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## The Author Speaks: Precept versus Practice

The correspondence of Charles Dickens the editor offers valuable insight into the artistic principles of Charles Dickens the novelist. As proprietor and editor of *Household Words* from 1850-1859 and *All the Year Round* from 1859-1870, Dickens was tactfully candid in criticizing fiction submitted by writers of all levels of talent and experience. One frequent theme of Dickens’s editorial advice involves the “disappearance of the author from the text.” In some respects, it seems that Dickens anticipated Henry James and Percy Lubbock in formulating the golden rule of modern fiction, the rule that authors must *show* and not *tell* readers what to make of their stories. A brief glance at Dickens the editor’s correspondence will demonstrate, perhaps surprisingly, that like James and Lubbock, and Flaubert before them, Dickens felt authors should avoid self-conscious intrusion into their texts in *propria persona*.

In rejecting the novel *Only George* for publication in *All the Year Round*, Dickens cautioned Jane Brookfield against a tendency to inject herself, plainly as author, into her text: “you constantly hurry your narrative . . . *by telling* . . . *in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves*. My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their own business to do it, and not mine.” He added, “I don’t want you, in a novel, to present *yourself* to tell such things, but I want the things to be there” (*Letters* 11: 160-61). Or, as he explained in initial rejection of Louisa King’s “Mother and Step-Mother,” “The people do not sufficiently work out their own purposes in dialogue and dramatic action. You are too much their exponent; what you do for them, they ought to do for themselves” (*Letters* 7: 529-30). In the same vein Dickens said of Charles Collins’s *The Eye-Witness and His Evidence about Many Wonderful Things*, “there is too much of the narrator in it—the narrator not being an actor. The result is, that I can not *see* the people, or the place, or believe in the fiction” (*Letters* 9: 164-65). *Showing*, through dialogue and dramatic scene, Dickens the editor says, is more effective in bringing fiction to life than intrusive authorial *telling*.

Dickens’s prejudice against *telling* extended even to such extra-narrative vehicles of explanation and commentary as prefaces and footnotes. In response to *Basil: a Story of Modern Life*, Dickens told Wilkie Collins, “I have no doubt that the Prefatory letter would have been better away; on the ground that a book (of all things) should speak for, and explain, itself” (*Letters* 6: 823-24). Dickens held that a book should speak for and explain itself because he believed that authors impose upon and even risk offending readers with direct explanation of their works. As he told Edward Bulwer-Lytton, after reading chapters from *A Strange Story*:

That the audience is good enough for any thing that is well presented to it, I am quite sure. Where you can avoid *notes*, however, and get their substance into the text, it is highly desirable in the case of so large an audience. . . . [T]he difficulty of getting numbers of people to read notes (which they invariably regard as interruptions of the text—not as strengtheners or elucidators of it), is wonderful. (*Letters* 9: 509-10).

A later installment of *A Strange Story* prompted further comment on the importance of novels explaining themselves:

I counsel you *not* to append the proposed dialogue between Fenwick and. . . .

Works Cited

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