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“I write this with my hands in a basin of water”: Dickens, Letters and Readers.’

Carolyn W. de la L. Oulton

In a letter to his friend and later biographer John Forster in 1868, Dickens pointedly assured him of the success of his public reading venture, stressing the new opportunities it had created for asserting his personal relationship with his public, ‘The audience do everything but embrace me, and take as much pains with the readings as I do’ ([?18 December 1868]. *Pilgrim* 12. 250-251. 251). Any discussion of Dickens’s literary status must accommodate this assumption of a special intimacy between himself and his readers, and the mechanisms he deployed to effect it.

But while his self-representation as unique and literally ‘inimitable’ was widely accepted at the time of his death, to some modern critics this attribution of status has come to appear intensely problematic. From a range of different perspectives, recent criticism has increasingly suggested an ambiguous model of an author who promotes an image of himself as a unique individual while creating a sense of shared experience with a homogenised reading public, at the same time participating in his own commodification. For Alexis Easley the propagation of Dickens’s image as a knowable figure itself counteracts his individuality, as ‘On the one hand, this replication of images, as a form of hero worship, would seem to highlight Charles Dickens’s individuality; however, this process of mass replication actually had the effect of effacing his identity, converting his image into mass produced objects of exchange: *cartes de visite* and collectible photographs’ (39).

Particular modes of publication – always of concern to Dickens himself in controlling reader response – also contribute to his marketing of him as a phenomenon.

Stressing the collaborative and contextual nature of periodical publication, Robert Patten uncovers the way in which ‘Severing Dickens’s periodical fictions from their magazine contexts allowed them to be reinterpreted as self-referential biographical disclosures’, a move he sees as making Dickens ‘a household name, a fortune, and the model of a genius generating text out of trauma’ (143). In Patten’s account,

naming Dickens as the author of the volume *Oliver Twist*, rather than Boz as the purveyor of a story arising from the *Mudfog Papers* 'distorts the textual record and obscures the ways in which the narratorial voice, Boz, is constructed out of those voices that precede and surround it' in *Bentley's Miscellany* (142). An alternative view of the serial fiction is offered by Sarah Winter, for whom 'Dickens's novels are distinctive among other works of Victorian serial fiction because they explicitly teach serial reading as an associative practice, channeling the memories of reading they supply into a common experience as a basis for cultural politics' (17).

Central to Dickens's vision of himself as a writer is the ideal of a reader / writer contract that effectually bypasses the agenda of editors, publishers and hack dramatists who often appeared to have more control over the dissemination of his work than he did himself. While the material conditions of print circulation were crucial to Dickens's image as both an individualised genius *and* the creator of an imaginative community of readers, he himself was the first to recognise that he could not always control the way in which his fiction was circulated, contextualised and adapted. His response to this dilemma was to seek direct engagement from readers who would respond imaginatively and even emotionally both to the text itself and to the writer.

This article therefore focuses on the allusions to the relations between author and reader contained within the text itself in Dickens's published and unpublished writing, analysing the strategies he deploys in attempting to create and sustain a relationship in which ideally, 'Whether his readers were scattered in space or brought together by one of his public performances, the same words transformed thousands of distinct individuals into a united audience' (Douglas-Fairhurst 182).

As a writer Dickens was taking his reader into his confidence (to borrow Forster's phrase) long before *David Copperfield*. In 'The Parlour Orator' from *Sketches by Boz* he admits to a failure of the imagination that is at odds with the status he hopes to attain as a successful writer:

If we had followed the established precedent in all such instances, we should have fallen into a fit of musing, without delay. The ancient appearance of the room – the old panelling of the wall – the chimney blackened with smoke and age – would have carried us back a hundred years at least, and we should have gone dreaming on, until the pewter pot on the table, or the little beer chiller on the fire, had started into life, and addressed to us a long story of days gone by. But, by some means or other, we were not in a romantic humour; and although we tried very hard to invest the furniture with vitality, it remained perfectly unmoved, obstinate, and sullen.’ ‘The Parlour Orator’ (*Sketches by Boz* 234-5)

In this early sketch ‘Boz’ candidly deconstructs the idea of creativity as a quasi-magical process, admitting that his own imaginative faculty could sometimes prove recalcitrant. In the legalistic phrase ‘established precedent’ he apparently recognises the reader’s reasonable expectation that the writer will provide a known and predictable story in pleasing language (for what other reason have they paid to read his work?), only to query the validity of this demand in the paradoxical image of an immediate drifting of the mind, as he satirically acknowledges that he has failed to fall ‘into a fit of musing without delay’. In this subtle undermining of the writer’s role as purely an entertainer, Boz has already established a key feature of Dickens’s literary manifesto: readers must be actively imaginative in their response to the fictional world he creates, rather than passively imbibing his words.

