



The written word as oral transcription : an examination of Dickens oral literary style
by Rodney Christopher Langley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English
Montana State University

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Abstract:

The focus of this thesis is on the oral quality of Dickens's literature. Although Dickens himself can be viewed as large participant in the rise of written culture, I explore the orality of his work in relation to the rise of literacy. By looking at the influence Victorian theatre had on Dickens, his narrative techniques and his characters I trace and examine the oral quality of his work. I feel Dickens was very concerned about the loss of an oral community and ironically used his fiction to explore this topic. I want to suggest that Dickens occupied a unique position in history where he could at once see the death of an oral community and the rise of an alphabetic society.

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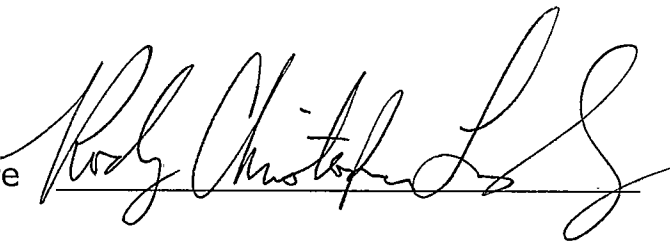
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this thesis is on the oral quality of Dickens's literature. Although Dickens himself can be viewed as large participant in the rise of written culture, I explore the orality of his work in relation to the rise of literacy. By looking at the influence Victorian theatre had on Dickens, his narrative techniques and his characters I trace and examine the oral quality of his work. I feel Dickens was very concerned about the loss of an oral community and ironically used his fiction to explore this topic. I want to suggest that Dickens occupied a unique position in history where he could at once see the death of an oral community and the rise of an alphabetic society.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

"...and Agnes wrote a few earnest words in her letters to Dora, of the pride and interest with which my old friends heard of my growing reputation, and read my book as if they heard me speaking its contents."

(David Copperfield, 643)

At present, reading aloud on a regular basis is limited to public settings such as the classroom, conventions, meetings, ceremonies and the Church. When, and if, reading aloud does take place in the home it usually occurs in the form of reading to children, often before bed. In earlier eras, reading and sharing literature aloud was more common. It was an activity related closely with theatre that helped create bonds between people and form communities and friendships. The power of voice, it would seem, was cherished and enjoyed. But, why as a society have we moved away from reading aloud together? Historically, it seems that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were responsible, among many other things, for motivating a shift from reading aloud to reading to oneself.

These two centuries were responsible for significant social transformations perhaps unparalleled by any other period in history. The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution

drastically altered previous social structures and created the foundation of the modern world that we currently inhabit. One of the numerous 'advances' of this period was the genesis and the gradual aim of literacy to a much larger and diversified population. However, a consequence of a larger literate community, that is often overlooked, is the effects it has on the shared orality of literature and the community as a whole. Perhaps this notion is not examined much because literacy has become so essential and highly valued in our present society and culture that it almost seems heresy for someone to suggest a negative cultural aspect of it.

Much of the literature of the nineteenth century examines the drastic social restructuring that was occurring. The authors of this period witnessed, analyzed and criticized through the medium of fiction a time when the Western world was redefining itself. Authors such as George Eliot, Thomas Carlyle, Elisabeth Gaskell, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Thomas Hardy and of course Charles Dickens were all absorbed by the drastically changing social climate. In short, they had something pressing and significant to write about and perhaps this is one reason why this period produced such an enormous amount of great literature in such a brief time.

Charles Dickens continues to stand out as one of the most prolific writers from this period. He is unique among canonical

English-language authors, along with Shakespeare and perhaps Austen, in remaining at once a vital focus of academic research and also a major figure in popular culture. Thematically, his large body of work calls into question the 'advances' of the modern world.

Paradoxically, for being one of the largest producer of words, his work often calls into question the social role of literacy. Also related to this paradox is that his work, I believe, lends itself more than any other of the nineteenth century to be read aloud.

The focus of this paper is on the oral quality of Dickens's literature. Although Dickens himself can be viewed as large participant in the rise of written culture, I want to explore the orality of his work in relation to the rise of literacy. by looking at the influence Victorian theatre had on Dickens, his narrative techniques and his characters I will trace and examine the oral quality of his work. I feel Dickens was very concerned about the loss of an oral community and ironically used his fiction to explore this topic. I want to suggest that Dickens occupied a unique position in history where he could at once see the death of an oral community and the rise of an alphabetic society.

The genius of Dickens manifests itself in many ways but one can not help notice the warnings or concerns that he casts on the emergence of the new modern world. Dickens had a great amount of concern for his audience and the community. Being skeptical of

the social implications of widespread literacy, the overall oral quality of his work, his method of publication in monthly serial installments, and his tour of public readings during the last years of his life strongly suggests that Dickens was well aware of the significance and importance of reading aloud. It would seem that perhaps Dickens foresaw the impact that widespread literacy would have on reading literature aloud. Through his writing, he promotes both implicitly, in terms of content, and explicitly in terms of language and orality the significance and benefits of reading aloud to one another.

CHAPTER 2

DICKENS AND HIS AUDIENCE

As Janice Carlisle aptly points out in her book, The Sense of an Audience, in Victorian literature the role or bond between writer and reader carried a particular charge or emphasis. The resulting literature was concerned with not only how the novelist viewed his or her art but also their public role. For Dickens, his view of the role of the Victorian artist can be derived from the following comment: "the sense of responsibility upon him to make the best of his audience, and to do the best for them is a highly agreeable sign of these times"(Carlisle 2). I use this quote to suggest that Dickens feels that the Victorian artist, unlike others, is very concerned with audience and how to make them better people through art. In fact, when beginning his career as a public reader he stated, "... I want to fulfill my trust and responsibility to sweeten the lives and fancies of others...everywhere I have found that peculiar personal relation between my audience and myself on which I counted most when I entered on this enterprise"(Forster 646). Why was the relationship between the audience and author so significant at this particular point in history? Janice Carlisle points out that the conflicts and changes of society in mid-nineteenth century resulted in many

divisions:

Widespread commercial competition, religious controversy, political dissension, and class distinctions all provoked a commentator like Thomas Carlyle to declare a divorce of contemporary society. (Carlisle 3)

Perhaps to counter this fracturing climate, the philanthropic Dickens turned to his definition of morality, principles of charity and common humanity as a source of content. Numerous readers and critics point to the underlying quality of goodness, focus on communion and charity as a primary characteristic in nearly all of Dickens's work. Perhaps this is why he has been labeled 'Father Christmas' by some. (Maurois 3)

Along with Dickens's moral concern, he employs certain narrative techniques to create a much more significant bond between writer and reader. In general, these techniques range from direct address to the reader and passages of obvious commentary to present-tense narration and the widespread use of the narrator as a mediating presence. These techniques seem to allow Dickens to more effectively communicate his social concerns with the reader. Dickens even goes a step further in the relationship between the story and its audience. He encourages and strengthens the reader's imaginative capacities by writing with an oral or theatrical quality. For example, in Dombey and Son at certain points the narrator actually joins the story and talks to the

characters. In this passage Edith Granger is playing a song on the piano and singing for Mr. Dombey. The song is one that Florence used to sing to little Paul, but the reader, Mr. Dombey and Edith Granger are unaware of this until the narrator informs us all. The narration stops and the voice begins to criticize the actions of the characters:

Edith Granger, any song but that! Edith Granger, you are very handsome, and your touch upon the keys is brilliant and your voice is deep and rich; but not the air that his neglected daughter sang to his dead son!(371)

Another example of this unique form of narration comes when Florence receives Diogenes, a dog, as a pet from Mr. Toots. Diogenes attempts to attack Mr. Carker who is continually making advances on Florence. In the following passage notice the change of voice in the narration as one from describing to one of bonding and joining with the reader or viewer in the condemnation of Mr. Carker's thoughts and designs as he steals a glimpse of Florence as she looks out her window:

Diogenes came clambering up close by [the window], and the dog, regardless of all soothing, barks and growls, makes at him from that height, as if he would spring down and tear him limb from limb. Well spoken, Di, so near your Mistress! Another, and another with your head up, your eyes flashing, and your vexed mouth worrying itself, for want of him! Another, as he picks his way along! You have a good scent, Di,--cats, boy, cats!(392)

Also, what makes this scene noteworthy is that the bond of author

and reader is accomplished not only through this narrative technique but also through the use of a joke. Up to this point in the story, Mr. Carker, and his regiment of teeth, have already numerous times been associated with the qualities of a feline.

