

## *Introduction*

*After Dickens* what? You well may ask.

Here's the exchange behind the title.

Two Italian art historians – Italians who also do Italian Art history – in an American museum, examining one of its Tuscan jewels.

“Pontormo,” the younger skeptically asks, “or only After Pontormo?”

“After, *certainmente*,” confidently replies the elder.

“*Certainmente*, it's certainly a Pontormo,” hisses, from behind them, the collection's Curator. All along he's been silently trailing them through the gallery.

“Well, yes. Probably it was a Pontormo,” the elder concedes, “once.”

Safely away from the Curator's baleful glare, the older Historian explains – to me – what he meant. The original canvas has been so thoroughly overpainted that, whatever might remain beneath, nothing now visible on the surface can possibly lay claim to have been put there by Pontormo's hand.

Ironically, the correct art-historical term for that process of painting-over/painting-out is restoration. But if Pontormo had been a writer rather than a painter, the equivalent term would be adaptation. And – here's where I, and this book, come in – if Pontormo had been Dickens, that is a writer not a painter, there'd never be any question that he could ever be anything but, as my Italian friends would say, *in restauro*: under restoration. Or, in literary terms, under adaptation. For a fresco, a statue, a baptistery, to be *in restauro* means – as every tourist in Italy learns soon after arrival – that what you have come all this way to see is temporarily unavailable, out of sight, locked away from your inspection. (Probably indefinitely unavailable, since it's Italy.) But a written text, unlike a painting, never gets out of *restauro*.

We read only in so far as we restore. Painting can trace outlines; writing only leaves traces.

Cambridge University Press

0521633222 - After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance

John Glavin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I know, of course, that paintings also can – and probably should – be read like texts. But there is a passive pleasure that painting shares with every other sort of spectacle, including theatre, a passivity that writing does not permit. Indeed, we can see that difference most clearly in the well-nigh desperate energy with which a figure like Brecht works against the passivity of theatre, to make theatre-going an experience something more like reading. If a novel, a poem, a play is to be read at all, it's got to be retrieved, put back together, refurbished. The pages may be there in front of us, but the text waits on our recovery. And just there, where restoration marks the only entry to reading, oddly the analogy to painting kicks back in. We can only do this work of restoration by overriding, covering over, erasing. My art-historical friends may reasonably stipulate for a way of seeing pictures that distinguishes between seeing a Pontormo – which is good – and seeing only after Pontormo – which is decidedly not so good. But we all come to Dickens only *after Dickens*.

What can we do about this inevitable lagging-behind? That's the question this book attempts to answer. If we can only, at best, and always, come after Dickens, how best can we stage that belatedness? Might we, as Pierre Bourdieu has suggested, somehow find “a way of producing an *aggiornamento*” of older traditions of reading in order to make possible a way “to redeploy a certain kind of literary capital” (Bourdieu 1990: 95). More specifically, how can we, in the twilight of what Joseph Roach has wittily labeled “the discipline that might still be called English” (Roach 1995: 45), “profit” from returning to the “literary capital” accumulated in Dickens's books? I understand and take full responsibility for all of the negative connotations in the metaphor of capital. Nevertheless, happily, I insist on asking: is there a way to navigate unscathed between the Scylla of canon-fetish and the Charybdis of canon-diss? Come neither to praise, nor to bury. Merely coming after, and glad of it?

*After Dickens* suggests one well-spent way to accomplish that *aggiornamento* can come from refocusing the relation between the page and the stage, between reading, adapting and performing. It's a way that positions reading as close cousin to adapting. A way that updates both of them as versions of performance. And that specifies such performance as modeling, fundamentally, what it means to find yourself coming *after* an original.

Of course, we come after Dickens in at least three ways. Most obviously, chronologically: he's gone, we're here. But we're also after

Dickens in the sense of seeking him out, trying to find him, tracing him through the pages where he himself has gone missing, constantly interpreting, striving for meaning, but catching instead only glimpses, versions, possibilities, accumulating readings, rereading. And that in turn means – to return momentarily to Pontormo – that we are also after Dickens stylistically, in the sense that echoes through so many second-level museums: an Epiphany “after Rubens,” a Madonna “after Raphael.” But where a better class of gallery may contain originals, the best of our readings can always only be “in the style of,” never “by the hand of.” To be faced by any sort of text at all, we readers of necessity become restorers – adapters *avant la lettre*. We overpaint to save, just as with the Pontormo, and in saving we overpaint.