But this implied challenge to the reader in turn implies the reward of a shared understanding. In particular, letters are deployed both in Dickens’s actual correspondence and increasingly as an imaginative feature of the published text, as a powerful means of inviting the reader’s confidence. The inability to summon a ‘romantic humour’ on demand infuses many of the letters Dickens wrote to friends during the writing of his novels in later years. But these very letters contain some of his most memorable images, as when he tells one correspondent that ‘I am in the first stage of a new book, which consists in going round and round the idea, as you see a bird in his cage go about and about his sugar before he touches it’ (To Captain E. Morgan, [19 March] 1855. *Pilgrim* 7. 571-2). Within the fiction letters are seen as

crucial both to the progress of particular novels and as a means of commenting on characters themselves. As David Paroissien observes, letters are not simply a device used within the novels; rather Dickens is notable as 'a writer to whom the bounds between fiction and correspondence are thin' (33). Rosemarie Bodenheimer concurs with this view that 'Dickens the letter-writer commanded as broad a range of languages as voices as did Dickens the novelist' (23).

In his *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* Gissing assesses Dickens's letters to Forster as crucial to his development as a writer, but also as constituting in themselves an important part of his literary output, as 'Year after year, he keeps his friend minutely informed by letter of the progress he makes with every book; consults him on endless points, great and small; is inexhaustible in gossip about himself, which never appears egoistic because of the artistic earnestness declared in every syllable' (60).

An often neglected aspect of the fiction itself is the way it enacts this process of reading, in its insistence on the power over successive characters of the written word. In *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844) Lewsome's confessional letter is read eagerly by several characters for whose eyes it was never intended, at least one of whom places undue faith in the words she herself has imaginatively attributed to him, 'The landlord read it: the landlady looked over him. The chamber-maid, in the background, made out as much of it as she could, and invented the rest; believing it all from that time forth as a positive piece of evidence' (*Martin Chuzzlewit* 352).

In his encounters with actual readers Dickens is known to have taken pleasure in such imaginative engagement, telling Forster that 'I was brought very near to what I sometimes dream may be my Fame, when a lady whose face I had never seen stopped me yesterday in the street, and said to me, *Mr Dickens, will you let me touch the hand that has filled my house with many friends*' (to John Forster [11 September 1858]. *Pilgrim* 8. 656-7). But this in itself is a crafted response to the literary relations Dickens promotes as subsisting between himself and the public. A few years earlier he had recoiled from just such an exchange with a reader, while looking round a villa he was considering buying, and unexpectedly running in to the current inmates, 'for it *has* inmates – as I found to my horror the other day, when a

lady, with curls like tight sausages, rushed out of the dining room, card in hand, and enquired of the humble individual who now has the honour to address you, if he were the real original inimitable to whom she was indebted for so many hours of - &c &c' (to Henry Austin. 25 January 1851. Pilgrim 6. 267). The boundary between writer, reader and text becomes increasingly permeable, as members of the public are comically fictionalised in Dickens's own correspondence and fictional characters test their imaginative capacity by writing or responding to letters. Even the ghastly Fanny Squeers reveals a certain creative ability in her famous letter to Ralph explaining that 'My pa requests me to write to you, the doctors considering it doubtful whether he will ever recuver the use of his legs which prevents his holding a pen' while she herself is 'screaming out loud all the time I write' (175).

Dickens's own correspondence was vast, but also inefficient in the sense that he could only communicate personally with one reader at a time. His response to this dilemma was of course to turn his prefaces into what were effectually 'letters' to his unseen public. Despite his later warnings to other writers that prefatory material only interfered with the message of a book, Dickens himself used prefaces both to direct responses to his novels or simply to open a line of communication with readers; the tone and format of this material, often carefully revised and updated for new editions often included the expressed desire of 'meeting again' and careful inclusion of the date and place of writing.

The preface to the first edition of *Nicholas Nickleby*, written in 1839, overtly requests the epistolary friendship of readers; pitching the monthly numbers as a sequence of letters he hopes 'that on the first of next month they may miss his company at the accustomed time as something which used to be expected with pleasure; and think of the papers which on that day of so many past months they have read as the correspondence of one who wished their happiness, and contributed to their amusement' (li). Prefaces to other novels are often composed as if in letter format, with the date and place of writing appended to the bottom. In an early example, the third edition of *Oliver Twist* is accompanied by a preface ending 'Devonshire Terrace, April, 1841' (lvii).

