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Mario Ortiz-Robles

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DICKENS PERFORMS DICKENS

BY MARIO ORTIZ-ROBLES

To the 1867 preface to *David Copperfield*, Charles Dickens added these now famous lines: “Of all my books, I like this the best. It will be easily believed that I am a fond parent to every child of my fancy, and that no one can ever love that family as dearly as I love them. But, like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is *David Copperfield*.”¹ But who is speaking here? Is it Dickens the consecrated author, claiming, through the trope of paternity, absolute authority over his craft and, in doing so, consolidating his reputation as the most successful writer of his time? Or is it Dickens the fictional author, appearing, like David, as a “posthumous child” who has fathered himself into existence through the act of writing?² Or perhaps it is Dickens the private citizen, speaking to a friendly public about his novels as one might speak to a neighbor about one’s children. But Dickens also presents himself as his own best reader, choosing as might an ardent fan of the great author the one book he prefers over all the others. It is impossible, in any case, to tell which of these Dickenses is speaking in this passage, for Dickens, the consummate performer, is ventriloquizing “Dickens,” the most enduring among all his fictional creations.

Dickens’s prefaces offer the first modern instance of a literary space solely devoted to the performance of public authorship. To be sure, the preface has a rich history that predates Dickens, but never before had all the contradictions and competing claims of the literary author found expression in quite so distilled a form. Informal, unstable, and ephemeral, Dickens’s prefaces bear the traces of the occasions for which they were written, providing insight into his politics, his sympathies, his literary quarrels, and offering, in residual form, an image of the author as Dickens himself might have perceived it. In his prefaces, we encounter Dickens as an author who is at once candid and guarded, brash and seductive, inventive and practical, combative and reassuring, but also as someone who is self-conscious about his fame, his legacy, and his royalties. Moreover, the peculiar structure of address of the preface—the author speaks directly to his public but always in the name of, or for the sake of, his fiction—allows Dickens not only

to offer a portrait of himself, but also, in so doing, to represent his readers, both in the sense of giving voice to their ambitions, values, and anxieties, and in the sense of using this voice from a position of authority to advance their claims.

In Dickens, the preface thus becomes more than an occasion to introduce one of his novels; it is an event in its own right in or by means of which he posits himself as an author by taking a position in a cultural field whose configuration he thereby transforms.³ Indeed, to the extent that his success as an author constitutes the triumph of liberalism, his prefaces act as a force field where there converge the ideological lines of industrial capitalism, middle class enterprise, and communal affect that render the figure of the author into both measure and emblem of individualism.⁴ On the one hand, the prefaces affirm the value liberalism places on self-reflecting individuality by constructing, over the course of Dickens's professional career, an author figure whose particular genius consists in marshalling the moral resources of his age (to be "industrious, contented, and kind-hearted," as Esther Summerson pithily puts it in *Bleak House*) in the service of literature so as to consolidate its role in a broader cultural project of self-improvement and social amelioration.⁵ On the other, they offer an emotional register that gives voice to liberalism's belief in presence, expression, and agency, the principal attributes of personhood upon which the representational logic of literary realism is premised.⁶ Dickens, in short, comes to represent character, the prevailing moral category in Victorian England and the personal quality most highly prized among his own novels' protagonists.⁷

The manner in which the prefaces identify Dickens specifically as a novelist, moreover, lends legitimacy to a genre whose literary prestige, at least since Sir Walter Scott, had had to contend with its enormous, and thus suspect, popularity. That literary history has not yet credited Dickens's prefaces with having the programmatic force of other, more anthologized prefaces such as William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, Victor Hugo's preface to *Cromwell*, or Honoré de Balzac's "Avant-Propos" to *La comédie humaine*, whose manifesto-like pronouncements altered the literary landscape of the nineteenth century, is due in part to the fact that they are usually restrained in making a case for what literature ought to be and what it ought to accomplish. They do not, in any case, present themselves as self-conscious meditations on the art of fiction. Yet, Dickens's prefaces are discursive artifacts that make visible, in a manner to be specified below, rhetorical and discursive forces whose power remains largely

unacknowledged and whose historical impact has to date received little critical attention but which play a fundamental role in the consolidation of the novel as the dominant genre in the literary field of the second half of the nineteenth century. After Dickens, the preface becomes a privileged site for authorship without the legitimacy of which it would be impossible to conceive of subsequent examples, from the minimalist, lapidarian preface to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* to the magisterial prefatorial performance in Henry James's New York Edition. As a peripheral textual apparatus, Dickens's prefaces have unfortunately been treated as nothing but peripheral to both literary history and Dickens criticism.⁸

At the level of theme and content, Dickens's prefaces are admittedly conventional, performing all the functions a preface ought to perform. According to Gérard Genette, who counts the preface among the liminal devices that accompany a work of literature and which he groups under the term "paratext" (titles, epigraphs, dedications, notes, epilogues, and the like), the principal function of a preface is to "present" the text to the reader, in the sense of introducing it but also of making it present.⁹ Prefaces employ a wide range of strategies to accomplish this, such as making a claim for the importance or topicality of the subject matter, declaring the intent behind the writing, stating the sincerity of the author, explaining the circumstances under which it was conceived, and so on.¹⁰ In Dickens, however, this presentation seems also to entail something of a performance, both in the sense that he can be seen to play different roles in them and in that this role-playing is constitutive of the author as author. For if the preface is a space in which the secret of literary creation is kept, it also reveals it not so much in descriptive terms as a statement of intent as in the declarative terms of authorial practice. Dickens's prefaces do tell us something about the man Dickens, but more than telling us something about the author's lived life, the trace of the author's individuality that we find in the preface at the level of its thematic elaboration becomes a showcase for the author's gifts as an author, as a being who is uniquely capable of turning life into literature.

