was "reading." At first glance the use of the book might seem both obvious and necessary: since Dickens was reading, he needed to have the book from which to read. But all accounts of Dickens's extensive preparation for the readings suggest that he could almost certainly have performed without the text open in front of him. Biographical information tells us that Dickens spent many hundreds of hours perfecting the readings before performing them and that the author often improvised as he "read"—adding, deleting, and reordering material ever more freely as he became accustomed to a particular piece. Indeed, Collins indicates that on some occasions Dickens closed the book before he even began.\textsuperscript{21}

Nonetheless, the book played a crucial part in the readings, and on at least some occasions viewers were persuaded that Dickens was, in fact, reading from the book. This is evident from one historian's description, based on various eyewitness accounts, of how the readings began: "Punctually [Dickens] would appear onstage unannounced and, books in hand, walk briskly to the table, put the books down, bow, smile, and wait for the applause to subside . . . When the applause stopped, and, with another bow, he would take up a book, open it, look at the audience, say: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I am happy to have the honor of reading to you tonight,' name the work, and begin reading."\textsuperscript{22} So central was the book to the performances that Mark Twain, attending a reading, became convinced that all Dickens did was pick up one of his books, and, without any particular emendation or rehearsal, read from it. In an account of his own efforts to do public readings in the style of Dickens, Mark Twain explains: "I supposed it would only be necessary to do like Dickens—get up on the platform and read from the book. I did that and made a botch of it."\textsuperscript{23} Dickens himself fostered this illusion, referring to the book as the central and only necessary prop for the readings when talking about them, and writing to a friend, "As to the Readings, all I have to do is to take in my book and read at the appointed place and hour, and come out again."\textsuperscript{24}
Dickens's readings were not, however, simply public acts of reading aloud in an ordinary reading voice from a book; they were monopolylogues, a staging of a scene of reading that emphasized dialogue and characters. So, in Dickens's enactment of reading on stage, a particular idea about what "reading" means came to life—an idea focused not on the controlling authority of the narration, but on the characters, and particularly the different voices of the characters. In using this style of performance, Dickens might be seen as dramatically enacting the equivalent of what Mikhail Bakhtin terms heteroglossia.25 The complexity of this interplay of voices in performance comes through in the following passage from Charles Kent's eyewitness account of the readings:

Attending his Readings, character after character appeared before us, living and breathing, in the flesh, as we looked and listened. It mattered nothing, just simply nothing, that the great author was there all the while before his audience in his own identity. His evening costume was a matter of no consideration—the flower in his button-hole, the paper-knife in his hand, the book before him, that earnest, animated, mobile, delightful face, that we all knew by heart through his ubiquitous photographs—all were equally of no account whatever. We knew that he alone was there all the time before us, reading, or, to speak more accurately, re-creating for us, one and all—while his lips were articulating the familiar words his hand had written so many years previously—the most renowned of the imaginary creatures peopling his books. Watching him, hearkening to him, while he stood there unmistakably before his audience, on the raised platform, in the glare of the gas-burners shining down upon him from behind the pendant screen immediately above his head, his individuality, so to express it, altogether disappeared, and we saw before us instead, just as the case might happen to be, Mr. Pickwick, or Mrs. Gamp, or Dr. Marigold, or little Paul Dombey, or Mr. Squeers, or Sam Weller, or Mr. Peggotty, or some other of those immortal personages.26

Kent's account asserts the disappearance of the author, the figure the audience had come to see, in favor of the dramatic appearance of the characters themselves. As a description of a scene of reading, this passage bears a striking resemblance to
one in which Deborah Vlock explains how Victorian readers would have visualized novels as drama: “One might imagine the Victorian novel as a kind of tableau vivant, to use a construction from the nineteenth-century stage—that is, a story locked in place (in this case contained within the printed word instead of the frozen human body) suddenly come to life as the reading act begins, vocalizing and posturing and gesturing with all its heart. People read these novels with an acute awareness of theatrical presence: they witnessed characters from the contemporary stage materializing, as it were, from the page.”

It would be unquestionably naïve to take at face value Kent’s description of Dickens’s presence as “of no account whatever,” given that Kent, in the act of disregarding its importance, carefully details the physical presence of the author down to “the flower in his button hole.” However, the connection between Kent’s suggestion that the author’s presence on the stage gave way to the “immortal personages” of the characters and Vlock’s idea that the narrator’s role in the novel served, for Victorian readers, primarily to provide a context within which the characters might “suddenly come to life as the reading act begins” suggests what type of reading the performances dramatized. Dickens’s style of performance articulated through body and voice the centrality and autonomy of the characters themselves—allowing the controlling voice of the narrator and the presence of the author to recede. It is here that a possible significance of the paper knife emerges. As a part of the set and costuming, it served to associate Dickens with the reader encountering the book for the first time and actively cutting open the pages of the text. It was not a pen that Dickens held, a prop that would reinforce his position as writer, but instead a tool identifying him as a reader even of his own work.

