BROADLY SPEAKING:

DEMOCRATIC ADDRESS AND THE HISTORY OF READING IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

By

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A dissertation submitted to the

School of Graduate Studies

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

written under the direction of

David S. Kurnick

and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey

October 2018
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Broadly Speaking: Democratic Address and the History of Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

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This dissertation argues that nineteenth-century British writers, in responding to the rise of mass literacy through conventions for addressing reading audiences, turned to literary form to imagine the public as a democratic concept. Associated above all with the diminutive appeal to the “dear reader,” these conventions are—when not bypassed as a gratuitous curiosity—often cast as a reactionary effort to contain the rise of a mass reading public in a singular, gentle figure. “Broadly Speaking” uncovers the remarkable range of devices for addressing readers in the periodical and the novel, including direct forms such as dear reader, networks of paratext, gothic frame tales and other structures for soliciting readers as interlocutors, and journalistic manifestos, among others. Focusing on the spatial dynamics organized by these conventions, I show how writers called on their ubiquity and pliability to situate audiences within an expanding reading public—a social body so sprawling that it was increasingly imagined in abstract terms. Because conventions of address appeal to unseen, uncountable readers, they proved uniquely able to implicate reading audiences in this shift towards abstraction. An abstractly drawn public is necessarily an inclusive public: across the diversity of these conventions, writers moved from evoking delimited and face-to-face relationships with
readers to a theoretically egalitarian and limitless readership. In doing so, they used literary form to imagine a democratic public that accounted for all by counting none.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe many and deep thanks to the people who have helped this project grow from an intuitive point of interest into a dissertation. I am grateful to David Kurnick for the patience and rigor he has devoted to my project, which is indelibly shaped by his insight. That I discovered myself equal to setting ever-higher expectations for my work is owing to his model of intellectual ambition and encouraging mentorship. My gratitude is therefore greater than what I can express here. John Kucich, through incisive commentary supplied with a readiness that never ceases to impress me, has brought clarity and concreteness to my thinking at every stage of my growth in graduate school. This project is much strengthened by his probing guidance. I thank Meredith McGill for taking me on, a sight-unseen Victorianist, and for sharing her remarkable energy for methodological interventions and all else with me. I am grateful to Garrett Stewart for his discerning, thoughtful commentary on this project in its nearly final form, which has both encouraged me to pursue its future and recalled to me the original excitement about forms of address that incited me to write it.

Thanks are due also to Brad Evans, who offered generous guidance as a teacher, to Jonah Siegel, who is responsible for several crucial moments of professional confidence, and to Lynn Festa, who led a dissertation workshop that grappled with Chapter Four and articulated approaches to writing that will stay with me. My path towards both a doctorate degree and this dissertation began ten years ago in a class on George Eliot with Susan Bernstein, for whose long-lasting friendship and mentorship I am deeply grateful. Cheryl Robinson and Courtney Borack, inimitable guides within the
department and state they invited me to think of as home, cannot be thanked enough. I am also grateful for the institutional support that has made it possible for me to pursue this project. Travel and professional development awards from Rutgers supported archival research for Chapter One, and I am thankful to the charitable staff at the National Library of Scotland for their assistance in that research. Chapter Two has benefited from the feedback of the peer reviewers at NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction and from fellow panelists at the American Comparative Literature Association conference in 2015. I am thankful to the English Department for the University and Raritan Fellowships, and to the School of Graduate Studies for the Mellon Dissertation Fellowship, which has allowed me to complete my degree.

While researching and writing, I discovered that the more I drew on the professional and personal support of my graduate student colleagues and family, the more bountiful these relationships became. For this reason it is impossible to measure their impact on this project. I owe special thanks, however, to the members of the Nineteenth-Century Interest Group for a productive workshop of Chapter Three, to Melissa Parrish, Luc Barton, and Isaac Cowell for much fruitful discussion on our work, to Bakary Diaby and Christina Jen for bringing me to new forms of intellectual pleasure and self-reflection, and to Amy Cooper, for her fast friendship and confidence. Through a great fortune I have always had Katelynn Williams by my side, where she supplies honesty, humor, and motivation, often by simply showing me who I am, which is a wonderful comfort. I am very grateful to Mary Pat and Kevin Williams for constant support and encouragement. And to Robert Joynt, for a few stimulating cerebral challenges, and unreserved belief and love.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract of the Dissertation ii
Acknowledgments v

Introduction: The Reading Public At Large 1
A Brief History of the Reading Public 8
Methodological Debates 16
What is Literary Democracy? 22
Chapter Outline 29

Chapter 1: Addressing the “Universal Appetite”
Reading for All 33
Seeking Readers 45
Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal and the Politics of House Style 60
Democratic Address and the Unknown Public 74

Chapter 2: The Slow Death of the Dear Reader
A Century of Direct Address 92
Lingering at the Post-Chaise with Walter Scott 101
Political, Paratextual George Eliot 117
Marie Corelli, Henry James, and the Democracy of Taste 139

Chapter 3: “A People” in Bleak House
Dickens, Public Best Friend 159
Traversing Bleak House 174
A People’s Reading Public 187
Chapter 4: Un-Framing Address in Three Gothic Frame Narratives

Crises of Delimitation 211

I, Frankenstein: Monstrous Eloquence and the Emerging Reading Public 223

Reading Unmoored in *Wuthering Heights* 238

The Disembodied Speech of *Heart of Darkness* 257

Bibliography 275
INTRODUCTION

The Reading Public At Large

This dissertation traces the history of the modern public—vast, diverse, faceless—by recovering the intertwined histories of reading and literary form. Nineteenth-century British literature is replete with conventions for addressing reading audiences that often strike modern ears as eccentric and gratuitous. Behind their ubiquity, I argue, lies a strikingly modern problem: how to speak to a public one cannot see, convene, or even imagine as an embodied collective. “Broadly Speaking” presents the remarkable range of forms of address available to nineteenth-century writers as a response to this question. These forms include the paradigmatic appeal to the “dear reader” and extend to narrative structures built up around relationships of address, such as the gothic frame tale. They include invocations of friendship with readers as well as with a mass audience, the anonymous “we” of unsigned periodical essays, and the grandiose promises to periodical audiences with which new journals entered the fray of print culture. Across this diversity, I document a collective trajectory towards abstracting the form of address. Writers reformulated these conventions, once suggestive of embodied, delimited relationships
among readers and writers, in ways that opened their rhetorical reach to a public that could, increasingly, only be imagined as a social concept.