To say that this alchemical process is the product of a singular gift, however, is also to point to the ambivalent discursive status of the preface. Acting as a relay between fact and fiction or, if you prefer, occupying a threshold that separates the literal from the literary, the preface is both at once, which suggests that the author exists in this in-between zone and nowhere else. Before the preface, there is the private citizen with rights to voice but no forum in which to exercise

them; after the preface, there is the narrator whose personal attributes are subsumed, or perhaps only implied, under the functions he performs as a generator of literary discourse. Accordingly, the preface is, strictly speaking, the only place for the author as author since he is speaking both as a citizen-author who, banking on the cultural capital accrued over time by his writing, can enter the most important public debates of his age from the position of authority granted by the cultural prestige of his chosen discourse, and as a character-author who, in or by adopting the persona of a literary author, speaks for literature yet without exactly speaking from within literature. In the preface, the author thus exists in a perpetual state of becoming, a becoming-author positioned somewhere between the legal subject of fact and the grammatical subject of fiction.

In what follows, I will be interested in what this particular performance might tell us about the figure of the modern writer—a figure that Dickens can be said to have invented or been invented by, depending on how you read my title—and, more generally, about the ability of literature to help shape the reality it describes. In his prefaces, we perceive Dickens embodying two seemingly contradictory attitudes towards literature and its role in the world. On the one hand, Dickens presents himself as a self-sufficient, professional agent by means of whom all the conventions or laws of literature—originality, style, genius, authority; but also copyright, fame, and brand recognition—become culturally fixed. On the other, Dickens might also be credited with attempting to put literature to work in the service of political action, counting on his novels' power to persuade, cajole, coerce, or shame his readers into accepting or even promoting social reform. This two-fold mission, I will argue, is what makes Dickens a thoroughly modern novelist and, as such, a particularly rich test case for re-examining some of the assumptions we have come to espouse concerning the author and, as a corollary to the post-romantic constitution of this figure, the cultural institutionalization of literature. The point of this exercise is not to reclaim the figure of the author from its premature poststructuralist death nor yet to reinstate uncritically the traditional authorial attributes of presence, expression, and agency that were once thought to encumber the study of literature. Rather, the aim is to analyze, and in analyzing to sharpen the terms we use in describing, the discursive forces that come into play in the cultural performance of the author, a type of performance that continues to be central to our conception of the historicity of literature. Moreover, to the extent that the author is a cultural figure for agency as such, this

analysis will also yield valuable insight into the conditions and limits of individual action in liberal society.

But before proceeding to the substance of Dickens's prefaces, it is instructive to consider the figure of the author in its disciplinary context. To claim that the figure of the author is central to the study of literature would not have been anathema to Dickens and his contemporaries, yet, until recently, criticism has constructed a narrative of literary agency from which the author has been curiously absent. For all sorts of valid reasons, both the methodological emphasis on close reading and discourse analysis and the political exigencies behind the attempt to account for the historical uses of literary representation have tended to eclipse the figure of the author. Such occlusion, however, has also prevented a serious consideration of its historicity as figure. Indeed, to say that the figure of the author is central to the study of literature is counterintuitive only if we construct our view of the author's historical impact on the basis of some textual residue we ought to be able to decode but which turns out to be, under closer scrutiny, as elusive as the referential fiction its figure, as figure, aims to sustain. The figure of the author is immaterial to the study of literature only if we accept the author's own claim to authority uncritically. When Roland Barthes famously declared the "death of the author," he was rejecting the ideological service into which such a claim is often pressed, but not the discursive forces that operate through the subject-position of "author."¹¹ In proposing the figure of the "scriptor" as an alternative, Barthes is also suggesting that these forces are crucial to an understanding of the historicity of writing.¹² Similarly, Michel Foucault's formulation of the "author-function" is an attempt to historicize the figure of the author from the point of view of its discursive determinations within its institutional, social, cultural, and commercial settings, not an attempt to dispense with it altogether.¹³ Indeed, the aim of showing how Dickens performs Dickens in the prefaces is to offer a description of something like the "scriptor-function"; an account, that is, of the historicity of the discursive force of the figure of the author, which should not be confused with the notion of the author's intention.

The recent publication of a series of single-author monographs—I'm thinking here of Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), Stanley Fish's *How Milton Works* (2001), D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (2003), Andrew Delbanco's *Melville: His World and Work* (2005), and Leo Damrosch's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (2005), among others—would seem to suggest that the author has once again come

to occupy a central position in literary criticism.¹⁴ Despite the very different methodological programs and theoretical investments these studies bring to bear on their subjects, they have one thing in common: they are all centered on canonical authors. Whether it is understood as the return of the repressed or as an attempt on the part of the discipline to argue more forcefully for the relevance of literature to culture and of its criticism to its consumption, this trend is significant for doing something else as well. The privileging of the author is also a vindication or recovery of the subject, and, in particular, the subject of humanism, after the failure of poststructuralist theory to kill or de-center it, of which failure this trend would be both symptom and cure.

To be sure, the resurrection of the figure of the author within the current critical scene responds at least in part to the consolidation of historicist paradigms in the study of literature, whether these involve the de-realization or plain reduction of the literary to its material culture (the book, the reader, the institution of letters) or the inscription of its discourse into more broadly construed patterns of cultural negotiation. But the return of the figure of the author has also resulted, I think, from an unresolved contradiction that was already present in the move towards the de-centering or de-privileging of the subject so crucial to poststructuralist thought and that, in a symptomatic manner, informs the political discomfort surrounding the call to ethics that characterizes our present moment. The contradiction can be phrased in these terms: if the subject is indeed a living amalgam resulting from the somewhat haphazard confluence of biological, linguistic, physical, affective, discursive, psychic, and ideological forces over which it can exert only partial control, how can it be made to be accountable for its acts, all of which can be potentially unethical and irresponsible. If one does not subscribe to living under the conditions of uncertainty to which a certain practice of responsibility in relating to the other without coercive calculation leads us, the phantasmatic figure of the author remains enormously appealing. To the extent that the discomfort one feels in the absence of the author—a discomfort, it is worth noting, mitigated by the comfort one experiences in reading a preface—is also an affirmation of authority, the return of the author corresponds to a potentially more troubling trend: the abdication of political responsibility in favor of ethical deliberation. The so-called ethical turn in literary studies has of course been tremendously productive, and indeed thoroughly political when ethics is conceived as an ethics of the other, but critical investment in a discourse of rights in some of the sub-fields falling under this general rubric (trauma studies, human rights, and

bioethics, to name the most salient) tends to reaffirm rather than to suspend political asymmetries and, accordingly, to sustain domains of authority for which the author acts as both sentinel and alibi in the guise of universal human subject.¹⁵