If the primary aesthetic focus of Dickens is on the reader and narration is a mutual activity, including both author and reader, what better way to perpetuate fellowship and community than writing fiction that is meant to be read aloud? The oral quality of Dickens's literature, if acted upon, renders the lessons of sympathy, common humanity and man in his social relation to others as a means as well as an end. Family or community readings of his work were common and motivated a critic in 1857 to say: "In England nowadays novels are written for families--in France, they are written for men"(*Spectator* 160).

Dickens had a certain amount of faith in his audience's innate capacity to feel with and for the characters in his fiction. For this to be effective, he felt that the reader needed to believe and be absorbed into the story in order to be made any better by it. An example from Dombey and Son illustrates this by showing, with Dickens's entertaining comic relief, a bad example of a narrative. In the following passage, frail little Paul Dombey has been sent to Brighton to benefit from Mrs. Pipchin's domineering teaching style. In this example, Paul serves, like us, as the reader of a narrative:

"Remember the story of the little boy that was gored to death by a mad bull for asking questions."

"If the bull was mad," said Paul, "how did he know that the boy had asked questions? Nobody can go and whisper secrets to a mad bull. I don't believe that story."

"You don't believe it, Sir?" repeated Mrs. Pipchin, amazed.

"No", said Paul

"Not if it should happen to have been a tame bull, you little Infidel?" said Mrs. Pipchin.

As Paul had not considered the subject in that light, and had founded his conclusions on the alleged lunacy of the bull, he allowed himself to be put down for the present. But he sat turning it over in his mind, with such an obvious intention of fixing Mrs. Pipchin presently, that even that hardy old lady deemed it prudent to retreat until he should have forgotten the subject.(104)

Like Pip who comes after him, Paul asks too many questions. Here Dickens uses Mrs. Pipchin's story to illustrate how not to elicit a moral or tell a tale. Paul is doubtful and focuses his attention on the plausibility of the story. He therefore disregards any meaning that was intended by Mrs. Pipchin or the author of the fable.

Perhaps the most noteworthy method that Dickens used to create a powerful connection between himself and his audience was the manner in which he published his fiction. Although scorned by colleagues for choosing such a "low,cheap form of publication", that of weekly and monthly installments, the result was a powerful connection with his readers. The significance of this publication method was so influential to his work and its reception that I feel

that one can accurately characterize the idea of serial composition as truly Dickensian.

Firstly, and perhaps most applicable to this paper, by publishing in this manner Dickens reached a marginal and often illiterate portion of society. The installments were cheap enough that poorer folk could afford to buy them. Those who could read would then read aloud to their families or friends, including children, who could not read. The result was not only reaching a portion of society that held a special place in Dickens's heart but also creating suspense. Dickens alludes to the importance of reading aloud in poorer communities in the content of some of his texts. In Our Mutual Friend there is the famous case of the young boy Sloppy, who reads the popular press aloud to his illiterate foster mother, Betsy Higden. "He do the police in different voices," is Betty's description of Sloppy's performance(357). Also in Our Mutual Friend there is the ballad monger Silas Wegg, who is hired by the illiterate Mr. Boffin to read aloud to him from Gibbon's Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Both of these scenes are indicators of the importance of reading aloud for Victorians, and both scenes could be interpreted as allusions to the fact of Dickens's own texts being treated in similar fashion.

In essence, Dickens can be seen as the creator of the modern soap-opera or sit-com where the story is unfolding serially overtime.

This shared reading environment motivated discussions and conversations speculating what was to come in the next installment. As a result, the listeners were bonded together through the shared experience of hearing Dickens's fiction read aloud.

A greatly moved listener of such a family reading of *David Copperfield* was Henry James. James, then six-years-old, recalls how he had been sent to bed, but hid behind the tablecloth, until the Murdstones' ill-treatment of little David made him break into "the sobs of sympathy that disclosed my subterfuge"(Dupee 69). James also recalls what anguish it was when his father would retreat into his study with the new Dickens installment, shut the door, and begin his private perusal and rehearsal for the evening's family reading. The anguish came from not only the suspense of having to wait for hours but hearing his father's chuckles and bursts of laughter through the door(Dupee 69-70).

Dickens also used serial publication as a way to imbue a greater sense of life to his characters and his fiction. This idea is the focus of a brilliant essay by John O. Jordan titled "Partings Welded Together". The title of the essay comes from a passage in Great Expectations where Joe, who has come to visit Pip in London, tells him that "life is made up of ever so many partings welded together...divisions among such must come and be met as they

come"(246; ch.27). Jordan uses this passage to suggest that the sentiment that Joe voices has considerable importance for the Dickens canon as a whole. The significance lies in the fact that partings or separations, goodbyes or endings of any kind carry a special emotional charge for Dickens. They do so because as the omniscient narrator of Bleak House reminds us "all partings foreshadow the great final one"(693; ch.58). Or as Jordan puts it, "every goodbye contains a foretaste of mortality and is in effect a miniature death"(20). Jordan argues that the sentimental farewell is not only a primary cornerstone of Dickens's narrative art but is also no less important to his conception of narrative structure. Jordan offers the following consideration that illuminates how serial publication gives life to Dickens's fiction and creates a greater bond between him, his fiction and his audience:

Each monthly number or weekly installment advances the larger narrative toward its conclusion, yet each installment constitutes in itself an enforced separation or parting in the narrative. The original reader of a Dickens novel, or the modern reader who pays attention to the serial parts, is constantly saying goodbye: goodbye to characters, to a narrative voice, and to a story that, even as it moves forward, keeps dying a little at the end of each installment, until it dies permanently at the point of narrative closure...the most profound and paradoxical aspect of Joe's epigrammatic saying lies in its assertion that such experiences, taken in the aggregate, are what constitutes "life".

(20-1)

By publishing his fiction through serial installments, which as Jordan

suggests constitutes several deaths, Dickens gives a greater sense of life to his fiction. This aspect of narrative form bonds the reader and the author because it implicates the author and the story directly into the lives of the reader with each installment. The literary experience becomes a mutual activity much like the narrative technique mentioned earlier where the narrative voice joins that of the reader.

If we agree with Peter Brooks when he famously argues that "all narrative may be in essence obituary" in the sense that events become meaningful only when they are contemplated from the perspective of their ending, or in other words from the perspective of death, then this would seem to be particularly true for serially published novels like those of Dickens.

CHAPTER 3

DICKENS AND THEATRE

Another quality of nearly all Dickens's fiction, that one could argue bonds the reader with his fiction, is his memorable characters. He paints with words to create personalities that truly come to life on the page. The descriptions, not only visual characteristics but also their personalities, are often exaggerated to the point of becoming caricatures. What makes these characters so effective is that although exaggerated for comic entertainment they all seem to contain archetypal traits with which people can easily identify. Who can forget Sam Weller in *Pickwick Papers* who serves as Mr. Pickwick's 'yes-man' or even more accurately his 'Sancho Panza'? Weller's comic observations, logic and insight are so unique and memorable that they have been labeled by some as "Wellerisms".