I don’t mean to imply that there’s no sense in trying to distinguish between reading and adaptation, only that the difference between them is one of degree, not of kind. In fact, the more interesting difference separates, on the one hand, unproblematized reading and unproblematized adaptation, from, on the other, ways of reading and ways of adapting that recognize their common and problematic aftering.

Unproblematized reading insists that it can somehow make present to itself what Dickens actually said or even less plausibly what Dickens actually meant. It corresponds to the kind of “authentic” stagings of the novels, insistently faithful to every Victorian detail, that claim in hours and hours of performance or film to reproduce the novel under scrutiny. Both seem to me to involve similar sorts of forgery, copies which will not admit the altering in their aftering, which can not face up to the fact that the original can never be present to the consciousness of the follower, whether reader or adapter. Both forms function as pacifiers, fictions about fiction that attempt to console us for the inevitable depredations of time. Like the overpainting my art-historical friend so haughtily dismissed, they set out to hide the ways in which their recoveries inevitably obscure, replace, distort the originals they so earnestly claim to bring back.

On the other hand, reading and adaptation that problematize themselves take root in a common recognition of belatedness. We can see them agreeing companionably to blur the conventional distinction Bourdieu, in the same essay, outlines as a cardinal distinction between *lector*, one who “comments on an already established discourse,” and *actor*, one who produces new discourse. Obviously, *actor* – author, prophet – is the privileged term of the pair, the one who writes out of “his charisma . . . the *actor* of his own *actoritas*.” The *lector* – reader/

Cambridge University Press

0521633222 - After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance

John Glavin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

priest – holds only a delegated “legitimacy . . . based in the final analysis on the *auctoritas* of the original *auctor*, to whom the *lectores* at least pretend to refer” (Bourdieu 1990: 94). But in that “at least pretend” my argument squeezes its toehold.

The kind of reading and adaptation that interests me is the kind that problematizes itself, and thereby reveals readers and adapters as kin, reversing the conventional author-reader privilege. To use Bourdieu’s terms, this is a reversal that recognizes that it’s the priests who create the prophets, and prophecy. Prophetic charisma, whatever the faith, is conferred not by prophets on themselves but onto those prophets the scripture-redactors find they can use to suit their ends. (The other explanation is inspiration, but no one, I’m sure, wants to risk moseying down that particular path.) Prophets are those writers whom priests use to prove their points. The rest is heresy and schism. And, just as clearly, in our own after-words, it is readers who don’t simply read-into, but much more crucially read-out, text.

Bourdieu’s weakness, of course, is that he lumps everyone not a prophet into the category priest. That can’t be true. Or at least it can’t be true anywhere more than a mile beyond the left bank of the Seine. In any case, I don’t want to go about multiplying Latin distinctions. I only want to make clear that, just as priests above all insist on distinguishing between priests and people, so also we must mark some significant distinction between two sorts of readers. Is it the distinction between readers and commentators – to redeploy Bourdieu’s word – or readers and critics, or merely readers and profs.?

The words don’t matter, I think, at least not here. What does matter is that we agree to see that those who read for themselves – rather than merely repeat others’ readings – are in fact always “after” and always “aftering,” always restoring, adapting, supplying, making texts and promulgating meanings. Some do that on the sly. I’m too much of a gentleman to name them. Others do it boldly, flagrantly, with panache. They are those who proudly up-date, re-invest, paint-over, paint-out, restore, adapt, and in the process take liberties with the narrow “manner of.” They are those who will – I hope, by the end of *After Dickens* – be us.