From this perspective, attention to Dickens's performance of Dickens in the prefaces allows us to recover some of the critical impetus behind death-of-the-author theoretical models, especially its attention to the historical force of discourse, and, more generally, to revise, or nuance, some of the assumptions underlying our understanding of the function of literature in culture. There are several reasons why the preface is an especially rich discursive site for exploring these issues, not the least of which is that it is a literary artifact with a very odd rhetorical disposition. Note, for instance, the definition provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: the word "preface" comes from the Latin *prae-fatio*, or "a saying beforehand," which makes perfect sense since it does usually appear "before" the text it prefaces; but then the *OED* adds that, when introducing a literary work, the preface usually offers "some explanation of its subject, purpose, and scope, and of the method of treatment," which means that it is not a "saying beforehand" at all, but rather a *saying afterwards*.¹⁶ And, to be sure, most prefaces are written after the work is finished. Add to this the fact that the preface speaks in and to the present tense of reading—in the mode of the *in what follows* or the *without-further-ado* or *what-you-are-about-to-read* of an introduction—but with full knowledge of what is to come since it is in fact a *saying afterwards*, as though it occupied that strange temporality of the future perfect, of the *it will have been*. Also consider the fact that the preface is and is not part of the text it prefaces: it is a "saying beforehand" insofar as it stands "before" the novel it introduces, in the sense of being in front of and outside of it, yet it is also intimately and inevitably connected to it since the novel is its sole structure of reference, its only reason for being. (One can't imagine a preface without a book: it is in this sense like a non-essential or vestigial appendage or perhaps even a parasite or a virus.) To complicate matters even further, reflect on the fact that the preface belongs to a cognitive order that is radically heterogeneous to that of the novel it prefaces: while the novel is fictional, imaginative, non-serious, the preface is ostensibly factual, expository, and serious even as it is meant to display the literary gifts of the writer whose work it introduces. Now, to top all of this off, take into account the fact that, in many cases, and certainly in the case of Dickens, the preface is, almost by definition, ephemeral, occasional, and subject to all sorts of revisions,

emendations, and erasures—self-quotation only being the strangest, or most economical, of these different forms of iteration—such that, in contrast to the literary artifact proper (the novel, in this case), the preface is not considered sacrosanct or inviolable and offers itself through the very precariousness of its discourse. The preface is thus a discursive event that, as Jacques Derrida notes, is always produced in view of its “self-effacement.”¹⁷ We seem to be left with a discursive form that is highly unstable, volatile, perhaps even ready to combust spontaneously like Krook in *Bleak House*.

In Dickens’s hands, this bizarre textual structure becomes the occasion for an equally strange rhetorical performance in which he attempts to do many things at once, adopting many different personae, or, as I suggested at the outset, performing many Dickenses at the same time. In part this has to do with the history of the prefaces themselves, which span Dickens’s whole productive lifetime. He typically wrote a preface for the last, double number of a serial run with a view to the one-volume bound edition, which would soon follow it. *Hard Times* (1854) and *Great Expectations* (1860–1) were notable exceptions to this practice, since they were published in weekly installments in *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, respectively, and then in a three-volume first edition. *Edwin Drood* is not really an exception since, left unfinished, it was never in a position to be retrospectively introduced. Dickens would sometimes write new prefaces to his novels when they were to appear in one of the three collected editions that were published, at approximately ten-year intervals, during his lifetime, the Cheap Edition, the Library Edition, and the Charles Dickens Edition, but he seldom wrote more than two prefaces for any one novel. More commonly, he would add a new paragraph or revise an existing preface, in part to be able to claim copyright. The total comes to 12 prefaces, eight of which were revised and none of which were completely re-written.

Dickens’s performances in his prefaces therefore correspond to different periods in his own life and constitute different occasions in which he revisits and reflects upon a particular work. For the sake of convenience, the different personae Dickens adopts in the prefaces can be classified under five rubrics: the Friend, the Truth-Teller, the Advocate, the Professional Writer, and the Famous Author. It would be inaccurate to say that Dickens adopted these personae selectively; rather, it makes more sense to consider them as figures or figurations of the author with which he takes positions in a field over whose proliferating force he can exert only limited, initial control. Consider,

then, the following figures as interventions in a struggle for legitimacy in which authority is short-lived, positional, and contingent.

