Introduction

This book comes into the world at a time when Victorian studies are dominated by the spirit of Michel Foucault, whose construction of modern European social history, with its evolution from the spectacular, public discourse of the Enlightenment to the privatized, domesticated culture of the industrial revolution, has informed a large body of exciting scholarship. This study, certainly, is indebted to *Discipline and Punish* and *Madness and Civilization,* which have enabled me to imagine and describe the structures of social differentiation and containment which operate in Victorian novels and popular entertainments.[1] But if Foucault's voice is generally present here, it is here, much of the time, to be challenged, as a voice potentially as totalizing and controlling as the cultural forces it describes. If we accept as accurate the discursive shift he defines as a more or less material cultural change occurring around the end of the eighteenth century, a shift from the spectacular to the speculative, from the corporal to the carceral, then we are led to accept as well a vision of novel reading and writing in Victorian England which emphasizes isolation, privacy, the contemplative reading subject – a reductive and romanticized view of a complex subject. Acts of novel reading and writing took place in "public spaces" – that is, in the terms of a popular agreement, a framework of consensual cultural ideas and the signs assumed to represent those ideas – in the nineteenth century, even when performed in isolation and silence. Novel reading literally entered the public sphere when novelists like Dickens took to the platform and performed public readings, and, less obviously, when the novels themselves borrowed heavily from the theatre, employing almost casually, and with confidence in their readers' collective understanding, some of the standard theatrical signs of the time.

This is not to say that an attention to the inward, the carceral, the embracing structures of control operating in nineteenth-century Europe is uninteresting or invalid. Indeed, this book enthusiastically examines

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Victorian social controls, performing readings which might well be described as "Foucauldian" themselves. But I wish to turn the carceral cell inside out, to expose the very public nature of the Victorian hegemony. In other words, I object not to the assumption that the nineteenth century moved to bourgeois rhythms, or was buried under layers of ideology, but to an unexamined belief in the interiority of modern culture. A number of scholars have embraced that idea, and produced suggestive but perhaps short-sighted treatments of nine-teenth-century novels and novel readers. D. A. Miller may be the most prominent among them, and while *The Novel and the Police* remains among the most successful books on the subject, it almost ruthlessly appropriates Victorian novels and their readers, packaging both entities in cells, if you will, of its own construction, and locking its doors against alternative treatments.

Since the novel counts among the conditions for [its] consumption the con-sumer's leisured withdrawal to the private, domestic sphere, then every novel-reading subject is constituted – willy-nilly, and almost before he has read a word – within the categories of the individual, the inward, the domestic. There is no doubt that the shift in the dominant literary form from the drama to the novel at the end of the seventeenth century had to do with the latter's superior efficacy in producing and providing for privatized subjects.[2]

This passage engages in a critical policing of its own: it is difficult to resist the assertion that the reading subject is constituted implicitly, even "naturally" – "willy-nilly, and almost before he has read a word" – within the categories Miller has devised for him. But if we do resist, if we entertain the possibility that the nineteenth century, despite its privileg-ing of the inward and private, perceived itself in other ways as well – published its image, its values, its desires, in extravagantly public venues like the theatre, and depended on such publicity to promote a discourse which favored "interiority" – then it is less clear than Miller suggests that the shift in the dominant literary form, from drama to fiction, was due to the novel's greater efficacy in constituting the private subject, or indeed, that this shift occurred at all.

The primary assumption behind this study is that Foucault's histori-cal model performs the same discursive function it describes, totalizing and containing nineteenth-century culture in a way that renders it *readable* to the twentieth century, but which erases its very strong spec-tacular, externalizing impulses. This paradigm does not adequately express the differences between early modern and modern cultures; it polarizes them without considering certain inevitable complications in

the constructed binarism, the moments, for example, when nineteenth-century Europe recognizes itself through publicly displayed bodies, or the prototypical carceral imaginations of certain early European writers, like Tommaso Campanella (*La Città del Sole,* 1623). One way to think of the present study's theoretical position is to imagine it conversing with Foucault, but also with Bakhtin, whose ''dialogic'' novel reverberates with theatrical voices, a more public entity than the one permitted by Foucault's vision, but subject to the same hegemonizing desires described in *Discipline and Punish.* Foucault has taught us how to recognize the structures of social control – this book, certainly, has benefitted from the lesson – but Bakhtin had already, preemptively, as it works out, demonstrated how such controls are constantly subverted by the nineteenth century's irrepressible heteroglossia. I wish my argument to encompass both possibilities, the Bakhtinian (discursive regulation which generally fails) and the Foucauldian (discursive regulation which generally succeeds), privileging neither one but finding each useful at one time or another. In every instance, however, I shall insist upon the primacy of public display, a phenomenon which Foucault has associated with pre-industrial Europe but which continued to be a powerful organizing and controlling force through the nineteenth century, and indeed, continues to do its work in our century as well.

