



**A Tale of Two Desks**  
**Professor Malcolm Andrews**

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*'I have often thought, that I should certainly have been as successful on the boards as I have been between them'*

(Dickens, Letter to Forster, Dec 1844-Jan 1845)

Charles Dickens had three professional careers. He was a novelist, a journalist, and a public reader, 'on the boards'. He certainly was successful as both a writer and a public reader. At his death his estate was valued at £93,000. Half of that came from the proceeds of his readings over the last 12 years of his life – particularly the readings on his American tour of 1867/68.

This talk explores the relationship between Dickens the novelist and Dickens the public reader. Why did he take up the reading career late in his life? Was there anything in his earlier writing practices that anticipated that later career in public performance? I begin with Dickens at his writing desk.

### The Improvisor

The mystery of literary creation fascinated Victorian readers, and there are many portraits in paint and photography of Dickens at his desk. All of them are peculiarly unrevealing about the creative process, not surprisingly. In middle and later life Dickens was extraordinarily disciplined in his writing practices. He was strict in his routines and obsessively tidy at his desk. But in the early years he seems to have been much more relaxed. In writing *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist* and *Nicholas Nickleby* – each in monthly serial form – he was happy to improvise. We can get a glimpse of this from an eyewitness, who watched Dickens writing *Oliver Twist*.

*"One night in Doughty Street, Mrs. Charles Dickens, my wife and myself were sitting round the fire, cosily enjoying a chat, when Dickens, for some purpose, came suddenly from his study into the room. 'What, you here!' he exclaimed; 'I'll bring down my work.' It was his monthly portion of Oliver Twist for Bentley's. In a few minutes he returned, manuscript in hand, and while he was pleasantly discoursing, he employed himself in carrying to a corner of the room at little table, at which he seated himself and re-commenced his writing. We, at his bidding, went on talking... he, every now and then (the feather of his pen still moving rapidly from side to side), put in a cheerful interlude. It was interesting to watch, upon the sly, the mind and muscles working...in company, as new thoughts were being dropped upon the paper. And to note the working brow, the set mouth, with the tongue slightly pressed against the closed lips, as was his habit."*

Comparison of the manuscript pages of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) with *A Tale of Two Cities* 30 years later shows how freely and easily composition came to the young Dickens. There are hardly any erasures or second thoughts on the *Oliver Twist* sheet, whereas the later manuscript shows almost every other line revised to some extent.

By the middle 1840s, when Dickens was in his early 30s, he began to plan his stories more carefully. This can be seen in the design on the monthly wrappers for the instalments of his novels. When Dickens embarked on writing *Pickwick*, he had little clue as to where it was going in terms of any plot. He just knew if it was going to feature comic sporting adventures; so that is all the wrapper illustrator had to go on. By the time of *Dombey and Son* in 1846, Dickens was planning theme and plot. And the wrapper design became more complex and richly informative, indicating the main thematic components.

Furthermore, Dickens is now exploiting the serial form to shape the relationship he wants with his public. In planning *Little Dorrit*, he uses the pace of monthly serialization to imitate the rhythms of the real social life of his readers, so as to make the division between the fictional and the real worlds more porous. It is a way of insinuating his fictional world into the real day-to-day lives of his public.

### Rapport with the Public

'To commune with you in any form, is to me a labour of love'. So, Dickens wrote as he brought *Master Humphrey's Clock* to a close in 1841 (the weekly periodical that had run *The Old Curiosity Shop* and *Barnaby Rudge*). This was not just a polite authorial gesture. Dickens really craved the affection of his reading public. In his Preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* (composed for the volume edition after the monthly serialized novel had been completed) he quoted an eighteenth-century periodical writer signing off to his readership:

*'The author of a periodical performance... commits to his readers the feelings of the day, in the language which those feelings have prompted. As he has delivered himself with the freedom of intimacy and the cordiality of friendship, he will naturally look for the indulgence which those relations may claim; and when he bids his readers adieu, will hope, as well as feel, the regrets of an acquaintance, and the tenderness of a friend.'*

(Henry Mackenzie, *The Lounger* 1785-7)

Dickens then continued in his own words: 'With such feelings and such hopes..., the Author of these pages, now lays them before his readers in a completed form, flattering himself, like the writer just quoted, 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.' 'Company'! Dickens wanted to become a personal friend to his readers. As if to reinforce this, the volume edition of *Nickleby* carried an oval portrait engraving of the young Dickens, beneath which was printed his handwritten signature. It was as if he were signing a letter. And indeed, that is how he sometimes pitched his appeal: 'I wish you would regard my Christmas Books, and Dombey's, and so forth, as letters to you...' (Dickens Letter 27 November 1846).