The rise of literacy fueled this development by dissolving the boundaries that had cordoned off an educated, male elite as the primary audience for print. When Samuel Taylor Coleridge called the reading public a “misgrowth of our luxuriant activity” in 1816, he was lamenting the disappearance of these boundaries. Carried by a vehement reaction into a long aside in his Statesman’s Manual, or, The Bible, the best guide to political skill and foresight, a lay sermon, addressed to the higher classes of society, Coleridge offers his diagnosis of the problem:

[Not] even as a Sermon would I have addressed the present Discourse to a promiscuous audience; and for this reason I likewise announced it in the title-page, as exclusively ad clerum; i.e. (in the old and wide sense of the word) to men of clerkly acquirements, of whatever profession. I would that the greater part of our publications could be thus directed, each to its appropriate class of Readers. But this cannot be! For among other odd burs and kecksies… we now have a READING PUBLIC—a strange phrase, methinks, as ever forced a splenetic smile on the staid countenance of Meditation; and yet no fiction!  

Coleridge channels decades’ worth of anxious cultural commentary on the expansion of reading to women, to what we now would call the middle class, and, in his own time, to the upper reaches of the working classes. Making for “promiscuous” audiences, this expansion forced writers to reflect on the new impossibility of delimiting the edges of their readerships. “Broadly Speaking” explores how the READING PUBLIC came to cast a shadow over these readerships, both by rendering them promiscuous and by reshaping British society, such that writers addressing any given audience had also to address the public. No “fiction” in 1816, the reading public ultimately came to encourage new imaginations of democratically inclusive space, universal access to culture, and social

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egalitarianism.

Conventions of address mediated this imagination for readers. Offering insight into the early-century scene of address with which “Broadly Speaking” begins, Coleridge both draws from and reflects on these conventions. In a pages-long footnote suggestive of his ad clerum style and appended to the asterisked “reading public,” he observes a recent rhetorical “Revolution” in “the nature of the introductory sentences and prefatory matter in serious Books”: “The same gross flattery which disgusts us in the dedications to individuals in the elder writers, is now transferred to the Nation at large, or the Reading Public.”

This change indexes the growth of the public and the use of address to register it in a particularly pat way. But the roiling energy of Coleridge’s aside also belies how the presence of a reading public, in confounding writers’ relationships to their audiences, prompted them to play on all sorts of rhetorical ploys for dealing with the many readerships the “Nation at large” covers. The spread of reading opened the public to women as a notable constituency for the first time, obliquely dismissed here through Coleridge’s emphasis on “clerkly acquirements.” Special contempt is saved for newly literate men seeking to join public debate, however. Again in the footnote, he parodies “one of the READING PUBLIC, a thinking and independent smuggler” struggling to pronounce the word demonstrate: “‘As to Algiers, any man that has half an IDEA in his skull, must know, that it has been long ago dey-monstered, I should say, dey-monstrified, &c.’”

Qualified only by his own literacy, such a one gains entry to the public by engaging on public matters of the day—that is, by understanding himself to be an addressee of any print he can read.

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2 Ibid., 46.
3 Ibid.
This bar was too low for Coleridge (and many others), for whom it facilitated both the dilution of the meaning of an “idea” and the dissolution of particular audiences into a broader public. At the same time, his proliferating appeal to his own readers as only the most erudite members of this public, first in his title, then in his aside, then in his prolix footnote, has the air of protesting too much for their distinction, the sharp juxtaposition of “ad clerum” and “dey-monstered” notwithstanding. The writing was on the wall, by way of the page. Coleridge’s reaction bears witness to an urgent moment of reckoning with the first public that reads. Though the “the reading public” may have originated as a “strange phrase,” modern life would become unthinkable without it. Indeed, in a mass literate society—like Britain at the end of the nineteenth century—the term has a certain redundant, excessive quality because the reading public reshaped the public more generally, with which it became increasingly coterminous.

Writers across the nineteenth century documented this change while enlisting readers in its evolution, turning audiences into figures for a public so broadly construed that it could only be imagined as a virtual social body, uncountably massive and diverse. In this form the public was in fact at its most embodied; otherwise, despite its felt impact in social life, the public came to denote a concept of social belonging. Speaking of publics, plural (a distinction I will arrive at later), Michael Warner notes that “publics exist only by virtue of their imagining. They are a kind of fiction that has taken on life.”

Between Coleridge’s insistence on the reality of the reading public (“no fiction!”) to Warner’s sweeping definition of the fictionality of publics is the rise of mass literacy and the reformulation of conventions of address that documented it.

Across the series of studies to follow, I return to this early-century moment of

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reckoning in the novels of Walter Scott, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and, slightly later, the “cheap literature movement of 1832”\(^5\) carried out in weekly periodicals. Drawing on the exemplarity of George Eliot and Charles Dickens, I show their notable reformulations of address brought the novel through a crucial mid-century turning point towards the inevitability of a mass reading public. The end of my narrative, as the century closes, arrays forbearers of literary modernism Henry James and Joseph Conrad alongside the stubborn persistence of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, a middle-brow, general knowledge weekly miscellany first meant to popularize wholesome reading, and the first true bestseller Marie Corelli, a prolific novelist who found readers in the masses, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and Queen Victoria. An exemplary “promiscuous audience” if ever there was one.

These writers find homes in chapters centered on particular conventions of address.\(^6\) Alternating case studies with multi-authored chronological surveys, I begin with *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, a weekly miscellany explicitly aimed at bringing literacy into the working classes and, failing that, aimed at maintaining the *principle* that anyone could belong to the universal reading public that motivated their original publication. Retiring categorized addresses such as “To the Working Classes,” for example, *Chambers’s* shifts from an accumulative attempt at creating a universal reading public to invoking the ostensible indivisibility of such a public. Turning to the novel’s response to the mass reading public, I chart the trajectory of direct address from an insistence on face-to-face relations with the “Author of Waverley” to spatial abstractions in Eliot and

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\(^6\) For ease of reading, I allow this term to cover specific variations, such as apostrophe (“dear reader”), reader reference (“the reader may be interested to know”), and proxy readers-as-characters (“Dear Mrs. Saville”), though these will distinctions necessarily shape my analysis in the chapters below.
her two stylistically antithetical heirs, Corelli and James. Eliot’s career marks a pivotal point in this trajectory, as her late fiction largely replaces her early narrators’ Scott-like invitations to readers to enter into precisely articulated narrative scenes with the oblique acknowledgement of lyrical chapter epigraphs. James and Corelli follow Eliot’s abstraction of space; they represent its eventuation into a late-century “democracy of taste.” Later chapters explore how novelists grappled with representing the reading public through strategies of address built into multi-voiced narratives, Dickens’s Bleak House and three gothic frame tales: Shelley’s Frankenstein, Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights, and Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. These novelists invited readers to enter social bodies shaped by differences in literacy and class, gender and race, though with the ultimate result of figuring a more inclusive abstraction—what Bleak House simply calls “A People.”