The Friend: In an effort to connect with his readers directly, Dickens often adopts a confidential or confessional tone; the sort of tone one might expect from a friend, rather than an acquaintance. In the second preface to *Pickwick* (1847; Cheap Edition), for instance, we get an autobiographical tidbit in which he tells us the origin of the nickname Boz: "'Boz,' my signature in the Morning Chronicle, and in the Old Monthly Magazine, appended to the monthly cover of this book, and retained long afterwards, was the nickname of a pet child, a younger brother, whom I had dubbed Moses, in honour of the Vicar of Wakefield; which being facetiously pronounced through the nose, became Boses, and being shortened, became Boz. Boz was a very familiar household name to me, long before I was an author, and so I came to adopt it."¹⁸ Dickens proves to be a good friend to the reader in this passage by offering a glimpse into his private life (we learn he is a caring older brother). But, more important, by telling the reader the story of the origin of this "household word," he is also clarifying in doing so something that might have been a source of public debate and private embarrassment: the proper pronunciation of Boz. At the same time, the fact that the origin of the name Boz is revealed in the form of a story (and a family story at that) rather than as a mere statement, ensures that the name be familiarly remembered. In the preface to *David Copperfield*, to give another glimpse into Dickens-as-friend, he draws attention to his own form of address, self-consciously speaking to the reader directly, and, in this way, showing that he is a considerate author: "My interest in it [this Book], is so recent and strong; and my mind is so divided between pleasure and regret—pleasure in the achievement of a long design, regret in the separation from many companions—that I am in danger of wearying the reader whom I love, with personal confidences, and private emotions."¹⁹ But Dickens is also being coy here, suggesting to the reader, whom he loves, that she is just like the "many companions" he has left behind insofar as he is speaking as would a "companion" who shares and with whom one shares the sort of "personal confidences" and "private emotions" that he is expressing here. Furthermore, the deliberate slippage between fictional character and real reader that constitutes this avowal of friendship points towards an altogether different form of praise: Dickens seems to be suggesting that the reader is in fact a character worthy of being novelized and, moreover, that they are both the products of a "long design," an authority that is marked in the preface by Dickens's ability

to “weary” the reader. In both examples, Dickens presents himself to his readers as a friend who shares his life with his readers and, in an act of friendship, offers them thereby a degree of protagonism that they would otherwise not feel they had a right to expect.

The Truth Teller: In several prefaces Dickens presents himself as an honest broker; as a writer whose purpose is to tell the truth, even as he recognizes that his craft is imaginative and creative and that he must therefore be allowed to take some liberties. In the preface to *Oliver Twist*, he is very keen on defending himself and his brand of realism against his critics: “It is useless,” he writes, “to discuss whether the conduct and character of the girl [Nancy] seems natural or unnatural, probable or improbable. IT IS TRUE. Every man who has watched these melancholy shades of life, must know it to be so.”²⁰ It is as though shouting made his representation of Nancy indisputably real, even as he admits that she is a “shade” and thus presumably impossible to capture. Dickens is here countering his critics, who, in a fierce polemic against so-called Newgate fiction staged most forcefully in the pages of *Fraser’s Magazine*, maintained that *Oliver Twist* was not true-to-life and that the criminal class could not, and should not, be sentimentalized.²¹ The most spectacular, and implausible, defense of verisimilitude that Dickens offers in his prefaces, however, has to be his scholarly justification for spontaneous combustion in the preface to *Bleak House*. Arguing against H. G. Lewes, who had objected in his review of the novel to the representation of Krook’s death, he writes: “I have no need to observe that I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject.”²² He goes on to reassure us that there are about thirty cases of spontaneous combustion on record, of two of which he then proceeds to give detailed account. That these cases are more than one hundred years old, and their sources, one Italian, one French, too distant, too foreign, to be easily verified, does not prevent Dickens from using these “notable facts” to support his contention that Krook’s death is a “human occurrence.” Hedging his bets, however, he also adds this at the end of the preface: “In *Bleak House*, I have purposely dwelt upon the romantic side of familiar things.”²³

The Advocate: I have called the third persona Dickens performs in his prefaces “The Advocate” since he often uses the preface as an occasion to advance one of his numerous social causes. In the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, to quote a celebrated instance, he takes issue with the Poor Law: “I believe there has been in England, since the days of the Stuarts, no law so often infamously administered, no law

so often so openly violated, no law habitually so ill-supervised.”²⁴ By making an explicit appeal in the preface that the novel to which it is appended can only dramatize (in this case through the figure of Betty Higden), Dickens does two things at once: he is using his position as author to advance a cause that is larger than he is (the Reform of the Poor Law), but he is also, in advancing it, making sure that the dramatization of such appeal as it appears in the novel is not dismissed as mere fiction or sentimentality even as he counts on the novelization of its consequences to make vivid what would otherwise be an abstract ethical case. Dickens makes a similar appeal in the second preface to *Nicholas Nickleby* (1848), but, in this case, with respect to education: “Of the monstrous neglect of education in England, and the disregard of it by the State as a means of forming good or bad citizens, and miserable or happy men, private schools long afforded a notable example.”²⁵ And then, after proceeding to single out the “rotten” Yorkshire schoolmasters as singularly responsible for this state of affairs, he tells us that things have changed: “A long day’s work remains to be done about us in the way of education, heaven knows; but great improvements and facilities towards the attainment of a good one, have been furnished, of late years.”²⁶ That these “late years” coincide with the space separating the first and second prefaces (1839–1848) is in itself significant since the implication is that his novel has had something to do with the changes instituted in the educational system. Whether one regards it as the posture a socially responsible author would be expected to take (however modern the notion of the *engagé* author) or whether one accepts at face value Dickens’s subtle avowal of his novel’s role in implementing social change, the mere mention of literature’s social disposition is sufficient to give the preface the performative force of an injunction. Indeed, to the extent that the preface is not fictional, it legitimates literature’s extra-literary acts as fiction, which can advocate more forcefully for, and indeed engage in, social change by providing an emotional register to human action.