Such invitations to a 'personal' correspondence draw in a wider audience than Dickens's individual letters can hope to reach, while allowing one text to infiltrate another, as in the rather crowing preface to *Little Dorrit* dated London, May 1857, 'In the preface to Bleak House I remarked that I had never had so many readers. In the preface to its next successor, Little Dorrit, I have still to repeat the same words. Deeply sensible of the affection and confidence that have grown up between us, I add to this Preface, as I added to that, May we meet again!' (xxii) This inclusion of letter-style prefatory material becomes such a feature of the later novels that what would turn out to be the last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*, can appropriately include a 'Postscript in lieu of Preface' dated September 2, 1865 (822).

This formulation of public 'letters' in turn feeds back in to Dickens's actual correspondence with both personal friends and with unknown readers and autograph hunters. In writing to friends from the early 1840s he increasingly references or adopts the linguistic tics of his own characters, and in a particularly self-conscious allusion to his author status, one letter apologises for its supposed lack of interest in the words, 'And even now, in this Preface or Prologue to our future correspondence (in which I mean to shine very much) I have only time to be dull, and inclination to be bright' (To Mrs David C. Colden, 15 July 1842. Pilgrim 3. 271-2. 271).

Thomas Mitton is told in a letter of the following year that 'I am extremely glad you *feel* the Carol. For I knew I meant a good thing. And when I see the effect of such a little *whole* as that, on those for whom I care, I have a strong sense of the immense effect I could produce with an entire book. I am quite certain of that' (To Thomas Mitton, [6 December 1843]. Pilgrim 3. 605-606). Beginning with pleasure that his friend has enjoyed the first of the Christmas books, Dickens quickly moves to identifying him with the reading public in general, who would welcome a longer book; notably if 'those for whom I care' are a feasible test case for a wider audience on whom Dickens can produce an 'immense effect', this suggests that the two are virtually interchangeable. In other words, the missing implied object in the clause

‘the immense effect I could produce’ – and by extension also the object of Dickens’s affection – is the book buying public.

The direct connection he assumed between himself and these unseen readers is pithily expressed in a letter to one curious correspondent, in which (despite the proof readers and printers with whom he was closely involved) he derides the notion of any intermediary, ‘In reply to your second question whether I dictate, I answer with a smile that I can as soon imagine a painter dictating his pictures’.

Letters to other writers in particular show Dickens deliberately merging fictional creation and personal address. Writing to Washington Irving in 1841 he told him that:

I have been so accustomed to associate you with all my pleasantest and happiest thoughts, and with my leisure hours, that I rush at once into full confidence with you, and fall – as it were naturally, and by the very laws of gravity – into your open arms. Questions come thronging to my pen as to the lips of people who meet after long hoping to do so. I don’t know what to say first, or what to leave unsaid, and am constantly disposed to break off and tell you again how glad I am this moment has arrived (21 April 1841. Pilgrim 2. 267-269. 268).

Improving on this idea, from the mid-1840s he began offering publicly available fiction as a substitute for private communication, suggesting to one friend that ‘I wish you would regard my Christmas Books, and Dombey’s, and so forth, as letters to you: and when you find anything you particularly like, would take it as your own exclusive property. Then I should be entitled to an answer, and should always be an active and punctual correspondent’ (27 November 1846. Pilgrim 5. 664-6. 665). This promise of ‘exclusive property’ is hardly consistent with the number of similar offers made to other friends over the next few years. In 1852 William de Cerjat was told less disingenuously that ‘...I really think so often of my friends in writing my books, and have the happiness of knowing they think so much of me in reading them, that I have a sort of stupid sense as if they served for letters...’ (To W. F. de Cerjat, 20

December 1852. Pilgrim 6. 828-30. 828), but a few years later Irving is assured that 'If you knew how often I write to you individually and personally in my books, you would be no more surprised in seeing this note than you were in seeing me do my duty by that flowery julep... at Baltimore' (5 July 1856. Pilgrim 8. 150-1). On the very same day Dickens wrote to another literary friend assuming a reciprocal exchange through published writing, 'I write to you so often in my books, and my writing of letters is usually so confined to the numbers that I *must* write, and in which I have no kind of satisfaction, that I am afraid to think how long it is since we exchanged a direct letter. ... that you *do* write, and that pretty often, I know beforehand. Else why do I read *The Examiner*? (to Walter Savage Landor 5 July 1856)

In the sustained identification of the figure of the author with the written word, both letters and fictional texts often insist on the materiality of the writing process – one correspondent is told that 'I write this with my hands in a basin of water; being in the very act of trimming myself for going out' (13 February 1842. Pilgrim 3. 57-58). At particular moments characters may embody or even become letters. In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) Riah is unable to account for Fledgeby's curt dismissal but 'The dolls' dressmaker found it delicious to trace the screaming and smarting of Little Eyes in the distorted writing of this epistle' (728) In a yet more extreme example the shabby genteel go-betweens in *Little Dorrit* (1857) 'had a peculiar way of doggedly slinking round the corner, as if they were eternally going to the pawnbrokers. When they coughed, they coughed like people accustomed to be forgotten on door-steps and in draughty passages, waiting for answers to letters in faded ink, which gave the recipients of those manuscripts great mental disturbance, and no satisfaction' (75).