While the reading side of this reading-adaptation equation may not find significant opposition, the adaptation-side is likely to face at first a fairly unfriendly audience. Despite significant recent defections, text-based critics continue generally to manifest a profound mistrust of

Cambridge University Press

0521633222 - After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance

John Glavin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

theatricality – whether they are friend or foe to Foucault. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick claim that the “theoretical convergence” of cultural and textual studies has of late “pushed performativity onto center stage” (Parker and Sedgwick 1995: 1). (Indeed, Eve Sedgwick, crossing Ziegfeld with Zelig, has been doing much of the best of that “pushing.”) Parker and Sedgwick are probably right about the “fecund center.” But in the wide margins which surround that center “crossings” of the page and the stage remain, to use another of their phrases, “under-articulated.” Overpoweringly so, I would say. Off-center, most text-oriented criticism continues to insist that it “must protect itself from the performing artist . . . who is always the enemy” to language (Huston 1992: 129).

To demonstrate this point quickly – why dwell on the painful? – here are three recent readers of Shakespeare, surely an area where one might expect the most fecund crossings of language and performance. *Staging the Gaze*, Barbara Freedman’s 1991 study of Shakespearean comedy, sees performance as prime locale for Lacanian *Méconnaissance*, the “misrecognition” and “illusory identifications” through which the ego “is sustained” (Freedman 1991: 53). And text-centered Martin Buzacott demands nothing less than *The Death of the Actor*: “In this historically-bizarre modern theatrical age, the mythology of acting, suppressed for centuries and liberated with a vengeance, has attacked the authority of textuality with the result that the slave now claims the title of master as a natural birthright” (Buzacott 1991: 7). It’s hardly a surprise then that Wolfgang Iser’s attractively (to me) titled *Staging Politics* (1993) turns out never to speak at all of any actual staging, or acting, or actors, or theaters. All the world has become Iser’s stage, literally, depreciating the stage itself into nothing but a convenient, toothless metaphor. For Iser the plays could be – we get the sense they probably would be – far better off being novels.

This mistrust of theatre and theatricality derives ultimately, I think, from an even deeper unease with affect. Here again Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick is in the vanguard. Her recent Silvan Tomkins reader, edited with Adam Frank, *Shame And Its Sisters* (1995), eagerly points toward rereadings of affect that could energize the entire field of critical practice. But whether Sedgwick will prove in this instance a prophet or Lot’s wife, sadly saline with a pointless looking back, it is hard to say. Certainly, criticism as a whole seems now resolutely unwilling to let itself in for feeling.

But feeling is precisely what *After Dickens* intends to prompt, a “con-

Cambridge University Press

0521633222 - After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance

John Glavin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

vergence of body and meaning” (Diamond 1995: 154) at the “crossing” between performance and critique. This convergence takes its source and pattern from a series of adaptations I staged for the annual conference of The Dickens Project, an international consortium of English departments, headquartered at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The Project scheduled these performances to parallel the longer conference papers on Dickens’s fiction, not as curious or exotic complements to journal- and volume-based critique, – at least that’s what the Project directors said – but as *supplements*, in the fully Derridean sense, to those more conventional forms. In a sense, then, the Conferences predicted the form of this book, this crossing of performance and critique, of acting and thinking, of body and mind.

The adaptations themselves stem from the theory and practice of Jerzy Grotowski, the widely acclaimed founder of Poor Theatre. (Movie-goers will remember Grotowski as the subject of the ecstatic rhapsodies that punctuate Wallace Shawn and André Gregory’s film *My Dinner with André*.) Grotowski offers a critically generated model of adaptation which stages not a venerated image of the original, the parent text, but its probed and disturbing negative. Most of what now passes for adaptation on stage and screen represents a more or less “random historical pillaging” of the past (Wolin 1995: 57), displaying severed, deracinated members in misleadingly archival form, like blockbuster art shows in international museums. In contrast, Poor Theatre takes a scalpel to the parent-text and delivers from it the new materials folded away, disguised, denied by the original. Poor Theatre thus engenders from the source a new text, one that the adapter and the adapter’s audience *feel* they must have, one that evades the traps of false consciousness or a culturally mandated subjectivity – imminence without immanence. Critique filters affect. Affect reinforces critique.