The Professional Writer: He tells us in his prefaces all about the commercial success of his novels, as though they constituted a sort of corporation (“Dickens and Son” or “Our Mutual Fund” perhaps) whose profits had to be periodically reported to its stockholders. In the preface to the *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), he writes: “It has made its way, and is doing such thriving business that nothing remains for him to add, in the words of the good old civic ceremony, now that one dish has been discussed and finished, and another smokes upon the board, that he drinks to his guests in a loving cup, and bids them

hearty welcome.”²⁷ With hindsight, it is easy to see why Dickens himself thought it newsworthy to mention to his readers that the novel was doing “thriving business” since, as we now know, it was the most popular of all his novels, selling more than 100,000 copies at the end of its run.²⁸ Yet, it is also easy to see that, in announcing its success, the preface also seeks to enhance it, and hence the haste with which Dickens concludes (“nothing remains for him to add”) as though “adding” were in fact the surest way to not do so in terms of sales. The fact that this passage comes after a long quotation from Fielding’s preface to *Tom Jones*—and hence the conceit of the preface as a “bill of fare” presented to customers entering a public house—also enhances, by association, the literary prestige of Dickens’s novel, and hence its market value. Dickens’s commercial motives become even more explicit in the preface to the French edition of *Barnaby Rudge* (or rather *Barnabé Rudge par Ch. Dickens*, as the translator renders it *avec l’autorisation de l’auteur*): “Hitherto, less fortunate in France than in Germany, I have only been known to French readers not thoroughly acquainted with the English language, through occasional, fragmentary and unauthorized translations over which I have no control, and from which I have derived no advantage.”²⁹ Dickens’s address to his French public, which appeared in both French and English in the original French edition of 1864, authorizes the “uniform” translation his French publishers, Messrs. Hachette and Co. and Ch. Lahure, have agreed to publish and, by doing so, positions them in a foreign market in which “unauthorized” translations have prevented him from fully realizing his marketing potential. Using the prefaces as a kind of account book, Dickens transforms a mere description of sales into the declarative force of a sales pitch.

The Famous Author: In his prefaces, Dickens grows increasingly self-conscious of his fame and begins to refer to it quite openly, promoting, as he does so, the myth of the author as a public figure. In the 1848 preface to *Nicholas Nickleby*, for instance, he gives us a sense of his popularity—and perhaps the responsibilities and burdens that come with it—by noting, in a somewhat offhand manner, the fact that he receives, and presumably reads, an extraordinary amount of correspondence from his readers, a collective response to which we imagine he considers the preface to be issuing. “If I were to attempt to sum up the hundreds upon hundreds of letters, from all sorts of people in all sorts of latitudes and climates, to which this unlucky paragraph has given rise [the one talking about the originals for the Cheerybles], I should get into an arithmetical difficulty from which I

could not easily extricate myself.”³⁰ Following a logic of literary marketing that he did much to install himself, his popularity can only make him all the more popular; the more letters he says he receives, the more letters he will henceforth receive. The influence he now commands is both immensurable (an “arithmetical difficulty”) and global (“all sorts of people in all sorts of latitudes and climates”), a veritable authorial force to which the reader can only succumb. In the preface to *Little Dorrit* (1857), to give another example of the self-conscious manner in which Dickens brings his fame to bear on the reading of his novels, he ends with these words: “In the Preface to *Bleak House* I remarked that I had never had so many readers. In the Preface to its next successor, *Little Dorrit*, I have still to repeat the same words. Deeply sensible of the affection and confidence that have grown up between us, I add to this Preface, as I added to that, May we meet again!”³¹ Here we see the preface becoming an account, indeed an accounting, of his growing influence and also an open invitation, or incitation, to make it grow even further. The repetition of “May we meet again!”—a repetition that can only function as repetition since it anticipates a further meeting—has the declarative force of a binding promise that, in opening up the possibility of meeting again, also ensures that it comes to pass. Dickens’s track record, in any case, almost guarantees that the next meeting will indeed occur.

Through the development of each of these personae over the course of Dickens’s career, the prefaces provide a privileged glimpse into the struggle for legitimacy into which the modern author must now enter. The discursive forces that operate in this liminal space make visible the institutional, commercial, aesthetic, affective, and political pressures that culture brings to bear upon the author as figure. Rather than making such figure an emblem for individual agency, however, the prefaces render agency itself an ephemeral, contingent, and very possibly illusory condition of authorship. It is as though the forcefulness of the prefatorial locution were in fact an expression of the more ambivalent regard in which we hold action in and out of fiction. Put differently, the many faces Dickens adopts in the prefaces are attempts to make literature count, but to count not only as representation, as theatrical performance; it is meant to count as an act in its own right. Dickens’s performances therefore suggest not that the author is an actor (in the sense in which he embodies or acts out different roles) but that he is an agent (in the sense that he can act in the world) whose agency nevertheless rests in his ability to act in and as literature. Dickens’s prefaces do all sorts of things exceptionally well (they

befriend, advocate, authorize, market, sell, glorify, etc.) and, in doing so, they also construct Dickens as “Dickens,” a figure for the acts the reader might one day, like Dickens, perform. Dickens as author thus comes to symbolize the ability of the subject to act in the world even as this ability is itself bracketed by the ideological and disciplinary work the novel performs.

Given what I have just said, it may seem contradictory to suggest that the figure that emerges in these prefaces—the Dickens that prefaces Dickens, if you like—is the familiar, coherent though complex figure we have come to recognize as “The Inimitable.”³² He is at once a consecrated novelist who embodies all the attributes of the professional author and the self-made man all too painfully conscious of social injustice who aims, in making use of all the cultural resources available to him as a novelist, to put literature to work in the service of political reform. This is the enabling morality of literature we come to recognize in Dickens: a redemptive, reparative, renovating force in the face of a dehumanizing culture of individualism whose narrative takes as its form the novel itself. The Dickens of the prefaces, in short, embodies all the contradictions and competing claims that converge in the subject position we have come to associate with the modern author.