Some of the strongest evidence for this continuity lies in the popular entertainments of nineteenth-century England. As this book hopes to demonstrate, the tropes of the theatre gave voice to other forms of artistic and popular expression; people read novels, newspapers, social criticism – indeed, just about everything worth reading – through the lens of popular performance. In other words, the ''drama'' was not supplanted by the novel in the nineteenth century but merged with it, enabling the novel to exist. Dickens, who figures at the center of this study, regularly borrowed characters, dramatic idioms, even stories from the melodrama, and the popular theatre borrowed equally from him; the same may be said for many of his contemporaries.[3] What this means is that the Victorian novel did not really resemble the discrete textual unit we receive it as today, the self-contained package Miller imagines as privately and personally consumed, but was loose and fluid – particularly when published serially, as so many novels, including Dickens', were – and attentive to the theatrical developments which were at once its source and its competition. That Dickens' novels were so often adapted and produced before he had finished writing them raises some interesting and exciting questions about the role of theatre

and performance in their composition. For example, when adapters like Edward Stirling or W. T. Moncrieff devised what seemed a probable ending to one of the novels, so that it could be quickly produced, what effect did that have on the ending Dickens ultimately wrote? He hated most of the adaptations of his novels, but he appears to have followed them carefully. The probability that novelists, like Dickens, whose serial fiction was regularly plagiarized, were forced to dance with hack play-wrights as they wrote, requires us to rethink our relationship to these texts.

If we imagine the novel and the drama as intimately conversant with each other, rather than in binary relation or in chronological sequence with drama the genre of early modern culture, and the novel, which supersedes it, the product of full-blooded modernity, we must likewise imagine a reading subject constituted otherwise than in the interior spaces of home and privatized imagination. This is what I have under-taken in this book: a repositioning of the Victorian bourgeois reading subject, a re-visioning of the Victorian novel, and a recovery of the conditions in which both novels and novel readers were made.

At the center of this study lies the theatre, lively, healthy, magnificently vocal – not a thing of the past but an integral part of the Victorian present. One should perhaps avoid the use of the word *drama* in describing the genre of writing produced for the stage, because it implies a literariness which popular Victorian plays emphatically lacked. These were often colorful, inelegant vocal-spectacular displays, written in and for a virtual moment, and significant now primarily for their significance then. That significance was substantial: the popular theatre mediated acts of novel reading and writing, structured class and gender relationships, informed political discourse, and entered the fields of journalism and social science, providing small- and large-scale models of relationship.

Several recent works on nineteenth-century fiction and theatre pro-ved to be indispensable to this project. D. A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* and *Narrative and its Discontents* articulated some of the novel's important regulating functions, like its self-policing and its understand-ing of generic and discursive imperatives, and despite my arguments with Miller's construction of the Victorian novel and reader as ultimate-ly privatized entities, I could not have formulated my own position without his, against which this study differentiates itself.[4] Martin Meisel's *Realizations*,[5] far grander than this book aspires to be, articulates the intersections among the arts that I have presumed here. Joseph Litvak's *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel*

says a great deal about Victorian attitudes towards the theatre, and about the positioning of otherness – particularly homosexuality and femaleness – within performative or theatrical and narrative apparati.[6] Litvak's study "repeatedly emphasizes the *normalization* of theatricality, its subtle diffusion throughout the culture that would appear to have repudiated it . . . [and shows] how, if theatrical structures and techniques underlie or enable various coercive cultural mechanisms, the same structures and techniques can threaten those mechanisms' smooth functioning" (pp. x–xi). These are ideas underlying this work as well, which implies many of the conclusions of Litvak's study even when it, perhaps ungratefully, challenges or rejects some of his premises – especially those Foucauldian-inspired assumptions which I find so insufficiently circumspect, or permissive, to accommodate all of the facets of Victorian experience.

Much has been written over the past twenty years or so on the Victorian theatre, and while almost all of it is valuable in one way or another, this body of criticism tends to be motivated by narrative concerns, reading theatre and theatricality narrativistically, and linking the novel and other popular forms to the theatre biographically or anecdotally. (Two notable exceptions are George Taylor's *Players and Performances in the Victorian Theatre*, and Joseph Roach's *The Player's Passion*.[7]) In other words, literary scholarship has typically imagined "theatre" – a phenomenon, in the nineteenth century, only nominally literary but overwhelmingly vocal, gestural, spectacular – to be synonymous with "drama," and has sought in it the narrative structures which underlie realist fiction, reading its relationships to the social and literary worlds as one reads novels, chronologically, sequentially; relying on literary interpretive strategies, on the existence of the signifying properties typically found in written text. This suggests, more than anything, that we, as readers and writers, are constituted narratively rather than theatrically; that our organizing apparatus "naturally" constructs our experience in linear, chronological sequence, presuming logical, "storied" relationships. In this we differ from the Victorians, who understood their theatre, their literature, even their social world, in terms of very explicit non-narrative signs (voices, postures) as well as the stories which tied those signs into narrative units. Still, the work of scholars like Nina Auerbach, Philip Collins, Michael Booth, George Rowell, Edwin Eigner, Robert Garis, and others has shown that the nineteenth-century English theatre is a legitimate and exciting topic of discussion, and the present study has profited from them.[8]