This organization reflects the proliferation of conventions of address across a century’s worth of prose and, at the same time, the need for a more thorough analysis of a device central to the period but now typically overlooked as a byproduct of Victorian verbosity. There is only one major monograph on address, Garrett Stewart’s Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction. Its range of evidence and argument testify to the pervasiveness that makes its object of study so compelling; notably, Stewart leverages an itinerary of nearly ten premises for understanding address into a nine-part claim that engages narratology, post-structuralism, discourse analysis, deconstruction, psychoanalysis, and literary history. In its cumulative effect this extensiveness demonstrates how depleted an understanding of nineteenth-

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century British literature is without attention to what Stewart calls the “rhetorical layerings that once went to consolidate the very genre of the realist novel.”

Twenty years later, I show, this depletion continues to be felt not only in the dearth of new studies of address but also in the methodological stalemate afflicting formalist literary analysis and the history of reading. My aim to unite these disciplines is in part motivated by Stewart’s claim that conventions of address “trope rather than reproduce the reading experience within… a given set of publishing imperatives, mass market expectations, and consumer constraints.”

Such a claim shows why a duly complex study of address as a creative figuration of reading in literature promises to illuminate reading in its historical configurations as well.

“Broadly Speaking” shifts emphasis from the notion of an “the reading experience” and its attendant implications for subjectivity (address as a trope, by extension, for a “bifocal discourse of subjectivity divided between narrator and narratee” to an explicitly political scale. While the generic scope of this dissertation extends beyond fiction (Stewart’s emphasis) to the periodical, it plots conventions of address alongside a more firmly defined historical narrative arc, the rise of the mass reading public. More generally, then, what Rachel Ablow’s edited collection *The Feeling of Reading* (2010) does for figurations of the affective experience of reading in the nineteenth century, I hope to do for our account of the rise of a mass reading public.

Both the decision to incorporate periodical writing and to focus on this narrative help me draw out a complex and at times counterintuitive set of claims about the political

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8 Ibid., 43.
9 Ibid., 23.
10 Ibid., 23–24.
implications of address: namely, through its reformulation, writers established a democratic principle of inclusivity under the auspices of abstraction. That is, by using address to respond to the spread of reading and the characteristics that came to define it—a combination of inaccessible insularity and utter ubiquity—these writers established their audiences as faceless figures for the modern public as a democratic social concept. 

In what remains of this introduction, I unfold the historical context behind this claim, situate it within methodological debates that have stymied literary approaches to reading, and expand on its implications for the way nineteenth-century studies and critical inquiry understand the politics of literature.

I. A Brief History of the Reading Public

The prehistory to the story I tell in “Broadly Speaking” is a long one. My review is therefore pared down to a few pivotal moments whose effects, I stress, begin culminating in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the conceptual interest of my project is as old as the distinction Plato draws in the Phaedrus between the orator’s live, responsive relationship to an audience and the writer’s ambiguous one—in which discourse “passes from hand to hand, among all sorts of persons.”¹² (I quote here from John Stuart Mill’s 1834 translation). Much of the work of Jacques Rancière, whose account of “literary democracy”¹³ guides my thinking about the politics of address, is informed by his reading of the Phaedrus.¹⁴ Literary democracy comes to fruition, according to Rancière,

in the “new regime of the art of writing in which the writer is anyone at all and the reader anyone at all,” a “regime” manifest in the novelistic prose of Balzac and Flaubert (12). In *The Politics of Literature*, Rancière suggests that the “sentences of those novelists … were mute in the sense in which Plato had opposed the ‘mute paintings’ of writing to the living words of speech dropped by the master like so many seeds destined to grow in the soul of the disciple” (12). Rejecting the logic of “master” and “disciple,” literature allows speech to circulate indiscriminately, “outside any determined relationship of address” (12). This indeterminacy of relationships of address becomes a through-line across the chapters to follow, even as distinct social categories magnetize around particular forms of address and developments in nineteenth-century reading to give that indeterminacy a certain character or set of stakes. As we saw with Coleridge’s attempt to direct his address to educated men, class and gender in particular shaped the cultural commentary on reading as well as conventions of address. These categories intersect in different ways across the chapters below; racial difference becomes particularly salient to the picture of inclusive society in the gothic novels of chapter four.

Concomitant with the growth of the reading public on which I focus, two notable shifts in nineteenth-century reading practices helped create the conditions for a “reign of writing” to take hold in nineteenth century. First, silent reading became the paradigm we know it as today, as oral reading found itself increasingly sequestered in specific contexts like the classroom. The turn to silent reading dates to the late medieval period’s shift from a monastic to scholastic model of reading, which, according to reading historians Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, was a “break of capital importance”
that “initiated a commerce with writing that was potentially freer, more secretive, and wholly internal.” For nineteenth-century writers, “potentially freer” silent reading amplified the sense that audiences had become indeterminate objects of address, and not just because of their size. Second, silent reading coevolved with “extensive” reading (the quick reading of many books), which gradually overtook “intensive” reading (the devoted reading of a few books, for which Bible reading is paradigmatic across periods). Like the difference between silent and oral reading, this shift is not a straightforward break—the autodidacts of the working classes, for example, were intensive readers—but general enough to create the sense that the landscape of reading had been irreversibly altered.