Through Poor Theatre we can *update* the Dickens we are *after*, to perform him belatedly as “present.” We thereby re-make his fictions into something “comprehensible, usable and relevant to our own interests” (Orgel 1996: 64), understanding our “interests” as simultaneously theoretical and pragmatic, intellectual and emotional, the community’s and our own. And in the process we move happily away from the terrible sameness of the field that has been English. We leave behind the numbing lock-step of the Theory Shop, and, refusing high-minded orthodoxies, look toward not only a stage but a world in which we can – there’s no better word for it – act, a world in which we not only think but feel sharply. Worked within this frame, adaptation emerges as an

Cambridge University Press

0521633222 - After Dickens: Reading, Adaptation and Performance

John Glavin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

instance – perhaps even a paradigmatic instance – of what the anthropologist Sherry Ortner has called a “serious game.” Serious games, Ortner claims, play themselves out at an intersection of theory and practice, a cross of purposes “that embodies agency but does not begin with, or pivot upon, the agent, actor, or individual.” Instead, they invite us to be agents-as-it-were, that is: *players*, who enter upon “webs” of already in-place social positions and ideological scripts, scenarios we can manipulate and modify just as long as we are playful, that is just as long as we move along and within those webs with “skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence” and a serious commitment to the shocks of a serious game (Ortner 1996: 12).

I gesture here toward Ortner’s feminist anthropology because I refuse to believe myself a solitary, the odd or only person interested in, still less capable of, the kinds of liaison on which my argument focuses. In a wide range of fields and activities we can easily recount the recent amalgamation of affect and agency: psychological studies of group conformity; forensic management of jury behavior; theological, philosophical, historical explorations of altruism, to name only three (Parrott 1993: 278). Certainly, I’m not the only person doing English stimulated by the challenge of Grotowskian transgression. Ten years at Santa Cruz taught me exactly the opposite. And I also hear or overhear at virtually every sort of professional gathering the costly, pervasive, and profitless, renunciation of creativity and feeling so many of my colleagues have enforced upon themselves as the price of performance in the Theory Shop. Why not transgress, then, not only the binding of theory and the boundaries of text but the boundaries that separate academic departments and the bindings that enforce the disciplines of critique?

*After Dickens* thus faces boldly and unafraid the nastily capitalist metaphor with which it opened – how to make a profit from coming After Dickens – because the ultimate restoration it seeks is not of the text, anybody’s text, but of the restorer. We’ve got to get up off our knees from venerating the fetishized text – or down off the high horse from which we beat it, degraded and dethroned – and return to the fundamental understanding that we are writers too. We’ve got to remember that what interested us in the first place about English was the possibility of exploiting language to achieve a fullness, a richness, a density, of affect. And that a critique that doesn’t take the restoration of that affect as its goal might as well be . . . well, what shall we call it? How about Sociology? We’ve got to become again prophets of our own charisma.

Of course, the enthusiasm of those last paragraphs betrays me. *After Dickens* has turned out to be, despite its academic credentials, in many ways a playwright's book. That's certainly not what I set out to write. But I am a playwright, as well as a literary critic, and in writing this book I've discovered that a playwright's way of thinking is more fundamental to me than I would have believed before I undertook this task. It's not just that the book's three parts insist on developing suspiciously like a script: set-up, flashback and resolution. Or that it would rather please than enlighten, though it hopes that in pleasing it might also enlighten. But *After Dickens* also insists, and this will doubtless disturb, that more than the usual combination of hands and eyes will be needed to read it well. It moves to a place where readers, shoeless, supine (but unobserved), are invited to stage themselves.

I get to that stage through three sets of paired chapters. We move from Dickens's exemplary resistance toward theatre (Set up), through an attempt to recreate what performance means in a shame-based psyche and culture (Flashback), to end with a pair of adaptations that transgress and transform their originals (Resolution).

Part I sets up the problem of the refusal of theatre, a refusal explored in detail in chapter 2 by focusing on Dickens's last completed novel, *Our Mutual Friend*. That chapter, generously, gives Dickens his only chance for a horrified rebuttal of everything we're about to do to what was literally his life's work.

Part II flashes back to the psychic and cultural origin of this crucial stage fright. Chapter 3, starting with *Pickwick Papers* and continuing into *Nicholas Nickleby*, locates anti-theatricality in the private and social shame attached to acting. Chapter 4, resuming in *Nickleby* but going on to spend a lot of time with *A Tale of Two Cities*, traces the ways in which Dickens arrives at a form for fiction which he fashions as a defense against that shame.