Mr Carker the manager in *Dombey and Son* who, like Weller, is also a devoted assistant to the powerful businessman Mr. Dombey. Here is an excerpt from *Dombey and Son* that describes Mr. Carker who is asking about Paul, Mr. Dombey's new son. Throughout the novel, when Mr. Carker appears, Dickens uses numerous references to Mr. Carker's teeth as a way to communicate to the reader his

over-the-top servitude that is sheepish and fake:

Mr. Carker was a gentleman thirty-eight or forty years old, of a florid complexion, and with two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing. It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat...His manner towards Mr. Dombey was deeply conceived and perfectly expressed. "Mr. Dombey, to a man in your position from a man in mine, there is no show of subservience compatible with the transaction of business between us, that I should think sufficient." If [Mr.Carker] had carried these words about him printed on a placard, and had constantly offered it to Mr. Dombey's perusal on the breast of his coat, he could not have been more explicit than he was..."How do you do, Carker?" said Mr. Dombey. "Coolish!" observed Carker, stirring the fire. "Rather", said Mr. Dombey. "Any news of the young gentleman who is important to us all?" asked Carker, with his whole regiment of teeth on parade.(239-40)

This exaggeration of characters has an almost theatrical quality in that one can not only easily visualize the person but also his or her personality. Dickens creates or furthers certain archetypical characters that are now easily recognizable in western society. If we meet Dickens's characters, on the street, we only recognize them because we have seen them displayed many times previously, they are old acquaintances.

With this being said, it seems that Dickens wrote for readers

who already expect and understand certain dramatic cues. In, Dombey and Son Mrs. Pipchin can easily be seen as what has become the wicked witch figure. In A Christmas Carol there is of course the mean old selfish man, Scrooge and the list goes on. Some of his stories and characters have virtually reached the status of myth. This idea led Paul Davis to say that Dickens's Christmas Carol has become a "cultural text" for the world at large.

Dickens's interest and love for the theatre has often been cited as being, at least in part, responsible for his colorful characters as well as an oral literary style. Among the numerous books and articles written concerning the theatre and Dickens, what is common among all is they all point to Charles Matthews as being the largest source of influence on Dickens.

Charles Matthews was a comic entertainer very widely known among Victorian popular theatre. In John Forster's biography of Dickens he states that Dickens was fascinated by Matthews, a famous comic actor whose one-man shows captured public attention with their caricatures and impersonations(Forster 7). And as Deborah Vlock points out, "It is almost certainly the case that Dickens borrowed freely from Matthew's *dramatis personae*, for I have found prototypes for some of his most famous characters in the comedian's famous one-man shows,"At Home With Charles Matthews"(Vlock 43). Although Matthew's had an over-all influence

on Dickens's characters, Vlock focuses on and isolates the primary vehicle of influence as 'voice'.

She begins by claiming that voice is seated not in the physical body, diaphragm, or mouth, but in the social body. As will be discussed at a later point in this paper, the linguistic terms and class associations in speech patterns known as 'patter' is highly significant to the overall discursive order of Victorian society. In other words, the significance of the character's voice is derived in part from the contemporary popular assumptions about speech, and from the strains of dialogue which ran in Victorian heads. Knowing what these imagined voices sounded like is, of course problematic and involves speculation. However, as a source of analysis Vlock offers an obituary of Charles James Matthews, Victorian actor, playwright and theatre manager:

His utterance was clearness itself, and with his winning charm of manner was allied extraordinary incisiveness in speaking. Every word was finished, and every sentence was delivered with a crispness that brought its full meaning home at once to the mind of the listener...No one who knew him in the old days can forget his pleasant glibness, his extraordinary volubility and his most remarkable distinctness of articulation.(Vlock 130)

How this influences Dickens the most, Vlock contends, is that Matthews was responsible for creating, furthering or circulating certain voices that were heard on and off the stage. Stereotypes were as popular in Victorian society as they are now and Matthew's

influence helped Dickens be able to seize upon. For example, with the character Mrs. Pipchin the reader sees and hears the stereotypical mean and punishing spinster that has already become a part of the culture.

Another element that can be derived from Matthew's obituary is his charm and comic magnetism that are qualities easily found in the work of Dickens. Vlock points to reviews of Victorian theatre as a source of analysis. One such review, of J.S. Knowles' *The Hunchback*, shows that the dramatic experience of nineteenth-century theatre was seated primarily in the voice. In the review, John Coleman's description emphasizes the power of the main character's voice as greater than any dramatic descriptions of her physical gestures. The main ingredient that Vlock is picking up on here is that in the reviews she uses for support, the voice in the performance receives far more attention as the vehicle of power which inspires physical responses from the audience. Dickens was a well-known public speaker whose reviews indicate a powerful, lively, expressive and controlling voice(Collins 45).

But how did the emphasis on voice in the theatre affect Dickens's written fiction? The answer, obviously, is significant to this paper. Several critics have addressed his use of eccentric voices, like dialect and idiolect. But few examine the verbal stereotyping inherent in his work such as 'patter' and its overall significance to

the theatrical voice of Victorian society.

One critic, Peter Ackroyd, does touch upon the theatrical nature in Dickens's writing:

he is able to bring the light and exaggeration and animation of the theatre to the streets of London...he can, as it were, jump on the stage and do all the voices...But what his contemporaries heard were the voices, and the prevailing admiration for Dickens's early work came from what was described as the "vivid" and "graphic" way in which he had described the speech of London.(167)

Ackroyd here is pointing to a collapse between the lines of staged and social speech. Even if Dickens turned to the stage for theatrical idioms for his renditions of London life, it seems his readers heard them as authentic instead of dramatic.

To see further the influence Matthews had on Dickens, take for example Matthew's self-portrait that read remarkably like the beginning of Great Expectations or David Copperfield.

I was born on the 20th of June, 1776, at half-past two o'clock "and a cloudy morning" at No. 18 Strand, London...The agreeable twist of my would-be features, was occasioned--indeed, I have heard my mother with great tenderness and delicacy confirm it,--by a species of hysteric fits to which I was subject to infancy, one of which distorted my mouth and eyebrows to such a degree as to render me almost hideous for a time...the "offside" of my mouth, as a coachman would say, took such an affection for my ear, that it seemed to make a perpetual struggle to form a closer communication with it; and one eyebrow became fixed as a rusty weathercock.(Matthews quoted by Vlock 23-4)

This description, which one assumes Dickens read, illustrates the influence of the theatrical to fictional forms. This long description of Matthew's entrance into the world surely was written in a way to elicit a comic response from the audience. Dickens, it would seem, adopted this narrative technique to much success. It also exposes the likeness of personality that attracted the era's most popular novelist to its most popular comedian.

The discussion of voice and theatre and its influence seems to problematize the widely held notion that the Victorian period was the age of the novel. Ian Watt would be one such influential critic, with his seminal work The Rise of the Novel, to support that notion. Ian Watt does not spend much attention or time discussing theatre and the nineteenth-century novel. Vlock, however, points to "the latent theatricality in the novels and their hopeless entanglement in the culture of the stage.(Vlock 137)" What seems a paradox here is that many critics point to the Victorian genre as a time of the privatization of performance, interiority and solitude which were the social factors that helped the rise of the novel. But, this theory or reading of the culture seems to be more akin with a rejection of theatre rather than perpetuating its characteristics through fiction. Dickens's work embodies theatricality to the point that one has to wonder if he perhaps envisioned a decline of theatre and oral performance in contemporary society and as a result wanted to

instill those qualities into his fiction.

But how does one recover the theatrical voices of nineteenth century England so we can hear them as Dickens did? One way is to read Dickens aloud and we may, with practice, learn the inflections and cadences of his typical idioms. But, of course certain aspects of the voices died and there is something lost which textual transcription cannot recover. Lost also are the authentic social, political and comic contexts of Dickens's characters. We can try to recover the contexts through scholarship but it will never be the same experience as a contemporary reader of Dickens. But by reading Dickens aloud we can perhaps recover the spirit and unique sensibility which belonged to Victorian readers. This would involve attempting to read with our ears and eyes, rather than merely the brain. One has to learn to notice the vocal patterns rhythms and tones to visualize the physical gesture Dickens so brilliantly conveys. Thus, reading Dickens becomes a performance to be recovered or learned, to be heard, and to be shared by the community.