Well before the appeal to the “dear reader” became a conventional device of the novel, writers found in address a tool for responding to these developments. But it is in the eighteenth century, with the rise of the novel and the newspaper, that the conventions I study in “Broadly Speaking” begin to proliferate. Indeed, these are some of the most enduring and fascinating forms of address: one thinks of Addison and Steele’s “To Correspondents” pages, Richardson’s epistolary novel, the extensive prefaces and interruptions of Fielding, the gothic novel’s penchant for epistemologically


16 Bibliographic historian D.F. McKenzie argues that authors and printers—Milton is an emblematic example for him—used address to “limit the difference of print by devising ways to suggest its affinities with speaking and [manuscript] writing” during the early modern period (251). Again, in the nineteenth century, the prevalence of silent reading compounds what McKenzie terms “the paradox of writing—that what seemed exact when first written can be torn a thousand ways by critical reading” (247). D.F. McKenzie, Making Meaning: “Printers of the Mind” and Other Essays, ed. Peter McDonald and Michael Suarez (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2002).
challenging prefatory remarks since Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* and, later, its moralizing interruptions, or Laurence Sterne’s absurdly self-reflexive *Tristam Shandy*. We can fairly characterize the use of address among these writers above as invested in the new rules for new kinds of writing being read by new kinds of readers.\(^{17}\)

This dynamic persists in conventions of address taken up by nineteenth-century writers, particularly in its first few decades. In my account, however, the emphasis shifts, along with the scale of the audience, from a question of *how to read* to *how many readers*, or, put differently, to a question of how to speak broadly enough to compass a reading public ever more coterminous with the general public.

This is not to say that the expansion of the world of letters did not concern eighteenth-century writers and readers. In Ian Watt’s retelling of this period, mid-eighteenth writers witnessed the development of “the great power and self-confidence of the middle class as a whole,”\(^{18}\) prompting reactions akin to the picture Rancière paints (without the contemptuous overtones) of the nineteenth century. Fielding, for example, thought “the whole world of letters was becoming ‘a democracy, or rather a downright anarchy,’” in which a “‘large body of irregulars’” could write criticism. Samuel Johnson called it the Age of Authors: “‘perhaps, there never was a time in which men of all degrees of ability, of every kind of education, of every profession and employment, were posting with ardour so general to the press.’”\(^{19}\) These remarks anticipate an even greater expansion of reading and writing beyond the middle class to the working classes.

\(^{17}\) John Preston’s *The Created Self: The Reader’s Role in Eighteenth-century fiction* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970) is illustrative of both this premise and of the reader-response theory discussed below. Of Fielding, Sterne, and Richardson, he says: “They are interested in creating a text which will, as it were, give instructions to the reader. They wish to keep the form open; they think of the novel as a process, not a product, and as a situation for the reader, not a received text” (7).


\(^{19}\) Quoted in Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 58
(to follow Watt in using an anachronistic term). According to Reinhard Wittman, the book market of the second half of the eighteenth century in Britain, Germany, and France “tended to deal with a reading public that was unlimited, heterogeneous and anonymous,” such that “the same moving family story was read both by the noblewoman and by her maids-in-waiting; the same horror story was read by the high-ranking official in the judiciary and the tailor’s apprentice alike.” This claim is overstated, but it captures the imagination of even the circumscribed eighteenth-century reading public as socially inclusive and foretells its future maturation as such.

The caveats of Jürgen Habermas’s account of the universalizing principles of the public sphere, which he famously dates to the coffee houses, salons, and reading clubs of eighteenth-century Europe, provide perhaps the best testimony of these limited or metaphorical ways in which the scale of the public operated for eighteenth-century writers. If in its own “deliberations” the public “anticipated that all human beings belong to it,” according to Habermas, it also took “specific form” as “the bourgeois reading public of the eighteenth century.” On the notion of a social body in principle fully inclusive and in which social status was “disregarded,” Habermas clarifies: “Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, the salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized.” Particularly in chapter one, on the weekly miscellany, “Broadly Speaking” draws on Habermas’s premise that the nature of the reading public determined how the public more broadly was conceptualized. But as Habermas’s adjectival specifications to the universal public

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20 Reinhard Wittman, “Was there a Reading Revolution at the End of the Eighteenth Century?” in A History of Reading in the West, 302.
21 Ibid., 85.
22 Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 36,
sphere suggest, this public was in actuality rather severely circumscribed. We “may be fairly sure that by 1780,” reading historian Richard Altick says, that “the national literacy rate was scarcely higher than it had been during the Elizabethan period.”23 (Some economic historians suggest that “scarcely higher” means, for men, about six or seven percent, reaching a total of 56%). This rate hovered around fifty percent, averaging men and women, from 1750 into the first several decades of the nineteenth century; by 1900, literacy was virtually universal.24

With some distinction between the reading public and the literate public, reading and book historians typically date what William St. Clair terms an “explosion of reading” to the last quarter of the eighteenth century. For St. Clair, the watershed moment was occasioned by a 1774 decision (in *Donaldson v. Beckett*) that abolished perpetual copyright, which led to greater accessibility to all but new book titles: “a huge, previously suppressed, demand for reading was met by a huge surge in the supply of books, and was soon caught in a virtuous cycle of growth.”25 It was not just the gradual corrosion of copyright in the nineteenth century that opened up the reading public, of course; changes to structures of education, the nature of work, and the advance of print technology together fueled the expansion of literacy and reading. More fundamentally, it

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24 See David Mitch, *The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England: the Influence of Private Choice and Public Policy* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992), 1. The difficulty of accurately measuring literacy rates is well documented, as is the need to distinguish between a literate public and a reading public. For a précis of the many approaches to the history of literacy in this period, including Altick and Mitch as well as Lawrence Stone, David Vincent, and R.S. Schofield (from whose work many citations of literacy rates are drawn), see Devon Lemire, “A Historiographical Survey of Literacy in Britain between 1780 and 1830,” *Constellations* 4, no. 1 (2012): 248–261. While I do not want to diminish the significance of the scrupulous care taken to present an accurate picture of literacy from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, because I am interested in studying the literary response to the evolution of reading, for my purpose what matters most is the unmistakable expansion of both reading and literacy.
25 To this late-century shift Altick adds the turn within the pedagogy of later eighteenth-century dissenting academies to discuss English literature, which he says “unquestionably helped spread the reading habit among the class it served,” and produced “a widened public for poetry and drama” (44).
was the nineteenth century’s march towards mass literacy—together with other expansions like the extension of the vote, the near-quadrupling of the population, the spread of empire—that most forcefully coupled the notion that print cannot determine its audience with an apparently limitless reading public.