As further evidence for this idea that the readings functioned—at least in part—as representations of a heteroglossic style of reading, I want to turn to a striking feature of Dickens’s editing of A Christmas Carol, one of his most frequently performed and popular readings. Over three hours in length when read in full, A Christmas Carol had, by the end of Dickens’s reading career, been reduced by half. In the extensive cuts from the published version for the reading version lie traces indicating Dickens’s shaping of his performances.

In turning to editorial marks in the prompt copies as a source of evidence, I recognize that I am moving into shadowy territory. Others before me have concluded that the prompt copies reveal
little of major significance for Dickens studies. Van Amerongen, for instance, insists that, in his choice and modification of the published works for the readings, “the author in [Dickens] always gave way to the actor.”\textsuperscript{28} And certainly there is danger in placing too much emphasis on prompt copies when eyewitness accounts establish that Dickens frequently improvised in performance. Nonetheless, I propose that there is one aspect of the emendations Dickens made to the text of \textit{A Christmas Carol} worth considering as further indication of the readings as scenes of reading—performances in which, as Kent suggests, the characters rather than the author took center stage.

Close analysis of the editing in the prompt copy Dickens used through most of his reading career for \textit{A Christmas Carol} shows that the narrator’s part, though not entirely eliminated, was extensively cut down and depersonalized for the readings. This is quite striking because, in the print version of \textit{A Christmas Carol}, the narrator is unusually intimate with the reader. Moving beyond the “dear reader” address so common in the nineteenth-century novel, the narrator in the print version actually claims to be at the reader’s side: “as close to it as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow.”\textsuperscript{29} This narrative comment appears to have been among the first passages eliminated for the reading, and this was only part of the depersonalization of the narrator’s role. Dickens also deliberately and systematically cut all of the thirty-seven instances from the published version of \textit{A Christmas Carol} in which the narrator refers to himself with the personal pronouns “I,” “me,” or “my.”\textsuperscript{30} In addition, Dickens cut all direct address to the reader, which in this case would be the listener, as “you” (there are eighteen of these in the print version). Though large sections of the published book ultimately had to be cut in the interests of time, careful consideration of the prompt copy reveals that these changes in the narrator’s self-reference and address to reader/listener were not coincidental, but selective.\textsuperscript{31}

The shift away from the use of the narrative “I” is particularly noticeable in this reading because the text contains so many moments that emphasize the “I” in the dialogue. In one scene, for instance, Dickens, playing Scrooge, asks whether the vision is the spirit “whose coming was foretold,” and Dickens, playing the spirit, responds with a resounding “I am!”\textsuperscript{32} There are eight instances in the reading version of the Carol in which a character refers to him or herself with the words “I am so-and-so,” most memorably, of course, the announcements of the first two ghosts—
“I am the ghost of Christmas past” and “I am the ghost of Christmas Present”—and culminating with Scrooge's declarations to the third, silent ghost: “I am not the man that I was” and to his nephew: “It's I. Your uncle Scrooge.” All of these lines, moments at which the author claimed a character’s identity, were maintained for the reading.

So we see that in the adaptation of the printed narrative to the reading script, Dickens, as actor, played “all the parts.” This is the role Cole assigns the reader. Dickens kept the book before him (as a reader does), and went to some effort to distance himself from the part most readily assumed to be his—that of the authorial narrator. In these aspects of the readings we see Dickens both violating the conventions of the playwright’s role and challenging the Victorian tendency to associate narrator and author. Alison Byerly argues that maintaining the stabilizing narrative role was essential to the comfort of Victorian audiences, critical as many were of the destabilizing of the self in acting, and suggests that, in playing his narrators, Dickens could be seen as playing himself.33 While this may, indeed, have been central to the acceptability of Dickens’s performances to those among the Victorians who were uncomfortable with more overtly theatrical performances, a consideration of the readings as readings and as theatrics suggests Dickens’s unwillingness to take on this role of himself as narrator. Rather, the readings reinforce the notion of reading Vlock describes: reading as a kind of mental drama, with the characters coming to life, “vocalizing and posturing and gesturing” in the reader’s mind, a drama Dickens, on the platform, playing Scrooge, Tiny Tim, and the other characters from his novels, brought to life for his audiences.