CHAPTER 4

DICKENS AND VENTRILOQUISM

Given the influence that the voices of the theatre had on Dickens just how does he achieve a textual transcription of those voices? As a starting place to answer that question, I think it is valuable to briefly discuss Dickens's early career as a writer in the form of a journalist and stenographer. Both of these professions seem to attempt to capture or record the 'real' world with words. Especially as a stenographer, Dickens was transcribing the dialogue of life as it happened in court. It helped him to recast the conventional relation between speech and writing. Dickens himself has professed that he liked to "estrangle reality without dispensing with it"(Nelson 32). It would seem that these two jobs were well suited for a person who, according to his daughter Kate, was "by nature bound to write everything"(Nelson 25-6).

Dickens spent nearly his entire life writing stories. He wrote fourteen novels, eight of them running over 850 pages. The fifteenth novel was in progress when he died. He also published five novelettes along with stories and articles for his magazines, *All The Year Round* and *Household Words*. He was also very involved in the editing process for his magazines and for friends, such as Wilkie

Collins, who also wrote fiction. In a letter to his friend and biographer, John Forster he said "I write because I can't help it." (Forster 45)

In a letter to Wilkie Collins Dickens gives us a hint to what his views are in regards to fiction and art as he takes issue with Collins's manner of handling plot:

...I think the business of art is to lay all that ground carefully, not with the care that conceals itself to show, by a backward light, what everything has been working to- but only to suggest, until the fulfillment comes. These are the ways of Providence, of which ways all art is but a little imitation. (Quoted by Nelson 27)

This imitation of life gains a particular Dickens characteristic by the manner in which he gives 'voice' to his characters. He succeeds in giving his characters an orality that is perhaps unmatched by any other author of his day.

Deborah Vlock discusses this element of Dickens's writing as being much more than simply dialect or idiolect. She examines and points to "patter" as being the best description of what Dickens is doing with the voices of his characters.

English popular entertainment dramatized the discursive order in a series of very public "dialogues" between normalcy and eccentricity; the comic-dramatic idiom known as "patter" was typically used in this fashion, to underscore the clarity and transparency of standard English speech and the superiority of those who spoke it. (Vlock 94)

Vlock uses the term patter to describe "a type of slang, a frivolous language, a language of form rather than content, in which words are deceptive because they deviate from conventional, and she would argue elite, semantics, rhythms, and syntax"(Vlock 94). It becomes a language that at first glance is gibberish and seemingly meaningless but actually means something truly significant. Patter for Vlock characterizes, from an elite point of view, socially marginal groups such as servants, beggars, street folk, children and embodies illiteracy as a whole (Vlock 95). The significance lies in the questions of social identity it raises and the play, as Derrida might say, of patter against the standard English that defined it.

Patter best describes Dickens's technique, because as Vlock points out, it first belongs to the stage and then to the novel. This form of language comes at a time in England's history when the political and economic landscape was redefining itself. Perhaps there was an underlying sense of anxiety about patter felt by the upper classes. Patterers could promote revolution or anarchy by banding together and speaking a language inaccessible to middle-class men. This style of speaking was very common in London during the 18th and 19th century. One encountered these voices frequently, in plays and novels if not on the streets. Take Sam Weller in Pickwick Papers as an example:

They puts things into old gen'lm'ns heads as they never dreamed of. My father, sir, vos a

coachman...His missus dies, and leaves him four hundred pound. Down he goes to the Commons, to see the lawyer and raw the blunt--wery smart--top boots on--nosegay in his buttonhole--broad brimmed tile...(139)

Many Dickens characters exhibit this pattered speech. For example Alfred Jingle, Captain Cuttle, Pip and Joe Gargery come to mind immediately. And more importantly for this paper, the voices of these characters effectively lend themselves to be read aloud. The reader has to sound out the words almost phonetically in order to get the meaning of what is being said. Take Pip's letter to Joe in chapter 7 of Great Expectations that is patter to the point of it being a puzzle that almost *must* be read aloud in order for it to make sense:

'mI deEr JO i OpE U r KrWitE wEll i opE i shAl soN
B haBeLL 4 2 teeDge U JO aN theN wE shOrl b so
glOdd aN wEn i M preNgtD 2 u JO woT LarX an bIEvE
ME inF xn PiP.'(123)

Dickens uses patter effectively to achieve what is perhaps a more verbal form of the written word. As Steven Marcus points out this pattering seems closely related to his job as a stenographer in the transcription of voice as it actually sounds. Marcus points out that once Dickens had mastered the stenographic characters, they were no longer the constituents of an imprisoning code (Marcus 69). This experience of a "quasi-graphic way of representing speech had, among other things, the effect upon Dickens to loosen up the rigid

relationships between speech and writing that prevail in our linguistic and cultural system”(Marcus 69).

The above passage from Great Expectations also has significance in content by suggesting literacy as a disease. One can take the ending to be a pun. Pip means, we think, in affection but writes infection. This idea lends itself to the promotion of reading aloud if literacy is a disease but more will be said on literacy as it is examined in Great Expectations later.

Dickens obviously saw a value in the orality of performance and story. Whether or not he foresaw a decline of it due to the industrial modern world remains speculation. But what is it about reading aloud that is so captivating and rewarding? Why did Dickens spend that last 12 years of his life traveling the world on a exhausting tour reading his novels aloud to packed theatres? Sure, he made money but he must have seen an importance and got a certain amount of enjoyment to have been so frequent about it. Why did he not spend this time writing more?

To examine the importance of orality that perhaps Dickens understood, I want to turn to a book by Steven Connor as a point of departure. Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism is a great study of the power of voice and its various cultural manifestations and influences. The book is particularly useful to this paper because Connor discusses Dickens, Charles Matthews and

Victorian theatre in his examination of ventriloquism's history. This occurs throughout his explication of the primary cultural notion of ventriloquism which is 'the art of seeming to speak where one is not'(Connor 12). He then aptly makes connections to the works of Dickens achieving this art successfully in the form of textual transcription.

Connor begins his book with a long chapter on the power of voice. His philosophical examination of voice is critical and thorough and questions Derrida's insistence on *écriture*:

If my voice is smoothing that happens, then it is of considerable consequence to whom it happens, which is to say, who hears it. To say the my voice comes from me is also to say that it departs from me. To say that my voice is a production of my being is to say that it belongs to me in the way in which it issues from me. To speak is always to hear myself speaking. Learning to speak depends upon being able to hear myself in this way...A voice also establishes me as an inside capable of recognizing and being recognized by an outside. If I hear my thoughts as a voice, then I divide myself between the one who speaks, from the inside out, and the one who hears the one who speaks, from the outside in... This is not, as those who follow Derrida's account of the phenomenon of *s'entendre parler*, will often imply, a 'splitting' of the self. There would be no self to split unless the self were already at least in principle distinguishable terms of what it says, and what it hears, or imagines itself saying.(Connor 6)

The point of this lengthy quotation is to illustrate the psychological implications of speaking. The focus is not necessarily what is being said but what is occurring as a process of orality. What I feel

Dickens understood about voice and orality has to do with the existential connections it creates between people. I believe that Connor, and Dickens for that matter, would agree with Hans-George Gadamer's opposition to Derrida in contending that "language and voice acts as a bridge not a barrier between people"(Gadamer 119). A person reading aloud to others is a vehicle, an actor or a puppet in the hands of the author. The listener is focusing on what is being said but the words, generally belong not to the reader but to the character and author. However, Dickens reading his own works aloud was an instance where they actually were his words. But when he was not narrating and reading the words of a character, the listener would view them as belonging to the character. The bonding or shared experience occurs as a result of everyone who is listening, even the speaker, who is, ideally, in a state of concentration bringing the character to life in their minds.

Connor suggests that in "a culture of writing, in which words come to take on the quality of objects, voices will tend increasingly to be modeled upon and to be assimilated to the condition of written words"(Connor 24). Here lies the importance of orality and the significance of reading aloud. The ephemerality of oral language means that it is more apt than writing to suggest a world of powers and powerful presences. Sound is more readily associated with the

transcendent, because sound suggests that over which we have no power(Connor 24). In other words, voice is itself a manifestation of presence. Here I want to use Hamlet's ghost, which is an often examined literary motif, as an example. To say that the divine being, in this case Hamlet's father is invisible but speaks, is to say that it is powerful and we have no power over it. But to say that the divine was inaudible, however, would seem to claim that it had no power over us. In other words, for ventriloquism the voice is what gives an inanimate object life.