In particular, the nature of enfranchisement, empire, and even the growing population (as grasped by the British census, for example, conducted every ten years form 1801) raise the issue of the nation as the tacit container of the public I am describing. In a practical if often ill-defined sense, the writers I examine presume they address a specifically British public. *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* originally targeted a Scottish readership, for instance, but even in its first issue, it announced its goal to reach “every man in the British dominions.”

Although Dickens came to have a fraught relationship with his large American readership, he concerned himself above all with representing Britain for a British public, which he addressed in those terms. Indeed, American democracy shocked him, despite his investment in speaking for “the people.” If Conrad did not straightforwardly propagandize European empire like some of his contemporaries, the readers he found through *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* were largely British, conservative, empire-supporting men. Even while the expanding reading public to which these writers responded was above all a British public, however, my emphasis is on the principle of inclusivity established by “speech circulating outside any determined relationship of address” (*Politics of Literature*, 12). By definition, such a principle undermines the delimiting edge of the nation, which it replaces with a yet broader and less stable abstraction. Benedict Anderson observes, for instance, that one

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might "‘have’ a nationality."\textsuperscript{27} Despite the similar effect the public has on lived experience, people don’t relate to the public in the same way; it’s hard to imagine a person, asked to describe themselves, replying that she belongs to the public, or, unsolicited, defining himself negatively as \textit{not} an MP, for example.

Thus, from Anderson’s influential definition of the nation as “an imagined political community,” I lay stress on imagination: “\textit{Imagined} because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”\textsuperscript{28} Anderson (it’s worth remembering, with the perspective of an anthropologist) saw the novel and the newspaper as "technical means" for representing this “image,” particularly in the way their formal structures represent time.\textsuperscript{29} Similarly, conventions of address, in my account, project an image of a virtual community through the spatial dynamics they organize for authors or narrators and their audiences. In claiming that literary form becomes a similar “means” for writers not just to imagine the public in these terms but also to engage their readers as its constitutive members, I give a degree more causal force to literature than does Anderson, for whom it rather serves as an example of a way of thinking about time and community. One hesitates to foist causality where cause-and-effect relationships are necessarily ambiguous, of course. Instead, I propose that in opening the rhetoric of address to an ever more inclusive, abstract concept of social “community,” periodical writers and novelists offered readers new ways of imagining the public to which they belonged by virtue of their reading.

\textsuperscript{27} Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 5.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 24.
II. Methodological Debates

If reading audiences and practices were increasingly hard for nineteenth-century writers to identify or control, they are notoriously difficult for scholars to reconstruct today. Historians have dismissed the methods of literary analysis in their quest to replace a textual history of reading with an audience history based on real readers. Since the demise of reader-response theory as developed by Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Hans Robert Jauss et al. decades ago, most literary scholars have simply vacated this area of study, turning instead to debates about our own critical reading practices and leaving behind what I consider to be some of the most compelling evidence of the historical relationship between literature and reading.

In the wake of this demise, reading historians have raised a polemic. Jonathan Rose’s *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*, one of the most comprehensive advancements of a “history of audiences,” argues that literary criticism routinely commits the “receptive fallacy” by trying “to discern the messages a text transmits to an audience by examining the text rather than the audience.” Although he pushes reader-response theories into a nearby footnote, Rose clearly has them in mind when he says this “blind spot is not easy to excuse or even explain, given that over the past two decades we have become used to the notion that readers make meaning.”

Footnoted as well is Janice Radway, whose *Reading the Romance* synthesizes book history, audience history (in the form of interviews with avid twentieth-century romance readers in the Midwest) and reader-response theory, as well as psychoanalysis. I share

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31 Ibid., 4.
Radway’s motivation to answer the question “what a literary text can be taken as evidence for.”\textsuperscript{32} It is this motivating orientation (and theoretical ambition) that Rose seeks to revise in his version of audience history. “Do not be misled by the title of this chapter,” Rose begins his essay “How historians study reader response: or, what did Jo think of \textit{Bleak House}?”: “This is not an essay in reader-response criticism, for it does not deal with ‘implied readers,’ ‘informed readers,’ ‘qualified readers,’ ‘supperreaders,’ or any other kind of hypothetical reader.”\textsuperscript{33} Never mind that Jo dies as he lived, illiterate. Still, Rose’s findings in the biographies and diaries of working-class readers provide valuable evidence for the indiscriminate (that is, unpredictable) reading of a widely literate public, which bears on the political implications I seek to draw out in “Broadly Speaking.” St. Clair, in \textit{The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period}, is more politic when noting that such “text-based studies of reading” (to which he adds Fish’s “communities of interpretation”) cannot “by themselves” reconstruct historical reading.\textsuperscript{34} He reserves his impatience for the chronology assumed by a text-focused model, the “parade of great names.” Because of changing access to texts, he shows, readers did not read according to the chronological organization we impose on the evolution of literary history.\textsuperscript{35} In short, readers read out of order and outside of expectations.

“Broadly Speaking” seeks to answer this polemic. Without disputing the value historians have brought to our understanding of the history of reading through deep

\textsuperscript{34} St. Clair, \textit{The Reading Nation}, 4–5.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 3.
archival work and sophisticated economic history, I suggest that nineteenth-century British literature is overrun with valuable evidence about historical reading. As a premise, it does not follow that because readers read texts out of order, writers did not respond to a sequence of events in the history of reading—such as the rise of a mass reading public—according to that order. More fundamentally, to dismiss the text as a resource for understanding reading is to risk unraveling the inextricably intertwined threads of histories of reading and literary form, as if remaining faithful to readers required forgoing good-faith interpretations of texts. Where Rose adopts from sociology the idea of a “frame” through which we read (for pleasure, for work, and so on) in order to “resolve that long and increasingly sterile literary debate over whether meaning is inherent in the text or created by the reader,” I suggest that the historical fact of indiscriminate reading (for which he offers valuable evidence) points also to the need for a literary theory of indiscriminate address.