AUTHORIZING

Though I have attempted to suggest ways in which Dickens’s readings were, in a sense, anti-authorial—resisting the presumption that the narrator is the author and directing attention to the characters—these performances must also certainly be viewed as performances of the authorial persona as well. As Kent’s detailed eyewitness account of Dickens’s appearance on the platform establishes, Dickens appeared as “the great author,” the face known through the “ubiquitous photographs,” the hands the very same that penned the words of the novels and signed the frontispieces, the lips articulating the words written by those hands. It was not Dickens’s theatrical abilities alone that drew
of the construction of “Dickens” as an author in the Foucaultian sense, a process this essay continues. In the plasticity of roles Dickens played in the readings—Dickens appearing at once as actor, as reader, and as author, in a performance style that was always somewhat in flux (with speeches on occasion but not always, the book sometimes consulted and other times closed)—lies evidence of the complexity, even in Dickens’s own lifetime, of this process of making “Dickens,” at once the celebrated author and every reader’s “friend.”

NOTES

My thanks to Roberta Davidson, Ed Foster, Ann Frechette, and the anonymous readers at SEL for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Thanks also to the members of my writing group at Whitman College, David Schmitz, Lynn Sharp, Julia Davis, Tom Davis, Paul Apostalidis, and Jeannie Morefield, who read the paper in its penultimate form and offered many useful suggestions. Thanks especially to Julia Davis for proposing the potential significance of the paper knife. And a final word of thanks to Robert L. Patten for truly invaluable assistance at several stages of the project.

1 There is a substantial body of work on Victorian authorship, often with at least some focus on Dickens. The following have been particularly helpful to the writing of this essay: Ian Duncan, Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); Sue Lonoff, Wilkie Collins and His Victorian Readers: A Study in the Rhetoric of Authorship (New York: AMS Press, 1982); Robert L. Patten, Charles Dickens and His Publishers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).


3 Sir Walter Scott’s career as a novelist, structured as it was in the later years around bankruptcy, seems to have influenced Dickens particularly. As Patten argues, “The spectre of Scott continued to haunt him” (p. 143). See also Duncan, chap. 4.


7 Schlicke, p. 234.
8 Axton, pp. 3–4.
9 Collins, Readings, pp. liii–lxv.
10 Schlicke, pp. 234–41.
11 Schlicke, p. 236.


14 Trautmann, p. 462.


16 Lonoff, pp. 8–9.
17 Collins, Readings, p. lix.

18 Van Amerongen, p. 32.


20 Cole, p. 119.


22 Trautmann, p. 462, emphasis added.

23 Mark Twain, The Autobiography of Mark Twain, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 176. This comment as a description of Mark Twain’s efforts is, of course, most likely exaggerated; however, the presumption about Dickens’s performance style is clear.

24 Quoted in Dolby, p. 3.


26 Charles Kent, Charles Dickens as a Reader (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1872), pp. 31–2, emphasis added.


28 Van Amerongen, p. 46.

29 Dickens, A Christmas Carol: The Public Reading Version, p. 42.

30 When I speak of the published version, I mean the printed text Dickens used as his prompt copy. A facsimile of this text, with Dickens’s editing for the readings clarified by editorial remarks by Collins, is widely available and was my source for this counting and analysis.

31 On p. 21 of Dickens, A Christmas Carol: The Public Reading Version, for instance, before cutting the scene on this page entirely, Dickens first changed “you may talk” to “People talk” and cut “I mean to say” specifically.
There are many other such instances throughout the prompt copy where a personal reference to the narrator was crossed out prior to the cutting of the entire scene in what was obviously a later round of editing.

32 Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: The Public Reading Version*, p. 44.
33 Byerly, p. 132.
35 Cole, p. 249.
38 Carlyle, p. 162.
41 Goldberg, p. 2.
42 Collins discusses these changes both in his edition of the reading version of *A Christmas Carol* and in the collected readings. Collins explains that Dickens cut such passages of social commentary in other readings as well, and points out that the readings are all taken from the earlier and less clearly sociopolitical novels (Collins, p. xxxvi and Dickens, *A Christmas Carol: The Public Reading Version*, p. 198 n.).

44 As Schlicke argues, for both Charles Mathews and Dickens, the most important element in their popularity was that they “projected images of themselves as genial men wishing unaffectedly to offer amusement to their audiences” (p. 237).
45 K. J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1988), p. 169. Dickens repeated similar remarks on 19 January 1858 (Fielding, p. 246; from the *Bristol Mirror and General Advertiser* of 23 January 1858; also from the *Bristol Times* of the same date) and 26 March 1858 (Fielding, p. 259; from the *Scotsman* of 27 March, and the *Edinburgh Courant* of the same date). The record of the January speech suggests that such an opening statement was common:

On occasions like the present, [Dickens] said, there were always two remarks he addressed to his audience. First of all, he would inform them that he always allowed an interval of five minutes to elapse, as nearly as possible when half-way through the *Carol* as the natural divisions of the story would allow of. Secondly if, as they proceeded, any of his audience should feel disposed to give vent to any feeling of emotion, he would request them to do so in the most natural manner, without the slightest apprehension of disturbing him. Nothing could be more agreeable to him than the assurance of their being interested,