Yet, the coherent author figure that emerges in the prefaces is surprising—or, rather, it is surprising that such a figure could emerge from the prefaces—insofar as the discursive elements that allow Dickens to claim authority (as author) are also the same ones that, in the service of political reform, would make him less than authoritative. On the one hand, the strange form of the prefaces themselves (they are ephemeral, improvisational, subject to change) would seem to produce a fragmented or unstable subject (this is signaled by the many personae, the many Dickenses, one can detect in the prefaces); a subject that could hardly be said, let alone be trusted, to act in ways that could mobilize social reform. On the other hand, the odd discursive status of the preface—introducing a work of fiction yet being itself something other than fiction and something less than non-fiction—would seem to make its content anything but politically efficacious. Yet, this is precisely what the prefaces accomplish not in spite of but very much on account of their instability: they help to install Dickens as an author and, in doing so, to encapsulate in a language of action what the novels attempt to do in the language of representation. The social, artistic, linguistic forces that become visible in the prefaces as means of creating authority are the same ones that permit literature, more generally, to help change the reality it describes, whether this be the public school, the prison, or the workhouse.

The contradiction we find in Dickens, if it is indeed one, is at the very heart of modern literature, whose mode of address is both literary (it is an aesthetic work) and literal (directed at life in society). In *Aspects of the Novel*, a book that in many ways functions as a preface to his work, E. M. Forster opens his first lecture by asking a deceptively simple question: “what does the novel do?”³³ Even as he immediately offers what is a very reasonable, a very commonsensical answer to this question—novels tell us stories—he remains skeptical about what this might actually mean. Admittedly, Forster’s main purpose is to show how novels tell stories; but the fact that he feels compelled to tell us this, to tell in effect the story of the novel, tells us something about the importance he attaches to the novelistic enterprise and, evidently, its impact on society at large. As a working novelist, Forster knows something about the power of literature and, like Dickens, must consider the question of what it does quite literally. In the case of the novel, this question becomes one of its own enabling fictions: the novel, the novel itself tells us, has an incredible effect on its readers, driving some to madness (as in Miguel de Cervantes’s *Don Quijote*), others to adultery and suicide (as in Gustav Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*), while always posing as a danger to excessive self-regard (as in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*). In this view, the novel is said to do things by means of some psychological mechanism that exacerbates the moral shortcomings already present in its readers, the best indication of which is precisely the fact that they read novels. (And in England, at least, it is always French novels that are to blame for virtually everything.)

To be sure, Dickens never felt the need to systematize the formal aspects of the novel nor did he produce a study detailing what he saw as the relation between the form and the content of his fiction. But he did write prefaces and in them we get an implicit, if unsystematic, answer to the question Forster asked: what do novels do? In the prefaces we get a very keen sense of Dickens’s awareness of the impact his novels have (or are having) on his readers and, by addressing them directly, makes explicit what his novels are trying to do to them indirectly through fiction; namely: to change their attitudes toward the great social ills of the age. Yet, because of their discursive, rhetorical, and generic peculiarity, the preface makes visible mechanisms of action that operate beyond the psychological and which resemble the sorts of acts that are performed in speech without reference to instruction, persuasion, or identification.

For Dickens, the Dickens we get in the prefaces, the novel, and literature more generally, does two things exceedingly well, both of

which have something to do with its storytelling capacity, but that are not limited to the telling of stories: one has to do with the status of literature as a cultural institution and the other with the ethical work it both enables and accomplishes. Let me explain: “Dickens” can be said to create himself as author in the prefaces, insofar as, in addressing the reader directly from the point of view of a self-conscious author (as opposed to, say, addressing the reader indirectly in his novels through characters or even the omniscient narrator), he does all sorts of things with language—things such as promising, persuading, seducing, selling, coercing, excusing, accusing—that contribute to make literature appear to do more than simply telling stories. The technical term for this type of language is “performative language” or “performative speech act,” and it refers to the language used in contracts, declarations, laws, and institutions of all sorts. “I do” as used in a wedding ceremony or “I name” as in the naming of a ship or the “I bequeath” of a will, are all common examples of this type of language. At the same time, the fact that all this use of language—this use of performative language—takes place at the very threshold of the literary (occurring just before or just after the novel proper) might lead us to conclude that the novel can indeed do things other than tell stories (say, reform the Poor Law) but does not actually guarantee that it does do so since the mode of address of the preface is categorically non-literary. Or almost non-literary, and this is the point to be made, since the prefaces make visible literature’s ability to participate in the world. By allowing us to see in very dramatic fashion how the figure of the author is constructed through performative language—how Dickens is able to install himself as author—and by making this constructedness visible, the prefaces also show a mechanism for how literature compels us to act ethically in the world at large.

This double movement can be illustrated with reference to two impulses very much present in the prefaces, but that also extend into his novels. First, the impulse toward self-legitimation, self-affirmation, even self-commodification that installs the figure of “Dickens” as author in the prefaces, but that is also present in his novels (think of John Harmon in *Our Mutual Friend*, who is forced to construct his identity predicate by predicate and by means of a series of aliases or, avatars, that finally converge in the harmonious individual who comes to occupy the normative subject positions of husband, son, and father). Second, the impulse toward selflessness, self-cancellation, or self-effacement that becomes, in the novels, Dickens’s preferred formalization of the ethical moment (think of Esther Summerson in *Bleak House*, whose

narration, rather than giving voice to her character, seems to negate it as she becomes as disfigured and as de-realized as an omniscient narrator, or, consider Little Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*, whose self-denial inspires Arthur Clennam to embrace the empty figure of the “Nobody” he has previously disowned.)