For our part, literary scholars often look past this period’s conventions of address which, working as hinges between literature and readers, remind us as well as historians of the significance of a textual approach to reading. Although the ubiquity of these conventions should make this general oversight incomprehensible, there are understandable reasons why critical attention has been absorbed elsewhere: the sheer

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36 Rose, *Intellectual Life*, 6–7. St. Clair also draws on a similar conceptual framework that, ironically, is central to the reader-response theory of Hans Robert Jauss: “horizons of expectation.” (Jauss appears in an early footnote, while a late chapter of St. Clair’s is titled “Horizons of Expectation,” its goal to find a “denominator against which not only textual content, but the responses to the reading of texts, and wider outcomes, can all be situated” (269). St. Clair’s animating question—“Can we begin to model the links between texts, books, reading, changing mentalities, and wider historical effects?” (1)—is impossible to answer without a theoretical apparatus to help consolidate claims not just about the economics of reading but its impact on “changing mentalities,” something much more challenging to measure. Notice, then, that the proclamations against theory in these histories are to some extent a matter of rhetorical posture.
amount of reconstructive labor that goes into studying ephemeral nineteenth-century periodicals, for example, or the sprawling and complexly knit webs of character and plot in nineteenth-century fiction that provide more than enough to exhaust our analysis. But also, as in Jonathan Culler’s account of apostrophe in lyric poetry, critics may “repress” address because it is “embarrassing.” Modern readers would be forgiven for pausing (perhaps with a blush) at Jane Eyre’s dramatic pronouncement, “Reader, I married him.” That this line is often taken as a byword for a broader Victorian mode of address is telling of a general hesitation to engage with the convention more thoroughly. When James looks back at the Victorian novel at the end of the century, he decries exactly this penchant of “certain accomplished novelists” (Trollope in particular) for “giving themselves away” when they use asides, digressions, and parentheses to own that they are “‘making believe’” to readers. As an outward-looking convention, address seems to cater to readers, hamstringing the artistic “producer,” all-important to James, who could elevate the novel into a self-respecting art.

Not coincidentally (as I discuss in chapter two), James’s non-fiction commentary on the novel marks a turning point in Nicholas Dames’s account of the long history of novel theory. That is, James helps us understand why the reader is largely absent from novel theory as we know it today. Reader response, it seems, only momentarily defied

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38 Emily Brontë, Jane Eyre, ed. Margaret Smith (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 473. Despite this iconic address in Jane Eyre and the notebly frequent turn to reader address in Villette, the only thoroughly discussed representative of the Brontës in this dissertation is Wuthering Heights. Neither this exclusion nor the decision to place Trollope and Thackeray in very minor supporting roles in subsequent chapters was made lightly. While both omissions allow for greater coherency of the argument and space to expand the argument beyond forms of direct address, they also testify to the ubiquity of address conventions in nineteenth-century British literature. If a book-length monograph can cover nearly ten authors in detail and still leave these notable rhetoriticians of direct address in the background, that is, then it’s clear how diffuse conventions of address were across the century.
this absence. While Iser projected his “implied reader” onto every line of every page—by definition, the figure could never not be there to make the text meaningful—his analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction also shows how the idea of an implied reader resonates particularly with the vocative conventions that characterize fiction from that period.\footnote{41} And the “implied reader” \textit{has} become critically embarrassing, associated both with readerly subjectivity and empty ahistoricism, despite the original historical trajectory Iser sought to sketch. As Kate Flint points out, reader response theory’s silence on gender, race, and class facilitated “a suppression of difference which … only serves to sustain, unchallenged, a status quo of dominant interests and biases.”\footnote{42} Conventions of address have, therefore, suffered an obscure fate in literary criticism, along with reader response theory, and were perhaps destined to suffer so since James’s defining work in literary criticism at the end of the century. Telling of this fate, the postmodern and contemporary reprisal of outward-looking appeals to readers are not framed by critical considerations of reading (although they court readerly attention), but are rather cast as a matter of style. Far from the questions of embodiment pertinent to the rise of the first reading public in Scott’s paratext, for example, the hyper-textuality of the sprawling paratext in David Foster Wallace presumes mass literacy. This break sharpens the argument for the ubiquity of reader address in the nineteenth century as a response to the rise of a mass reading public.\footnote{43}

\footnote{41} See Wolfgang Iser, \textit{The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974).
\footnote{43} A few other examples may help demonstrate this change. There is more than one “mass-market” contemporary novel titled \textit{You}, and many more written in the second person; while these effects certainly signal readers’ attention, they are more often designed to provide uncomfortably close entryways into characters’ minds and lives. And there is Yiyin Li’s intimate and yet taut memoir \textit{Dear Friend, From my Life I Write to You in Your Life}, which provocatively borrows for its title a line of address Li found in Katherine Mansfield’s notebooks. Li reflects on the “reliable” memory (“it does not belong to me but to
For the same reason, “Broadly Speaking” unfolds a century-long narrative to chart this response. Dealing with the bounty of evidence available starting from the later eighteenth century, scholars often limit their narratives to particular chronologies within the long nineteenth century: St. Clair’s *Reading Nation and the Romantic Period*, for example, or Jon Klancher’s *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832*. Given the tumultuous changes and constant expansions of the long nineteenth century, one can make a case for focusing on any particular period. In *Reading, Publishing, and the Formation of Literary Taste, 1880–1914*, for instance, Mary Hammond bookmarks her study with the publication of a new Revised Version of the New Testament, in 1881, and Florence Barclay’s popular Evangelical novel *The Rosary* in 1909. Adopting a focused period allows these critics to examine the nuances to be found behind what can look like schematic historical developments from the blurrier perspective of retrospect: Hammond complicates the “art/market divide” and its meaning for literary modernism, while Klancher examines a multi-tiered periodical culture. By contrast, “Broadly Speaking” turns over conventions of address in all their complexity, but reads them against a broad narrative of expansion. I have found this combination of privileging of a nuanced formal foreground and more pixilated picture of historical context most productive for exploring the way writers used a pliable literary device to gesture to the ever-expanding scale of the public. Doing so allows the indefiniteness of this object into which they projected their readers to become a central component of the argument.

Further, this capacious periodization and approach to literary form permits
authors often read as ambivalent about the masses, like Eliot and James, to participate in a different kind of narrative; the tacit assumption that only best-sellers can speak to literary enfranchisement has long oversimplified the relationship between nineteenth-century literature and the expansion of the reading public. In “Broadly Speaking,” novelists read as “high” and “low,” like James and Corelli, are brought together to demonstrate a shared tendency towards abstracting once-delimited scenes and spaces of address. This is a narrative of democratization, in which “democratic” modifies both literary form and, at times, the public. As a methodological argument, then, I claim for literary analysis the possibility of unfolding a history of reading documented in the text that, in turn, becomes a history of the public as a democratic concept. While this method capitalizes on the unique affordances of close reading, its conceptual interest ramifies across literary criticism, historiography, political theory and philosophy, in short, all those disciplines interested in the relationship between literacy, literature, and democracy.