6   *Dickens, novel reading, and the Victorian popular theatre*

In order to evoke acts of Victorian novel-reading and writing – and to some extent, the everyday performances of Victorian life – I have had to imagine a world in which reading took place under different circumstances than it does today; a world laced with glittery threads of theatricality, in which voices and physical gestures crowded the imagination, haunting the reading and writing subject. (Although this study primarily examines the influence of the theatre on novel writing and reading, it often draws on the other art forms – music, painting, and illustration, for example – which exerted a similar influence, as Meisel's expansive *Realizations* has shown us.) The fact of these "hauntings" is suggested in the novels and theatrical entertainments themselves; I had merely to learn how to experience them, to hear the theatrical voices and rhythms blended into fictional narratives. This was less difficult than one might imagine. Reading aloud had always been a part of my literary experience; my father read to me all of Dickens' novels, some more than once, from my early years in primary school through college, and I continue to explore spoken text as a regular part of literary interpretation. In reading Dickens aloud, one finds certain rhythmic and inflective patterns and quite "naturally" finds a series of dramatic voices at one's disposal. His texts require this, and somehow make it happen. I suggest that we read Victorian novels aloud as a matter of course – the Victorians did – if we wish to recover them in their authentic forms.

But imagining how Victorian novels sounded, felt, and tasted to the nineteenth century requires more than acts of oral reading. It requires acts of exploration, imagination, and reconstruction. In order to describe successfully the atmosphere in which English novels were produced and consumed I have had to coin a phrase: *imaginary text.* I wish "imaginary text" to resonate with similar constructions by other cultural theorists – Paul Davis' "culture text" is one of the first to come to mind[9] – but to emphasize, with its insistence on imagination, the tenuous distinction between "reality" and theatre or fiction which distinguishes, as I shall argue, the nineteenth century. "Imaginary text" should suggest a "reading space" located outside of the actual narrative embodiments of Victorian novels, and inside the field of sociodramatic possibilities – of idioms and gestures and a whole range of signifiers – established by popular entertainments. Victorian novel readers read in this space; both they and their novels were born into an agreement – written, as it were, in the language of theatricality – about certain types of character and story. Restoring some of these agreements or imaginary texts has en-

abled me to approximate, in my own readings, the very aural and spectacular act of Victorian reading, and it has tuned my ears to the voices, conventional but deeply powerful, which sang in printed narrative text – particularly Dickens' text.

The following chapters attempt to share that recovery, to demonstrate how the nineteenth-century novel fitted into its own historical moment, and how the recently popular interpretive paradigms fail to adequately express the nature of that moment. There have been certain difficulties inherent in this project, because our historical moment has integrated the structures of narrative so deeply into its framework that the critical language available to describe Victorian theatricality always seems to imply narrativistic or novelistic relationships. Still, it is possible to peer through the inevitable cracks in the foundation, at a world perhaps more foreign than we have liked to think, and to watch it go about its business of knowing itself and knowing others.

CHAPTER 2

Dickens and the "imaginary text"

Nineteenth-century English fiction has undergone a certain transform-ation at the hands of twentieth-century critics, who have read Victorian novels in discrete critical editions and assumed them to be privatized narrative expressions of modern bourgeois subjectivity.[1] While it is true that something which might be called a "bourgeois subjectivity" evol-ved in the nineteenth century, it is less than certain that the privatized subjectivity which has been so frequently invoked by cultural theorists sufficiently describes the nineteenth-century imagination. Nor does D. A. Miller's totalizing claim that "the novel counts among the conditions for [its] consumption the consumer's leisured withdrawal to the private, domestic sphere, [and hence] every novel-reading subject is constituted – willy-nilly, and almost before he has read a word – within the categories of the individual, the inward, the domestic"[2] adequately describe either the nineteenth-century novel or its readers, both of which took their form, as it were, in a culture characterized equally by theatrical and public, as well as domestic and private, impulses.