Historically this ideas seems consistent with Aristotle's definition of voice which is in relation to the soul. In *De Anima*, he distinguishes voice as "a kind of sound characteristic of what has a soul in it; nothing without soul utters voice." It is important to make clear that Aristotle here is making a distinction between sound and voice; voice implies a soul. Perhaps this why in the eighteenth century ventriloquism was viewed by some as having demonic or supernatural associations.

Connor points to Patrick O'Donnell's comments on Dickens as being the most suited to describe his association with ventriloquy:

Dickens throws or scripts the tumultuous voices of his many characters with an increasing sense that, the more successful or spectacular the act of ventriloquy, the more self-questioned is the singular identity who is the source of those voices.(O'Donnell quoted by Connor 314)

A good example of this can be explicitly seen in the character Bunsby in Dombey and Son. Here Dickens manipulates what Connor points out as being characteristic of voice, that it comes from a body. "The Commander, addressing himself to nobody, thus spake; or rather the voice within him said of its own accord, and quite independent of himself, as if he were possessed by a gruff spirit: My name is Jack Bunsby"(410)! Here, Dickens also seems to expose the superstitious notion of possession which seems to come as a result of the disassociation of body and voice during this time. This passage allows Dickens to create in his character Bunsby, who is a "vast and stolid corporal presence", a quality that suggests that he never succeeds in being all there(411). Take the rest of Dickens's description of Bunsby: "His one rolling eye is always fixed on some remote point on the horizon, and even his hair had no governing inclination towards the north, east, west, or south, but inclined to all four quarters of the compass, and to every point on it"(414).

The act of ventriloquism is an art that aims to dislocate the voice from the body. In reality, as Connor points out at the beginning of his book, body and voice are inseparable. Voice carries a power that seems to distinguish itself from the other senses. We cannot shut off hearing as we can seeing. Or, we cannot 'listen away' as we can 'look away'(Connor 15). According to Connor, vision's uniqueness and dominance comes as a result of vision's

ability to turn itself off:

To blink or the shut the eyelids is what give vision much of its active power, to dispose, discriminate, and revise. It makes vision an exercise performed on the world, as opposed to the bearing in of the world upon us that seems to take place in hearing.(Connor 15)

The idea that we have no earlids, and even if we did they would not be a discriminating as eyelids because of the nature of sound, is very compelling. It seems that it is the sensory experience that is the most powerful or at least the one of which we have the least control. There is no escape from sound. It reaches us from everywhere and works upon us without pause. Dickens understood this and exhibits it through the conscious orality of his works as well as particular moments of content. Take for example, the deaf landlady in Dombey and Son. Mr. Morfin, her tenant, is also an amateur cellist who practices often. Her deafness only offers her partial protection from his "unmelodious bowing" which she apprehends as a "sensation of something rumbling her bones"(912).

CHAPTER 5

LEARNING TO READ AND WRITE: PIP'S GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The prophetic quality of Dickens is so apparent in his work because he lived in a time that witnessed the largest, most significant alteration of the social and environmental landscape. The two most blatant changes, it seems, were: a dissolving of class structure and the mechanical results of the industrial revolution such as the steam engine, train and later the automobile. Often, during the course of a novel, Dickens takes time to offer his views, which are mostly unfavorable, of the new modern world. Although there are many examples of this, a passage in Dombey and Son illustrates Dickens's feelings most effectively. In chapter twenty, Mr. Dombey goes on a journey with Major Bagstock. Dickens uses this chapter to say a few words, about three pages worth, about Mr. Dombey's choice of travel, which is called the "indomitable Monster, Death" and the landscape that is viewed out of his cabin window:

Away, with a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle, from town...Away, and still away, onward and onward ever: glimpses of cottage-homes, of houses, mansions, rich estates, of husbandry and handicraft, of people, of old roads and paths that look deserted, small and insignificant as they are left behind: and so they do, and what else is there but such glimpses, in the track of the indomitable monster, Death!...Louder and louder yet, it shrieks

and cries as it comes tearing on resistless to the goal: and now its way, still like the way of Death, is strewn with ashes thickly. Everything around is blackened. There are dark pools of water, muddy lanes, and miserable habitations far below. There are jagged walls and falling houses close at hand, and through the battered roofs and broken windows, wretched rooms are seen, where want and fever hide themselves in many wretched shapes, while smoke and crowed gables, and distorted chimneys, and deformity of brick and mortar penning up deformity of mind and body, choke the murky distance. (354-5)

Dickens, here, associates the supposedly forward movement of society and industry with death. The "old roads and paths [that] are insignificant as they are left behind" perhaps symbolizes several aspects of society that are in jeopardy of being lost such as old ways of travel, the poor and illiterate. In short, the train as death becomes the symbol of destroying the life that came prior to society's "resistless goal" of advancement.

Perhaps this notion which laments the days before these changes is a bit romantic. The era before surely had numerous problems and social ills that Dickens would have been in favor to alter for the better. However, his ideas for advancement seem to focus more on the betterment of the community and country as a whole. Like most artists, he is more concerned with notions of the human spirit and morality as principles to be fostered and enriched to serve as the foundation of creating a better society. One of the more interesting social changes that Dickens witnessed was the

advancement of literacy. In chapter two of The Rise of The Novel, Ian Watt examines the reading public of the 18th century. His aim in this chapter is to make connections between the nature and organization of the reading public and the emergence of the novel. The chapter offers many valuable historical statistics of the reading public, schools and education as well as prices and reports from book publishers and sellers. In short, Watt contends that the reading public, of novels, during this time was still somewhat rich with a fair amount of leisure time. He states, " the price of a novel, on the other hand, would feed a family for a week or two"(Watt 42). This fact should be taken in light of the earlier discussion concerning Dickens's serial publication.

Watt then goes on to address literacy, not just economics, as a significant factor for a marginalized reading public.

...and three-fourths of the poor could not read, and there is much evidence to suggest that in the country many small farmers, their families, and the majority of labourers, were illiterate, while even the towns certain sections of the poor--especially soldiers, sailors and the rabble of the streets--could not read.(Watt 37)

It is important to note however, that London was especially becoming more literate as can be gathered by the general spread of shop names instead of picture signs in 1782(Watt 38). And, indeed London continues to grow and becomes the center of the Western world in the nineteenth century. It becomes a place where

the dreams and possibilities of the modern world are thought to reside. Pip in Great Expectations believes this and is convinced that literacy is his ticket through the gates of that city.

By the nineteenth-century literacy began spreading farther and farther out to rural areas in England. It seems that it became more and more apparent to the general public that if one wanted to rise in the new classless society one must be able to read and write. Literacy, in fact, becomes the manner in which one can climb the social ladder. Dickens viewing this and in his prophetic style writes Great Expectations, which addresses primarily the issues of social mobility and literacy.

As Murray Baumgarten aptly points out in his essay, *Calligraphy and Code: Writing in Great Expectations*, part of the pleasure in reading this novel comes from watching Pip learn to write and read. In the novel, Pip serves as the hero figure of reading and represents perhaps the sentiment of a common rural boy in this era. The theme of reading begins very early on in the novel when Dickens has Pip's imagination construct a picture of his parents from the shape of the letters on their tombstones:

...in a time long before the days of photographs,
the shape of the letters on my father's tombstone
gave me the odd idea that he was a square, stout,
dark man, with curly black hair...from 'Also
Georgina Wife of the Above, I drew a childish
conclusion that my mother was freckled and
sickly.(35)

Referring back to Vlock's discussion of patter, which creates a correct or privileged way to speak, the reader enjoys Pip's alphabetic adventures because of the comic amusement with which we, in our position of correctness, judge him a mistaken and eager student.