III. What is Literary Democracy?

“Broadly Speaking” controverts the focus on anxiety that has characterized our understanding of nineteenth-century reading to reveal instead the evolution of literary democracy, a term I take from Rancière to describe the inclusive, expansive orientation democratic address creates for literature with respect to its public. Many of the theorists and scholars who have concerned themselves with the relationship between the history of reading and conventions of address have tended to focus on the paradigmatic “dear
This emphasis has reinforced a focus on the anxious response to the rise of a mass reading public shared by many cultural commentators of the nineteenth century. For instance, although Fredric Jameson doesn’t use the term address to refer to “the gestures and signals of the storyteller,” he channels this anxiety into his claim that they “symbolically attempt to restore the coordinates of a face-to-face storytelling institution which has been effectively disintegrated by the printed book and even more definitively by the commodification of literature and culture.”

Patrick Brantlinger reads the “insistently singular” reader as a defensive response to “social anxiety” about increasing mass literacy. One hears this anxiety in the title of his book, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. It would be remiss not to note that the weight of the anxious response to the spread of reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which was associated with Jacobinism and the French Revolution, is a heavy one. In the wake of the 1774 copyright decision *Beckett v. Donaldson* and the Revolution, for example, came a series

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44 Stewart’s work is exceptional in taking this device as paradigmatic while connecting all other forms to the communicative trope it stands for, including structural forms of address, like the frame narrative, and even Jane Austen’s studied reticence towards the reader.

45 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 154–55. I discuss Jameson’s overarching claim that the nineteenth-century novel reduces political issues to ethical issues by scaling them down to local character dynamics in Chapter 2. Of course, critics often have reason to read the dynamics of address through an ethical lens. In *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), Claudia Rankine best captures the reason it is often futile to decouple political and ethical ramifications of address in her recollection of a scene with Judith Butler: “Not long ago you are in a room where someone asks the philosopher Judith Butler what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried our addressability.” Rankine explores how racist language trades on this emotional openness to make its addressees “hypervisible,” and her own use of the second-person works to make readers visible, or rather open to the discomfort of being intimately involved in this process. As the title *Citizen* suggests, a political context shadows these intimate ethical exchanges. For Butler, too, as well as for philosopher of language Stanley Cavell, the political and ethical registers of address are often not extricable. Not coincidentally, I engage with Butler and Cavell in a chapter dedicated to address among embodied interlocutors rather than disembodied narrators and invisible readers. On the whole, however, “Broadly Speaking” focuses on the political implications of address because the scale of the mass reading public is geared towards political claims.
of efforts to clamp down on and control newly literate constituencies: prices of new books actually climbed, peaking around 1830 (Walter Scott’s *Kenilworth* set a “standard price” of 31s6d.); taxes on newspapers were raised in 1776 (and again in 1789, 1797, and 1815), eventually to 4d., rendering them available to many would-be buyers only through circulating libraries. From Coleridge, to the Taxes on Knowledge, to Matthew Arnold and Henry James, mass literacy and mass taste provoked much social, cultural, and political anxiety.

Although perhaps less memorably, there were competing and more celebratory responses to the rise of a mass reading public, ranging from the well-known defenses of working-class recreational reading articulated by Dickens, G.W.M. Reynolds, Corelli and others to an intellectual group of early theorists of the novel brought to our attention by Dames, including Alexander Bain and George Henry Lewes. In the context of literary democracy, however, the opposition between celebratory and anxious readings forces us to make an unnecessarily narrow decision. The trajectory towards abstraction I trace here, in which writers open conventions of address to a wider and wider body of readers over the course of the century, gives us particular reason to be skeptical of claims in which anxiety becomes both the premise and the textual effect. But more fundamentally,

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46 Altick, *English Common Reader*, 379. On the circulating library, see Stephen Colelough, *Consuming Texts: Readers and Reading Communities, 1695–1870* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 88–89. Scholars have long recognized the significance of the circulating library to reading culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a contained space of reading, it distills the space of the reading public I describe as an abstract concept here. Thus, while my focus on conventions of address and the imaginary spaces they organize has led me away from the circulating library as a point of emphasis, there is a full body of scholarship on its significance. See, for example, Lewis Roberts, “Trafficking in Literary Authority: Mudie’s Select Library and the Commodification of the Victorian Novel” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2006): 1–25; Simon Eliot, “Circulating Libraries in the Victorian Age and After,” in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, vol. 3, ed. Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, 125–146 (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge UP, 2006). On how the “space” of book history might be theorized through circulating libraries, see Franco Moretti, “Narrative Markets, ca. 1850,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 20, no. 2 (Spring 1997), 151–174.

47 Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel*, 47.
“Broadly Speaking” aims to show that the political implications of literary form, particularly one as diffuse and flexible as address, extend beyond the politics of writers, parties, or ideologies. I presume that literary criticism has (more often than not) been able to resist what a recent polemic identifies as our downfall: “positivist historicism: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past.” Still, this assertion helpfully reminds us that one of the heaviest prices that these methodological stalemates has exacted is the obscuration of the often surprising political implications of the link between literary form and reading. Rancière is most explicit on this decoupling of the politics of partisanship and the politics of literature: “Whatever Flaubert’s feelings about the people and the Republic may have been, his prose was democratic. It was the very embodiment of democracy” (8). In his prose, Rancière explains the view of Flaubert’s contemporaries, the “absolutization of style” meant “pulling down all the hierarchies that had governed the invention of subjects, the composition of action and the appropriateness of expression” (7–8). In an older, classical order speech had organized these hierarchies by issuing from “men of action” to other “men of action.” Democratic address operates not only indifferently to the politics of class, taste, and partisanship, but indifferently to all “determined relationships of address” (12), where one’s will for another to do something or feel something, for example, is articulated through address.