In an obituary notice in the month of Dickens's death the *Illustrated London News* wrote of the experience of reading this writer's novels: 'It was just as if we received a letter or a visit, at regular intervals, from a kindly observant gossip, who was in the habit of watching the domestic life of the Nicklebys or the Chuzzlewits'.

Dickens generated a sense of community with his readers. He also felt a community with his fictional characters. His son Charley remarked that his father had two lives, 'one with us and one with his fictitious people, and I am equally certain that the children of his brain were much more real to him at times than we were'. (Charles Dickens Jr, 'Reminiscences of My Father', *Windsor Magazine* 1934). Sometimes Dickens described his creativity as passive. For instance, he told Forster: 'When ...I sit down to my book, some beneficent power shows it all to me, and tempts me

to be interested, and I don't invent it – really do not – *but see it* and write it down.' (Letter to Forster, October 1841). But against that is the extraordinary eye-witness account of his daughter, Mamie, watching her father compose: he would sometime jump up from his desk and go to a mirror to make faces in it, sometimes also muttering in different voices, before returning to his manuscript to continue writing. So, it seems from this that Dickens acted his characters into life. They were his impersonations of them. One friend reported, 'Dickens once declared to me that every word said by his characters was distinctly *heard* by him' (G.H.Lewes, *Fortnightly Review*, Feb 1872, xvii.).

Dickens 'had the power of projecting himself into shapes and suggestions of his fancy which is one of the marvels of the creative imagination, and what he desired to express he became'. So wrote his friend and biographer, John Forster. Dickens loved acting as someone else, both on the stage in his amateur theatricals and in generating his novels. So, it seemed a natural move for him to take to the lectern and recite parts of his novels to audiences. He decided, against the advice of some of his friends (who thought he was demeaning himself as a gentleman by going on stage as a public spectacle), to turn his practice of giving occasional charity public readings into a professional career. This was in 1858. Here are the reasons he gave for this: the public readings were to be

*“a means of strengthening those relations – I may almost say of personal friendship – which it is my great privilege and pride, as it is my great responsibility, to hold with a multitude of persons who will never hear my voice nor see my face. Thus it is that I come, quite naturally, to be here among you at this time; and thus it is that I proceed to read this little book, quite as composedly as I might proceed to write it, or to publish it in any other way.”*

(Speech before 1st Reading for his own profit: St Martin's Hall, 29 April 1858)

The staged reading performances were a compromise between drawing-room entertainment (befitting a gentleman) and a theatrical solo. Dickens dressed very formally for these occasions: tails and white tie. However animated he became in gesture and voice, he stayed behind his reading desk. To stray out onto the stage would have aligned him with an actor's freedom, and that would have been *infra dig*.

He designed his own reading desk, to replace the tall lectern so often provided for him at venues in towns around the country. The new desk was about hip-high, so that his upper body and gesturing arms were fully visible. The desk had a little prop for the book from which he read; but as the years went by, he learned most of texts off by heart, and the book (always brought with him onto the platform) became just a prop. He also developed his own portable set: a maroon curtain or large screen behind him (to help the voice's projection outwards); an arc of gas-jet lamps above him and to each side. Thus, when he eventually came out onto his platform before audiences of a thousand or more, sometimes, he was brilliantly lit within a rich red set.

In a letter of 17 April 1867, Dickens looked back over nearly a decade of public readings in Britain and America and described his aims in giving these readings:

*“When I first entered on this interpretation of myself...I was sustained by the hope that I could drop into some hearts, some new expression of the meaning of my books, that would touch them in a new way.”*

He had developed a repertoire of about 16 readings, all drawn from his novels and short stories and assiduously edited by him with a view to their delivery from the platform. By the time he retired in early 1870 he had given nearly 475 highly animated performances, nearly all of these consisting of 2-hour readings with a short interval at the halfway point. The toll on his health was colossal,

especially when in early 1869 he introduced into the repertoire the sensational reading from *Oliver Twist*, 'Sikes and Nancy', featuring the murder of Nancy, which he enacted with ferocious energy.

He was persuaded by his doctor and his family to give up his readings, and he gave his final performance in London on March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1870. At the end of this he gave a speech of farewell – except that it *wasn't* quite a farewell. He reminded them that they would soon be receiving the monthly instalments of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The fact was that Dickens couldn't bring himself to say a final goodbye to his audience, so he converted them back to his readership. In that capacity, he assured them, he (their indefatigable and devoted entertainer) be with them again soon – exchanging his reading-desk for his writing-desk, as of old:

*“Ladies and gentlemen, in but two short weeks from this time I hope that you may enter, in your own homes, on a new series of readings [of the serialized Mystery of Edwin Drood], at which my assistance will be indispensable; but from these garish lights I vanish now for evermore, with a heartfelt, grateful, respectful, and affectionate farewell.”*

(Dickens's Farewell Speech, 15 March 1870)

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