In part III, Resolution, Grotowski comes into his own and, as it were, gets the better of Dickens. Here we offer Grotowskian adaptation as resolution, dissolving Dickens's defense to show how we might retain and refuse him at the same time. Chapter 5 recreates an elaborately scaled staging of *Little Dorrit*. Finally, chapter 6, as a coda, invites you to begin to do the work of adaptation on and through your self, returning to *Our Mutual Friend* with a bijou staging as a blueprint for your own future adaptive performances.

Throughout this development, and despite the earnest advice of most of my brightest colleagues, *After Dickens* not only believes in but relies on



*Introduction*

9

that now deeply suspect notion, character, feeling's favorite tool. Obviously, any playwright's argument banks on characters to perform: specifically on characters I find in Dickens's texts, and characters I adapt from those texts. But by character here I also mean something more than merely figurative. I want to retrieve the original Greek sense of character, as a something pointed, sharp, jagged, menacing even. Remember that the original character is probably – at least for Sophocles – the serpent's tooth. Character here then stands for that psychic energy so enamored of its own fecund, if unhappy, agilities, that it eagerly courts even incoherence to baffle every readerly claim to competence – not don't tread on, but don't read on me. A notion of character I not only find everywhere in, but also everywhere as, Dickens.

This Charles Dickens is, inevitably, my adaptation of the man who lived between 1812 and 1870, my main character. This is a Dickens who feared the theatre. Who hated to write. Who constantly claimed center stage while refusing to be seen. The ultimate speaker, everywhere behind his figures and with such complete power that he could never be found out or trapped. This Charles Dickens is my familiar and my double, the necessary, inexhaustible through-line of my plan.

Three further and final caveats.

One. After this confession of predilections it can come as no surprise that I prefer suspense to any other structuring principle. These days the ill-omened byword for suspense is mystification. And we highmindedly treat all forms of mystification as bad: bad faith, bad thinking, even bad sex. But like the nineteenth century I find mystification, in the novelist Richard Ford's terms, "normal and even pleasurable" – normal indeed just because pleasurable. (Ford's word for mystification is "Dreaminess." It wouldn't be mine.) I love the nineteenth century precisely because it loved to mystify, and was indeed unsurpassed in trapping everything it made or saw or did within cloudy veils of mystification. How delicious and strange and witty to wrap a scarf around a piano leg and thus get everybody thinking about a phallus when they might only have been thinking about a piano. For my money, mystification keeps the emotion thrumming in emotional intelligence. And intelligence without feeling this book keeps insisting is just the intellectual equivalent of lunch-counter quiche, warmed-over experience sans texture and sans taste, sans sadness and sans pleasure. Sustaining, perhaps, to the saints of the latter-day Descartes, but scarcely fit food for citizens of a real, mongrel, if deeply flawed, democracy.

Two. I've tried to write *After Dickens* for both specialists and non-

specialists alike. Wherever they seem necessary I offer brief summaries of the novel under scrutiny. And I've put most of the more technical material in footnotes which the reader is free to ignore. I've done that, in part, because no one even among Dickensians (except for Michael Slater) remembers all Dickens's plots and characters precisely. But also because throughout the book I've tried to keep in mind W. H. Auden's advice: always write imagining yourself trying to cheer up a sick friend, all the while aware that the Postal Inspector won't pass the letter on unless he understands it. Here Auden's saying something like the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller's counsel that one should write a book so that those both inside and outside a field can follow it. Writing for insiders gives an argument rigor; for outsiders, clarity. I can't claim *After Dickens* achieves either rigor or clarity. But I have tried above all else to stay practical. *After Dickens* is a book about un-doing, un-doing Dickens, but, also and perhaps more significantly, about un-doing you.

Third and finally. Our bliss I believe to be of a very different sort from that of pure intelligence, of perfectly crystalline representation. I don't think – despite Dante – that His will is our bliss. I think His will is His bliss, and He is welcome to it. The bliss for which I root instead is that sort of cloudy unknowing which gets and keeps the juices flowing. So now you've been warned. Committed to affect, this book doesn't enjoy anything you can only know, and it doesn't want you to know anything you can't enjoy.