The first impulse, the impulse toward self-legitimation, is, I would argue, the single most important function of Dickens’s prefaces. Reading the prefaces together, one is struck by how Dickens becomes progressively aware of his status as a Great Author. The prefaces, in this sense, can be read as milestones in the road to fame, each expressing with increasing confidence Dickens’s literary power and, as a corollary of this power, his ability to help shape the world his novels describe. In this sense, one can think of the prefaces in Dickens as acts that correspond to what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “rites of institution,” symbolic displays whose function is to consecrate and legitimize a particular social role.³⁴ These rites, according to Bourdieu, are endowed with “symbolic efficacy,” by which he means to designate the “power they possess to act on reality by acting on its representations.”³⁵ In this case, it is as though Dickens needed the symbolic efficacy of the preface to declare himself an Author (a word he does not actually capitalize until *Nicholas Nickleby*; before this, it appears as lower case “author”); a social investiture that is repeated, revised, and rehearsed every time he writes or rewrites a preface over the course of his professional career. Consider the publication history of the prefaces. As I mentioned above, Dickens wrote prefaces to most, though not to all, of his novels following the pattern of serialization of his own novels, both in the original part-number run and in the serialized manner in which he published his collected works. Oddly, his very first novelistic preface—the preface to *Pickwick* (1837)—is actually about serial publication; its revision for the Cheap Edition (1847) ten years later gives us an autobiographical account of the history of serial publication. *Our Mutual Friend*, the last novel he wrote, also contains mention of the serial mode of publication and its effect on the novel’s narrative design, as though his career as author—consecrated in the prefaces—were book-ended by the practice of serial publication and even by the prefaces themselves since the preface to *Our Mutual Friend* is actually a postscript “In lieu of Preface.”³⁶ Serial publication thus becomes the distinctive characteristic of the Dickens brand or signature. But serialization also approximates the structural fragmentation and interruptive logic that corresponds to the process of subject formation enacted by the prefaces themselves

in the performative construction of “Dickens.” From this perspective, the prefaces can be said to stage a curious confluence of history-of-the-book narratives with those of the construction-of-the subject by virtue of their performativity.

This is perhaps most visible in the series of “collected works” with which Dickens serialized his career. Among the different editions Dickens saw to print during his lifetime, the Cheap Edition contains the most substantial revisions to the original prefaces and, in some cases, entirely new ones. As far as I can tell, Dickens did not write new prefaces for the Charles Dickens edition of 1867–68, though he did add the lines with which I began this essay to one of the volumes: “like many fond parents, I have in my heart of hearts a favourite child. And his name is *David Copperfield*,” which is perhaps appropriate for an edition that carried his name embossed in gold (or at least his intertwined initials—which thus become indistinguishable from David Copperfield’s: CD/DC). The preface is thus also a performative act that secures (as in a will) the sort of legacy he refers to or at least implies when he speaks of David Copperfield as his “favorite child.” But the “collected works” also form part of a massive editorial and commercial apparatus that includes journalism, public readings, letters, as well as a variety of modes for publishing and republishing the novels themselves, whose collective aim is the consecration of Dickens as Author and as “Household Word.” The institutionalization of literature and, more specifically, of the novel as form, is also a form of legitimation for the novelist. The prefaces to the “Complete Works” accomplish this task most efficiently and economically by making Charles Dickens indistinguishable from the Charles Dickens Edition (which like his life might be said to remain incomplete, interrupted as both were in the middle of Edwin Drood’s serial run). One might even say that the prefaces advance the work of legitimation to be accomplished historically by such “complete” editions by precisely anticipating, or “saying beforehand,” what its value will have been to posterity (today, here, now) in the characteristic future perfect mode of the preface.

In this context, we can profitably compare Dickens’s prefaces with the prefaces written by Henry James for the New York Edition of his works, which can be read as a mark or index of Dickens’s own legacy, as though the modern author could now, after Dickens, no longer do without prefaces to the collected works. Henry James’s prefaces are of course lengthier and more purposeful, offering readings of his own novels as well as a very thorough and complex theory of the novel from the point of view of its practice.³⁷ Yet, the spectacular commercial

failure of James's New York Edition suggests that the consecration of the author is not an act of self-begetting or, rather, that it is not so exclusively. James's prefatorial performance suggests that authorial intent is not the only, nor perhaps even the most important, force involved in the consecration of the author as figure. If it were purely an intentional act, James's New York Edition would have both sealed his critical reputation and secured at the same time its success in the marketplace. No prefatorial apparatus quite like James's, in any case, has again been attempted. In contrast, the occasional, ephemeral, fragmented preface of the type written by Dickens is still very much a staple of book publishing to this day.

The second impulse is less straightforward. I have already cited Derrida's conceptualization of the preface as a "self-effacing" form that undergoes revision and repositioning according to the occasion for which it is written. But the impulse towards self-less-ness and self-effacement is also thematically elaborated in the preface insofar as it constitutes in Dickens an ethical condition. This is certainly familiar to us from the novels: Esther Summerson, for instance, is literally defaced or disfigured as a mark, rather than as the cost, of acting ethically and responsibly. The curious anonymity of her narration in *Bleak House* is manifested materially, physically, when she in fact becomes disfigured after her illness. Indeed, in the novel self-effacement becomes the condition of possibility for acting ethically, perhaps nowhere more dramatically illustrated than when Esther finally does meet her mother and realizes that her disfigurement is the only guarantee she can offer to help her mother keep the secret of her birth from the villain Tulkinghorn, physical resemblance no longer being able to reveal their filiation (as it earlier did with Guppy). Little Dorrit is another case in point as is Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, all examples of selflessness in which the precariousness of the sense of self is the condition of possibility for acting ethically. An analogous form of self-effacement occurs in the prefaces in the formal and thematic fractures that I have already outlined. Dickens's voice, in its multiple registers, can hardly be said to be centered; similarly, the subject position he occupies shifts constantly between one Dickens and another. But the trend towards self-effacing is most dramatically illustrated in the fact that both characters and Dickens himself go from fact to fiction very rapidly, blurring the divide that normatively keeps an inside of the text separate from its outside. As he describes the railway accident in the Postscript to *Our Mutual Friend*, for instance, he refers to the Boffins in these terms: "On Friday the Ninth of June in the present year, Mr.