What is at the heart of Baumgarten's criticism on this novel, is that Dickens is suggesting that literacy can be viewed as a "code that directs and even imprisons the imagination in rules and laws"(Baumgarten 62). As the novel progresses reading becomes more and more suspect. Whenever Pip explicitly reads a text of some sort, something drastic immediately follows. For example, the note he reads that Wemmick leaves for him telling him not go home, the letter he has written Joe on his slate, and the novel he is reading just before Magwitch returns from Australia all follow with a drastic event. The consequences of the reader in the novel suggests to the reader outside the novel that texts are potentially dangerous and have the power to affect and even alter reality. This is an important point since Pip is writing his autobiography in order to communicate the story of his life.

Great Expectations is filled with the tension or irony between what Pip experiences and what the reader of the novel is in the act of doing. The reader becomes part of the story. As Baumgarten points out, many of the most crucial communications in the novel

take place between characters through writing with the implements of writing taking on a type of symbolic force: Wemmick expresses astonishment by putting pen in mouth, Miss Havisham keeps a pencil around her neck and Mike is rebuked for crying by the comment that his is "sputtering like a bad pen"(427). The characters end up reading each other, much like Pip suggests at the beginning of the novel, like alphabetic letters(Baumgarten 34).

The reader becomes Pip's accomplice in learning how to maneuver through this new world of slate and chalk, paper, pen and ink. We bond and join him in his process of education and are reminded of our own trials and struggles to become educated adults. We participate in the plot of reading which promises to lead an orphan to worldly wealth and a gentleman's status (Baumgarten 34). Magwitch defines a gentleman as someone who owns books "mounting up on their shelves, by hundreds! And you read'em, don't you? You shall read'em to me, dear boy! And if they're in foreign languages wot I don't understand, I shall be just as proud as if I did"(338).

If Pip is the hero figure of reading in the novel then Joe Gargery and the forge represents the illiterate world. Joe is an honest, hardworking blacksmith who has no ambitions of becoming a gentleman. Joe never quite becomes fully literate and thus does not forget the ways in which his person and identity are rooted in

the oral culture of family, place and time. Joe does not invest in his ego in the same way Pip does. Pip seems to manifest the modern ego, an ego full of desire and expectations. The simplicity and innocence of Joe is played against the world of literacy which, in the end, carries the guilty suspicion that the act of writing is merely a production of fiction, lies, and just something made up. Isn't the novel, Great Expectations, a representation of all of those things?

It would seem that, for Dickens, the written word and the world of books is suspect. Did this view contribute to the oral quality of his writing? By contrast with speech, writing is abstract. With writing one cannot interrogate and examine the speaker face to face. In place of a person with whom one can physically interact, the written word plunges us into the interpretive hermeneutic. Nietzsche suggests that we "force, adjust, abbreviate, omit, pad, invent, falsify and whatever else which is of the essence of interpretation"(24). As the oral culture continues to diminish in the nineteenth-century, Dickens it seems is cautioning us on the possible dangers of literacy and books.

Pip becomes literate grows up to be an alphabetic person. Through Pip, Dickens reminds us that even though literacy might be the mark of a gentleman, reading has also made men and women mad. With this in mind, one is again reminded of Sam Weller and Mr. Pickwick. It is no wonder why Don Quixote was one of Dickens's

favorite books. Is this to suggest that Pip goes mad? Even if Pip does not explicitly become insane he is definitely disillusioned. Pip believed his life to be destined to have the happy ending of a fairy tale. He believes this because he has become a consumer of words and reads the text this way. Reading for Pip can be seen as the democratic vehicle making possible the production of the self which promises great expectations. For example, in this case--the autobiography, the diary or confession enables the individual to objectify his or her own experience. One must first acquire the arbitrary and artificial skill of literacy until it becomes automatic. As Baumgarten points out, this has numerous consequences:

Literacy has a transformative impact on the social order. It also changes the writer. His psyche begins to be shaped by the process of reading and writing. The literate ego knows how to differentiate itself from the flow of language of oral culture. It distinguishes between letters, and comprehends how they make words and words sentences, paragraphs, and pages. The process in which it engages in reading and writing is only one of the actions inherent in the modern notion of ego development. As it changes, this self will also come to discover that just as it is separated yet mysteriously and secretly linked to the words it reads and writes, so it is different from and yet secretly joined to the many roles it plays.(66)

So now that Pip becomes self-conscious about his writing, he believes he is now worthy of being read. He has become a text. This presumption is another mark of his self-importance and

supposed moral superiority.

But perhaps the most profound aspect of Great Expectations is that it weighs the costs and benefits of literacy and social mobility and is not optimistic. Pip leaves the innocence of his life with Joe and the forge for the work of an education that will make him increasingly ashamed of his common boots and coarse hands. Literacy teaches Pip to become a liar in that he discovers that words are like clothes or costumes and can be put on and off at will. Baumgarten goes so far as to say that "literacy ushers Pip into the romantic world of Experience, as he leaves illiterate Eden"(66). Also Baumgarten reminds us that in Swift's fable, the rational Houyhnhnms who cannot lie, have no writing.

As I have argued for nearly all of Dickens's work, in Great Expectations he explores the values of literacy in his unique style that seems not so much to be written as spoken. It seems to preserve aspects of the oral speech of an era before widespread literacy. That this style is used for a novel exploring literacy is highly ironic. To read this novel, and all the others, is to listen to someone speaking personally to us with the quality of a face to face encounter.

In Great Expectations, Dickens also depicts the loss of intimate and personal relationships that are the result of an oral culture. Part of the intimacy of Joe and Biddy that is emphasized,

which leads them to marry, is the shared teaching and learning of reading and writing. Because the literate Pip has abandoned the forge and the people in it to follow his fairy-tale, he has become alienated and estranged from the love and intimacy of this oral community. Having Joe and Biddy cope with the difficulty of learning to read and write, Dickens illustrates not only the importance but also the increasing value of literacy in a world undergoing the revolution of industrialization and modernization. This revolution depends on making the illiterate into modern workers. Pip's experience seems to recapitulate the historical experience by which oral culture is devalued and writing replaces spoken communication as the transcendent value of western culture. This, it would seem, is where Dickens is making an accounting of the costs and benefits of modernization: writing, the production of language, and the manipulation of words and capital have become the new measure of human worth.

It would seem that Dickens truly understood this when one looks at the amount of words he produced. Although many other Victorian authors were pouring out many words, all before the invention of the typewriter, none surpassed the plenitude of Dickens. This has often been an area of attack or criticism from those that say his stories are only lengthy because he was being paid by the word. But, unlike other authors of his day, Dickens is

notable for his self-conscious concern to map the social and psychological consequences of writing. In Great Expectations, he reveals the gulf between written and oral culture. By doing this it seems that he occupies a particularly significant moment in western cultural history. He can look both ways--back into an oral culture and to the future and the emergence and dominance of an alphabetic society.

As was the case, numerous novels of the nineteenth century, most of the reading that took place within the novel was reading aloud. And by reading Great Expectations aloud, we become one of its community of readers. We are witnesses to its experience. Because of Dickens's genius, as Pip speaks we are not imprisoned by the code of reading, but rather liberated by its unique style of transcription. We envision the scene, encounter the portrayed situation and believe in this rendered world. It seems that our experience in reading this novel is not just Pip's deciphering a code but also the rhythm of participating in its production. It gives writing the qualities of speech and the flow of language.

CHAPTER 6

ORAL DICKENS AND FREUD

I have tried to establish that Dickens's work not only lends itself very effectively to be read aloud but that there seems to be an over-all oral fixation in his work as an artist. The content of his fiction, his public reading career towards the end of his life and his method of publication all seem to have the thread of orality running through them. In terms of content, Ian Watt has painstakingly examined the treatment of food and drink in Dickens's novels. Watt contends that in all there are thirty-five breakfasts, thirty-two dinners, ten luncheons, ten teas, eight suppers and drink is mentioned two-hundred and forty-nine times.(Watt 165) In his essay "Oral Dickens", Watt examines Dickens's gastronomic fascination which according to Watt far exceeds that of any other Victorian novelist. More importantly, Watt discusses what connections, if any, can be established between oral in the sense of preoccupied with food and drink and oral in the sense of the spoken.