If we entertain the possibility that the nineteenth century, despite its significantly circumscribed or internalized institutions, understood itself in other ways – aural and spectacular ways, for example; as a theatre of voices and figures – then we are forced to question some of the assump-tions currently circulating about nineteenth-century literature and cul-ture: for example, that the novel replaced the drama as dominant literary form, and that the ascendency of the private subject prompted this change. This study disputes those assumptions and the Foucauldian paradigm supporting them: that is, the presumption of a historical evolution from the spectacularity of early modern Europe to the intro-spectiveness of fully fledged modernity. This shift, if we accept it uncon-ditionally, imposes upon the nineteenth-century novel the burden of an intense privacy, an internally driven economy, and a consumption by individuals in the domestic enclosures which constitute their homes. I

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would describe this construction of the Victorian novel and novel reader as burdensome because it relentlessly denies the possibility of other kinds of reading and writing, including that which I maintain was peculiarly Victorian: a reading and writing mediated by the popular theatre.[3]

The Victorian reading subject did not resemble the solitary, withdrawn figure Miller has imagined for us,[4] but performed his or her reading in a highly public "space," drawing upon a set of consensual popular assumptions, cultural stereotypes regularly published on the stage and generally accepted as representative of Victorian social reality. In other words, Victorian readings were mediated by the culture of theatre – not merely because reading so often took the form of public declamation in the nineteenth century, although activities of this sort have been well documented,[5] but because novelists like Dickens drew quite freely from the body of sociodramatic possibilities established by the theatre, using theatrical tropes with an evident confidence in their familiarity to readers.

The end to which my disassembling of certain privileged critical structures aspires is a recovery of Victorian novels, particularly the novels of Dickens; a situation of these novels in their original contexts, and a reconstruction of the conditions in which they were initially received. Such recovery is, however, fraught with a certain danger – the danger of seeking the nineteenth century and finding only our highly self-conscious selves. Herbert Blau has shown how the recovery of the past, say in period dramas, is always about ourselves, a "reconstitut[ion] of ourselves, for instance, as the audience of Greek tragedy,"[6] or more appropriately, here, the audience of nineteenth-century melodrama. If looking for the past inevitably means turning up the disappointment, merely, of a hyper-aware present, ourselves in stays and stocks and morning coats – and that is possibly the best we can hope for – then recovering the Victorian novel requires most of all a readerly shift: we must transform ourselves into "Victorian" readers, and if we are lucky, the novels will follow. This will require that we change our relationship to these texts, that we entertain the possibility that a Dickens novel is not exclusively (and privately) literary, but expresses itself in three dimensions, so to speak; visually and vocally as well as narratively. We may perhaps achieve this "new" relationship by reading aloud, or at least with an attention to strains of voice, in order to hear the rhythms, inflections, accents, and vocal cadences which resonate through the novels. However we do it, it will require a substantial amount of

imagination: we can only reinstate the conditions under which Dickens' novels lived, and resuscitate the long-dead voices of his theatrical sources, by learning to experience them, somehow, in our own heads. These voices, which now only tentatively inhabit Victorian reviews, scripts, fiction, and nonfiction narratives, were everywhere in Dickens' time, the voices of particular actors and actresses, popular characters, even the novelist himself. When Dickens' characters spoke, they sounded familiar – they had already been circulating as part of the standard theatrical repertoire by the time he wrote his novels. In this respect he is less original than we might like to think.

Theatrical borrowing, on Dickens' part at least, has been discussed fairly extensively, but little or no attention has been paid to the role that theatre played in the formation of a reading public in nineteenth-century England, and no significant piece of scholarship has adequately explored the generic questions raised by this commerce between novel and stage. Some critics, like Paul Schlicke,[7] locate Dickens' novels in their theatrical contexts but never question the authority of genre, ultimately privileging the novels' life outside of the theatrical, their literary autonomy, if you will, and merely noting their structural and thematic similarities to the popular entertainments which influenced them. This is a fairly typical take on Dickens' fiction, but it presumes disciplinary or generic divisions which, although in theory quintessentially Victorian, did not in fact exist with much integrity in the nineteenth century. Novels and theatrical entertainments, novels and journalistic prose, novels and poetry constantly slipped in and out of mutual embrace. Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* influenced scores of novels and plays, no less than other novels and plays had shaped Mayhew's imagination. Poems like Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* adopted novelistic gestures. And the contemporary stage provided material for novels, which themselves generously reciprocated, so that the lines between theatre and prose fiction were fluid, and novel reading was performed in the rich and ambiguous area in between.

Hence, while Dickens borrowed from the theatre, he also contributed to it: virtually all his novels were adapted for the stage as quickly as he turned them out – often, indeed, before the last installments were published. In this way many of his readers received multiple versions simultaneously: the novel itself as it came out in monthly numbers, and the staged adaptations which reduced characters and plots to conventional types, but lent specific sounds and shapes to Dickens' written