And Mrs. Boffin (in their manuscript dress of receiving Mr. and Mrs. Lammle at breakfast) were on the South Eastern Railway with me, in a terribly destructive accident. When I had done what I could to help others, I climbed back into my carriage—nearly turned over a viaduct, and caught aslant upon the turn—to extricate the worthy couple. They were much soiled, but otherwise unhurt.”³⁵ This impulse can also be detected in the different characterizations Dickens uses to describe himself in his prefaces, whether calling himself a “story-weaver at his loom” as he does in the postscript to *Our Mutual Friend* or when he appears as a gossip acting in a role similar to that of the Ancient Mariner, preventing the guest, or in this case the public, from crossing the threshold and entering the novel. The fictionalization of Dickens in the prefaces thus becomes a disfiguration of Dickens the author insofar as it is a deliberate attempt to transform the author into a character, the agent into an actor. This process has at least two consequences: it evacuates the subject of its historical determinations and thus places it in a position of disinterest or selflessness and, at the same time, renders this subject into a discursive position from which to act or posit, as figure, a general condition of ethical readiness or disposition rather than in the name of a universal humanism predisposed to act by following a prescribed code of conduct.

What I have been describing here can be summarized as follows: the author figure Dickens constructs in the prefaces can be read not only as the result of a process of self-legitimation in the context of the literary market, but, given that the forces that make this process possible are made dramatically visible in the prefaces, this figure can also be read as an emblem of self-effacement insofar as the self that gets disseminated in the novels, through a species of negative capability, is also a condition of selflessness or absence of self that allows us to act ethically. The same mechanism that erects Dickens as author, also performs the task modern literature sets for itself: to act in the world. It is tempting to consecrate Dickens for what he represents—the self-reliant, self-made, self-authored man of letters who founded a whole industry around his personality—but I would suggest that it is more important to celebrate him for what he does. And there is nowhere where this doing is most evident, most material than in his prefaces, where “Dickens” indeed performs “Dickens.”

University of Wisconsin, Madison

NOTES

¹ Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. R. H. Malden, *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), xii. Dickens wrote the original preface for the one-volume edition of 1850 and added the lines quoted here in 1867 for the Charles Dickens edition. For the textual history of the preface, see *David Copperfield*, ed. Nina Burgis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), li.

² Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Burgis, 2.

³ I am borrowing the terms “field of cultural production” and “position-taking” from Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, trans. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), 15.

⁴ For a Marxist description of the ideology of the author, see Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology* (London: Verso, 1976), 58–60. For an account of the ways in which the novel, and Dickens in particular, provides an image of individualism and creates a subject position from which the reader can adopt it, see Mary Poovey, “The Man-of-Letters Hero: *David Copperfield* and the Professional Writer,” in *Uneven Developments* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988), 89–125.

⁵ Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. Osbert Sitwell, *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 18. For an account of Victorian liberalism in the context of Britain’s imperial project, see Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁶ For a treatment of emotion as a constitutive aspect of liberalism’s disposition toward action, see Frances Ferguson, “Beliefs and Emotions (from Stanley Fish to Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill),” in ed. Victorian Kahn et al., *Politics and the Passions, 1500–1800* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 231–250. For an account of agency in liberal culture and aesthetics, see David Wayne Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians: Liberal Culture and the Aesthetic* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

⁷ For a treatment of character as a moral category in Victorian England see Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), and Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003).

⁸ The prefaces are of course mentioned and used within Dickens studies, but, to my knowledge, no systematic account of the prefaces as yet exists.

⁹ Gérard Genette, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History* 22 (1991): 261.

¹⁰ See Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 196–236.

¹¹ See Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” trans. Richard Howard, in *The Rustle of Language* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 49–55.

¹² Barthes, 52.

¹³ See Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?,” trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 113–138.

¹⁴ See D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 2004), Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2001), Andrew Delbanco, *Melville: His World and Work* (New York: Knopf, 2005), and Leo Damrosch, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Restless Genius* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

¹⁵ Alain Badiou argues that the current discourse of ethics is erroneously premised on a conceptualization of man as a being “capable of recognizing himself as a victim,” a situation that leads to misleading generalizations about evil and an inability to face the singularity of events (*Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward [London: Verso, 2001], 10). I take this view to entail a critique of the self-present subject insofar as the negative view of man-as-animal is universalizing but also amounts to a certain form of nihilism.

¹⁶ *OED*, s.v., “preface.”

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Outwork,” in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), 9.

¹⁸ Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 886.

¹⁹ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, ed. Burgis, lxxxvii.

²⁰ Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Humphrey House, *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), xvii.

²¹ Thackeray, for instance, attacks Dickens’s representation of Nancy in “Going to See a Man Hanged,” by describing a prostitute he encounters in the crowd while attending a public execution. See W. M. Thackeray, “Going to See a Man Hanged,” *Fraser’s Magazine* (1840), 112–126.

²² Dickens, *Bleak House*, xiv.

²³ Dickens, *Bleak House*, xiv.

²⁴ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Salter Davies, *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 822.

²⁵ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. Mark Ford (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), 5.

²⁶ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 6.

²⁷ Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. Elizabeth Brennan (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 4.

²⁸ See Simon Eliot, “The Business of Victorian Publishing,” in ed. Deidre David, *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), 37–60, esp. 44.

²⁹ Dickens, *Barnabé Rudge*, trans. M. Bonnomet (Paris: Hachette, 1864), vii.

³⁰ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, 8–9.

³¹ Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), xxii.

³² Dickens was familiarly known as “The Inimitable” by his reading public. According to Michael Slater, Dickens was happy to adopt the nickname of “The Inimitable” after William Giles, a childhood teacher of his, had sent him a silver snuff-box inscribed to “the inimitable Boz” in 1838 during the serial run of *Pickwick Papers*. See Slater, *Charles Dickens* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009), 10.

³³ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Harcourt, 1927), 25.

³⁴ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991), 117–126.

³⁵ Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 119.

³⁶ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 821.

³⁷ For an account of the production of shame as a “perperformative” speech act in Henry James’s prefaces, see Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 35–65.

³⁸ Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 822.