In order to attempt to examine an oral fixation of Dickens's work Watt begins with tracing some biographical experiences of Dickens:

Dickens was then twelve; he would be nearing the end of the latency period when infantile sexual attitudes again come to the fore and are shaped into the basic sexual pattern of the future. But Dickens's mother had failed him on every count; he was expelled from home and family; he was hungry, and had to find his own food; all his hopes for the future were it seemed, permanently doomed; and he seems to have laid the blame on his mother--the very mother who, in Dickens's case, had performed not only the usual maternal offices, but had taught him to read. It was natural, therefore, that Dickens should have fallen back on the oral patterns of the distant past; attempt to achieve his early ambitions through prodigiously hard work; and that these ambitions should be connected with never going hungry.(Watt 174)

Watt here seems to suggest that the development of Dickens as a writer and oral performer is connected to what Freud would label an "oral regression"(Freud 43). According to Freud, in terms of oral progression, sucking, eating and speaking employ the same organs and reflexes. All three activities use the lips, the tongue, the jaw, the throat and the breathing apparatus(Freud 43). Watt states in his essay that many psychoanalysts believe that writers in general have strong oral personalities. Whether or not that is true for all writers is skeptical but it surely seems applicable to Dickens. The idea that speech itself was a source of psychological or emotional satisfaction seems to fit neatly into understanding why Dickens's whole literary style seems oral.

Another interesting issue of Dickens's work through the lens

of Freud is of the maternal figure. Given Freud's theory of oral regression and Watt's analysis of Dickens's childhood one might conclude that Dickens was preoccupied with finding or creating mother-substitutes. Perhaps this is why he was the first novelist to put a child at the center of a novel for adults. Also, it is obvious to anyone who has read a Dickens novel that he reveals many of the perspectives of a child. Referring back to Freud, the following seems to connect how the oral developmental stage could not only create an oral regression but also a sense of passivity and waiting for mother to return:

After birth the child develops its sense of pleasure, purpose, and relation to the outside world primarily through suckling. If in its first year or so the experience is gratifying and prolonged, the child is likely to develop an optimistic character. This optimistic and ambitious character can be of two kinds. In favorable circumstances an early self-confidence may later help the child to successfully achieve its aims in life; but a second kind of character may also develop, one in which a vague optimism habituates the individual to passivity, to a life of waiting for the world as mother to give him what he needs. (Freud 52)

The idea of passivity and optimism seems to fit well with a quote from Dickens about his reading habits. In an autobiographical passage in David Copperfield, David says: "reading kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time"(55). Given Freud's theory, it would seem that perhaps the fancy and hope that Dickens is referring to here is his mother.

CHAPTER 7

THE PUBLIC READINGS: A NOVELTY IN LITERATURE

Dickens found great emotional and psychological satisfaction in the relationship with his audience. This relationship grew and became more important as he began his career as a public reader in 1853. He said, "There's nothing in the world equal to seeing the house rise at you, one sea of delightful faces, one hurrah of applause"(Forster 65)! This feeling resulted in Dickens giving in all about 472 public readings(Collins XXV). Philip Collins, who has edited and compiled most of his readings, points to his private reading to friends of the opening number of Dombey and Son as first suggesting to Dickens the notion of giving public readings for pay. Up to this point he had done several readings but for charitable purposes only.

Another factor that Collins points to is his crisis of marriage which broke up within a fortnight of his embarking upon his career as a paid reader. This seemed to propel his reading career in that, as I mentioned earlier, he seemed to have found great comfort in having crowds about him. Dickens, it seems, liked to be liked and not just by the few. He had more of the literary talents requisite for widespread popularity than any other author since Shakespeare

and now he began to show his abundant talents on the platform.

But, what can the Dickens public readings tell us about the importance of reading aloud? Obviously, there is the fact that just by performing public readings Dickens is promoting and encouraging his literature to be read aloud. One might even argue that because of these public readings he captivated his audience to the point that in a sense he exemplified how to effectively read his fiction aloud as well as illustrating the bonding that occurs between reader and listeners. Being entertained by such a virtuoso perhaps motivated his audience to attempt to emulate his oral performances on their own behind closed doors. Unfortunately because Dickens performed these readings before they could be recorded, much of what we know comes from various reviews and reactions from audience members. Let us look at the intricacies of watching and listening to Dickens read his fiction aloud. Referring back to Steven Connor, he points out there is a close relationship between voice and the face:

Both face and voice are parts of us that are turned outwards and by which the world knows us, but which we can ourselves only see or hear partially. In other words, they signify intimacy and vulnerability. We are our faces as we are our voices, partly because we cannot hear or see them as others do. Our faces and voices express us, because we do not fully include them in ourselves; they are most like us because they are not wholly us.(401)

Even though, as I have argued, serial publication created a bond

between the author, story and reader, the spectator at a Dickens reading became even more intimate with the story as he or she watched Dickens himself perform. One reviewer was so taken by the performance he felt a great inadequacy of his words: "A man can't write his eye(at least I don't know how to), nor yet can a man write his voice, nor the rate of his talk, nor the quickness of his action, nor his general spicy way.(Forster 121)" Dickens was indeed a performer and the audience marveled at his ability to take on the role of seven or eight characters in one reading. As a great admirer of Dickens, I can only imagine what these performances must have been like. The following review of his farewell tour, taken from the *Illustrated London News*, 31 July 1858, gives a good visual of Dickens reading aloud:

He is a story-teller; a prose improvisatore; he recites rather than reads; acts rather than lectures. His powers of vocal and facial expression are very great; he has given them conscientious culture; and he applies them heartily and zealously to the due presentment of the creations of his own matchless genius. (Collins Xlvi)

Obviously, from most of the reviews one can surmise that Dickens was an animated and talented performer. But do these performances and acting talents simply create the illusion of an oral quality in his fiction?

Although Dickens was a talented reader and actor I have argued that his texts lend themselves, more than others, to be read aloud. His fiction provides, in addition to the narrative

qualities I have already argued, many opportunities for 'character and oddity' from the vocal reader. In other words, the text offers a lot of flexibility in how dialogue is rendered aloud since many of the characters within his fiction are nearly more accurately described as caricatures. Many critics of Dickens, most of whom I have utilized in this paper, point to the fact that for them the experience of reading Dickens is, like the epigraph of this paper from David Copperfield suggests, like hearing him speak its contents (Collins 12). Perhaps this is best understood in comparison to another Victorian author who also attempted to pursue a career by reading his fiction aloud.

Thackeray, perhaps Dickens's leading contemporary rival in English prose fiction, attempted to read his work aloud to large audiences. The reception was fair but in no way comparable to the success that Dickens experienced. Is this simply because Dickens was a better elocutionist, actor and performer? Perhaps, but it seems too simple and uncritical to not attribute some of the success to the oral literary style of Dickens's work. It would seem only logical that literary style of an artist who possessed such noteworthy oral and performance skills, as to make Thackeray himself say, "If that man would now go upon the stage he would make his 20,000 pounds a-year", would reflect a considerable amount of those qualities (Collins Xlvi). One only has to consider how many times one has witnessed or even heard of Vanity Fair

being performed on the stage as opposed to the continuing performances of A Christmas Carol and Oliver Twist. These literary texts are, of course, considerably shorter than other Dickens texts which might account for their selection but also they possess an oral literary style that continues to intrigue and capture the ambition of actors and theatre companies all over the world. Perhaps a fruitful area of examination concerning the oral quality of Dickens's texts is the manner he prepared and delivered these readings.