But despite this delight in the power of the written word, Dickens reminds his readers that it can break down unexpectedly. The Midshipman group in *Dombey and Son* believes Sol Gills to have died, because Mrs McStinger vindictively withholds his letters to Captain Cuttle. More problematically letters themselves may register the difficulty of articulating feeling, as a young Dickens insisted in response to the continued rejections of Maria Beadnell:

Your own feelings will enable you to imagine far better than any attempt of mine to describe the painful struggle it has cost me to make up my mind to adopt the course which I now take... If (I can hardly believe it possible) I have said any thing which can have that effect I can only ask you to place yourself for a moment in my situation and you will find a much better excuse than I can possibly devise (18 March [1833]. Pilgrim 1. 16-17).

In this convoluted attack Dickens implies both that Maria's sense of guilt – presumably the feeling to which he is alluding - will enable her to imagine his struggle; and that (unlike himself) she is adept at making excuses, which are in any case unnecessary to explain his behaviour.

In *Bleak House* a dejected Richard Carstone is found by Esther making futile efforts to vindicate himself to her in writing. "Have you been at the trouble of writing all that, and am I not to read it after all?" I asked. "Oh my dear," he returned, with a hopeless gesture. "You may read it in the whole room. It is all over here." *Bleak House* (647). The failure of the written word to express a position that Richard nonetheless believes himself justified in maintaining is a clear indication of his impending breakdown. The destructive course he is pursuing can be read both in the aborted letters and in his dishevelled appearance and disordered room, and it is only too plain to Esther, as it is to the reader, that quite literally it is 'all over' here.

The best intentioned letters, as Richard knows, are unstable or even untrustworthy. In *Little Dorrit* writing is used by the impecunious to practise on the ignorant; in the lodgings occupied by Amy's uncle:

A professor of writing occupied the first-floor, and enlivened the garden railings with glass-cases containing choice examples of what his pupils had been before six lessons and while the whole of his young family shook the table, and what they had become after six lessons when the young family was under restraint.

Dickens's relish for parodying such disingenuous letters is further evidenced in his mimicry of begging letters in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. But for this very reason he is sceptical about the authenticity of particular missives, warning his friend Edward

Tagart not to be taken in by a correspondent trying to solicit funds, in that he himself has recently heard 'a narrative, in its general features sufficiently like this (to one, as I am, in the habit of constructing fictions and curiously watching them) to awaken great suspicion' (20 January 1857. *Pilgrim* 8. 267-8. 267). As a writer of fiction himself, Dickens suggests, he is peculiarly alive to the strategies deployed by mendacious writers such as this woman who has approached Tagart.

On occasion he himself plays with the unreliable status of letters; writing to one acquaintance about the performance of amateur theatricals he begins with what appears to be a coldly formal tone, 'My Dear Sir, I beg to acknowledge the receipt of yours of the 19th, informing me of the terms on which you have engaged the Theatre. I subscribe to them very readily – having no choice – but am bound to say...' before disrupting the recipient's expectations with an abrupt shift in register, 'I write thus far, for you to read to the implacable Alexander the Little, if you think right; but I must break off here, to say that I laughed heartily on receipt of your letter this morning...' (to Andrew Dalglish. 21 June 1848). The text apparently contains two letters, the formal version to be read aloud and the coded version for the enjoyment of Dalglish alone.

This duality is equally characteristic of Dickens's fiction, which his more privileged friends are told to read as a series of letters to themselves. But if this invitation to look for hidden meanings ostensibly creates a hierarchy of readers, the preoccupation with letters and letter writing throughout his fiction points to the ways in which Dickens was indeed inclined to take the public, as well as his intimate circle, into his confidence. It is no coincidence that one of the most celebrated characters in Dickens's fiction, the utterly untrustworthy but well-meaning Wilkins Micawber, is addicted to writing letters even to friends who are in the room with him at the time. The straight-talking Betsy Trotwood might just as easily have been referring to Dickens himself in her exclamation, 'I believe he dreams in letters!'

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