Although we do not have any we recordings of the readings, we do possess the texts that Dickens used for his performances. As Philip Collins suggests, the move from the text to the platform was relatively easy for Dickens. He did not have to manipulate or alter his fiction much since it already possessed an oral quality. His editing and preparation was more concerned and focused on abbreviation and emphasis:

...preparation was relatively simple: mainly a matter of abbreviation, writing in an occasional summary or bridge-passage where a cut had been made. Words or passages were underlined for emphasis and in the margins Dickens wrote some 'stage directions' to remind himself about a tone of voice or a gesture. So he found it quite convenient to use an ordinary printed copy of the text. (Collins xxx)

And even more fascinating is that he continued to use these same 'prompt copies' throughout his reading career. Even through

hundreds of different oral performances of the same text, he did not alter or change the writing to attempt to a better or more effective oral delivery.

He did however employ other techniques to improve the delivery of his texts. Perhaps his success as a reader had to do with work ethic. Dickens would rehearse for hours before embarking on a new reading tour. He claimed to have rehearsed *Doctor Marigold*, a short story, over two hundred times and he told an American friend it took him three months hard labour to prepare for a new reading (Collins xxxii). In order to understand and illuminate just how Dickens prepared for a performance let's look at the prompt-copy of David Copperfield, one of his most ambitious reading efforts being both his favorite and longest.

For *David Copperfield* the main alterations were that of abbreviation and rearrangement. The prompt-copy consists of six chapters. The main plot, chapters I, II, IV and VI, concerns David's introducing Steerforth to the Peggotty group, Emily's elopement, Mr. Peggotty's search for and eventual recovery of her, and the deaths of Ham and Steerforth in the great storm. Chapters III and V provide a light relief from the plot, David's courtship of Dora and their early married life, and his amusing bachelor dinner for the Micawbers and Traddles. Also, Dickens omitted indications of who was speaking, and how, because the context and the tone of his

voice would signify this. Similarly many descriptions of facial expression, gesture, movement and demeanour were deleted because he adopted the qualities into his performance. However, according to reviews in the *Brighton Gazette*, he was also made it a point of not making his dramatic faculty too prominent in his readings:

He does not, except on very rare occasions, act thoroughly out; he suggests, and suggests very forcibly; but he leaves to his hearers to supply what he does not feel it necessary to delineate... This is just what the very best reading--that is, reading, and not acting--ought to be. (Cited in Collins ix)

As a result many reviews praised him for being careful not to confound the actor and the reader. This characteristic also distinguishes him from his noisier and less successful rivals who, as the *Brighton Gazette* suggested, indulged in "distressing physical exercises, which make some elocutionists objects of pity rather than of admiration"(Cited in Collins ix). The idea that Dickens had the awareness not to confound the actor and the reader in his performances also supports the notion that Dickens is unique in that his fiction seems to straddle or perhaps merge the notions of the spoken and the written. Or as one reviewer stated, "And if no great author since Dickens has had his talent and zest for the platform, neither has any other great literature, written for the page, lent itself so appropriately to solo performance"(Collins 64).

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: UNITING MORE THAN THE SPOKEN AND WRITTEN

If there is a downside to Dickens's public reading career, it might be that the energy and time he spent performing could have yielded a few more novels to his reading public. However, the Dickens's canon is so large one can hardly complain and as I have illustrated, his reading career was valuable to promoting reading aloud and set a literary precedent . As I have mentioned earlier, the work of Dickens is unique, along with Shakespeare, in that it occupies a place in the academic and scholarly sphere as well as capturing the popular imagination. I have tried to illustrate that it is no coincidence, I believe, that Dickens's fiction at once also occupies a literary/textual role as well as an oral/spoken role.

The performance element of these two icons of English literature has catapulted their work from being more than words on the page to becoming, as Paul Davis has labeled it, "cultural texts"(Davis 67). I take Davis's term to mean that at this point in Western history the works of these two giants have become deeply intertwined into the fabric of our culture. Much like the way that stories of the Bible are widely known by even those who are not Christians, people who have never read a Shakespeare play or a

Dickens novel are at least somewhat familiar with Romeo and Juliet and A Christmas Carol. The reason for this could be that, like the notion of Dickensian serial publication, the oral quality gives their work life. Their words and ideas, which in themselves are genius, are constantly reborn as they are spoken and performed with each passing generation. The classic or timeless quality of their work allows each generation to interpret, adjust and re-situate itself in relation to the work of these two authors as well as to past interpretations and criticisms.

Take for example, the recent cinematic renditions of Romeo and Juliet and Great Expectations. Both are, in terms of dialogue and narrative, very true to the original text. However, what is different and unique is that they are both placed in the present rather than in their historically appropriate places. Although reading aloud is less dramatic with fewer special effects, one could argue that this is a similar form of adaptation.

A distinction however should be made in that Shakespeare's orality is obviously more explicit in that as a dramatist he wrote his works to be performed on stage. The texts were created for the purpose of actors to read and memorize their lines for the stage. But one is also able to read an entire Shakespeare play as one would read a novel without much adjustment. However, what is the correct voice, rhythm and delivery of the lines in a Shakespeare

play? These questions involve interpretation and, like the reading of Dickens aloud, takes a lot of practice. But the fact that both of the great writers' work lends itself to be read aloud is motivation that the readers become a participant in the work. It is here that the lines of history, fiction and reality, solitary and communal become blurred as a result. The 'oral transcription' begs and urges the reader not to simply read silently but to produce it again and again with the voice. I believe, both Dickens and Shakespeare have a style that is a medium more for the voice and the ear than the eye.

Dickens was a great admirer of Shakespeare and often read certain plays aloud to friends and family(Forster 121). Dickens recognized that part of Shakespeare's everlasting success and genius was due to the orality of his work. Dickens's interest in oral literature was also associated with his philanthropic concern for the illiterate population. The portion of society that was illiterate could still enjoy and reap the moral benefits of hearing a Shakespeare performance or a Dickens's novel being read. Paul Schlicke gives, in his estimate, a relatively conservative figure of Dickens reaching four-fifths of the core reading population of England with each new installment(Schlicke 488). A reason for this is that the installment was recited aloud to a great many more people than just the purchaser of the installment. As a result, Schlicke suggests that the

number of less-literate fans was ten times greater than those who actually bought his fiction. This in mind, it is no wonder why some of Dickens's fiction have become "cultural texts".

But paradoxically, Dickens does seem to promote literacy by not only being a producer of words himself but what he implies in the content of his fiction. For example, Mr. Krook in Bleak House, who is illiterate, is never able to capitalize upon the power represented by his documents because he can never read them. So what can we gather from this paradox? It seems that Dickens, as an author, understood the value and power of literacy on the imagination. But he simply did not disregard those who could not read and perhaps wanted to usher them into this new emerging alphabetic society.

The prophetic nature of Dickens's work can be seen in the fact that since his time the role of literacy in society has continued to increase. The value of literacy has increased so much so that the mark of a gentleman is no longer simply being able to read and write. These two traits, along with all areas of education, are much more commonplace in today's society. However, illiteracy still does exist but in much smaller proportions. In terms of Dickens's prophetic sight, what is more interesting is that he foresaw a type of alienation and fracturing of family or community that the effect of widespread literacy would have on the experience of reading

literature together. Much of his fiction involves a cost-benefit analysis of the advancements of society. Literacy and education played a significant role in the collapse of a class structured society. In other words, literacy and education in our society have become the great equalizers or the means of establishing one's place and success. Dickens, a leading advocate for social reform, surely condoned such a transformation. But also, he recognized what would be lost a result of this new society. With a large literate society, no longer would people be forced to come together to hear, experience and share literature.

Towards the end of the nineteenth-century, self-sufficiency in all areas of life would increasingly begin to be seen as the new social goal or mark, replacing the notion of interdependence. But Dickens's work, as I have suggested throughout this paper, straddles the line between scholarly concerns and those of common folk, between empowering the individual and bringing community together, and lastly between the spoken and the written. By embracing the oral literary style of Dickens we are encouraged to come together, share time, participate and see in ourselves and others, reflections of the sentimental world that he has created for us not only to enjoy but also from which we can learn to be better people.

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