In the context I emphasize here, democratic address capitalizes on the fact that a literate social body entails indiscriminate relationships between text and audience, that “anyone at all, no one in particular” (12) makes up these indeterminate relationships of address. In this way, Rancière illuminates the political implications of the narrative of

literary device I unfold. But, as a response to the rise of mass literacy in Britain, the
colorations of address I examine document the gradual evolution of literary democracy
in these terms—alongside the rise of mass literacy, the expansion of the populace, the
pressure, in other words, to abstract the scene of address away from determined
relationships. This distinction entails another difference: Rancière’s theorization of
democratic address hinges, above all, on the “indifference” of novelistic prose and the
“mute speech” of writing that makes it possible, not on discrete conventions of address
like “dear reader.” “Broadly Speaking” is careful to hold conventions of address apart
from a looser definition of address that renders it nearly synonymous with *style* or casts it
as a general matter of tone. Enlisting theorizations of literary speech acts in Jameson,
Stanley Cavell, Judith Butler, and Eve Sedgwick, I draw together a body of thought about
address (though often not termed as such) to frame readings of *scenes* of address, in
which the parameters of the space invoked (its place, scale, people) are constantly
shifting, edging towards or shadowed by the totalizing indeterminacy described by
Rancière.

As a set of highly conventionalized strategies of address originating in the
eighteenth century and maturing in the nineteenth, the evidence I arrange here falls
distinctly to the first side of Mill’s “antithesis”: “we should say that eloquence is *heard*;
poetry is *overheard*… Poetry, accordingly, is the natural fruit of solitude and meditation;
eloquence, of intercourse with the world.”

49 Mill means that eloquence is directed with
intention outward at the world, like the conventions of address I examine here. Over the
course of the century, compelled not only by the expansion of the print marketplace but

also by the impossibility of imagining Fielding’s “large body of irregulars” in the same concrete space, this “intercourse” increasingly falls under the pressure of abstraction. When the “world” designates not only the space outside the text but a public of indeterminate, vast scope, within decades of Mill’s proclamation, even the fantasy of being in the presence of a storyteller by way of their fictional “voice” becomes untenable. Only over time, and in the context of an expanding mass reading public, do conventions of address become the site for establishing a principled provision for democratic inclusivity and egalitarianism.

Thus, by following the course of conventions for address over the century, “Broadly Speaking” is primed to elaborate the processes through which this space opens and the contours against which it reacts. That is, the tension between Habermas’s “principle of universal access”\(^{50}\) and its limited practice in reality never disappears, but is rather brought inside the mass literate public. The gradual emergence of literary democracy allows us to continuously hold in view the differences that stratify, exclude, and organize a mass public and that stand in tension to the democratic openness of abstract inclusivity. Indeed, my account of democratic openness is itself open to some of the same critiques leveraged against the abstractions of liberal democracy, namely, a blindness towards difference rather than a positive assertion of equality. Literary critics have sought to complicate that picture by emphasizing liberal engagement with embodied subjects and sociological problems. Through the oxy-moronic quality of her term “abstract embodiment,” Elaine Hadley argues for a nuanced balance in mid-century liberal politics between “laissez-faire, non-interventionist, and proretrenchment attitude toward governance” and the importance of “cognitive individuality” as the basis of the

\(^{50}\) Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 85.
“thoughtful opinion” that liberated individual subjects.\footnote{Elaine Hadley, \textit{Living Liberalism: Practical Citizenship in Mid-Victorian Britain} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010), 19.} More recently, Amanda Anderson has demonstrated that liberal thought doesn’t deserve its reputation as “naïvely optimistic, failing to attend to structural inequities or economic, psychological, and political actualities” because it has always confronted and encompassed those actualities in constitutive ways rather than dispatched them.\footnote{Amanda Anderson, \textit{Bleak Liberalism} (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2016), 1.} I share with Hadley and Anderson an interest in the tension between the political affordances of abstraction and principle, on the one hand, and its forms of embodiment or distinction from “actualities,” on the other. But however accommodating of these actualities, liberalism cannot but magnify the individual subject, for whom the system is to be justified, as one of the central nodes in a complex of tensions.\footnote{Subsequent chapters will take up these concerns in greater depth where relevant. Chapter one will engage with the distinction between Rancièrian democracy and Habermas’s deliberative democracy, which espouses liberal principles about conversation and reason. Chapter three will offer a more extensive engagement with the idea of the subject’s \textit{liberation}, in response to the strong readings of the liberal subject that have inflected criticism of \textit{Bleak House} including and since D.A. Miller’s \textit{The Novel and the Police}, along with Anderson’s recent account of the novel in \textit{Bleak Liberalism}.} “Broadly Speaking,” by contrast, is concerned with a social collective that immediately subsumes individual readers into a concept of the public broader too than the audience, the crowd, the masses, and the people.

The story of address reveals the tension less between individual readers and the public than ostensibly representative abstractions like “the working-class reader” and “the woman reader” and a freer, more open public. This tension is at the heart of a literary democracy whose most radical articulation of inclusion depends on the virtual, abstract nature of the public. On the one hand, the spread of literacy abets the stratification and compartmentalization of the reading public; on the other hand, a democratizing formulation of address emerges and persists over and above this stratification. There is a
conceptual stasis to this tension, but the form of this stasis help us understand the coexistence why it is impossible to conceive of an appeal to readers that could in fact reach a universally literate public as a whole—and why it is almost as difficult to imagine a theoretical limit at which readers could not access, indiscriminately, an address not meant for them. Democratic address abides this contradiction. Neither is the democratic inclusivity or egalitarianism of this public a misguided liberal fantasy that should motivate critical paranoia, nor is this principle of abstraction a guarantor of universally equal access to literary culture, much less lived social equality. Rather, literary democracy as it evolves through conventions of address across nineteenth-century literature demonstrates the inextricable links between the rise of mass literacy, literary form, and the modern public imagined as inclusive, faceless, numberless, equalizing, diverse—in a word, democratic.

IV. Chapter Outline

“Broadly Speaking” begins with the genre most vocal about the aim to expand the reading public, if not most responsible for doing so. My first chapter, “Addressing The ‘Universal Appetite,’” looks on the fate of the weekly miscellany Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal as an exemplary failure of address. Established in 1832 and running well into the twentieth century, Chambers’s led the effort to create a universal reading public by making amusing and instructive print material accessible to newly literate working classes. The mixed bag of strategies of address that is a weekly miscellany are typically channeled through an anonymous, first-person plural perspective that consolidates a journal’s identity—often bound by party and class interests—over its individual writers.
Chambers’s aim was to universalize an apolitical, nonpartisan “we” by speaking to all and excluding none. While Chambers’s found a steady readership that kept it in print for well over a century, its limited success with working-class readers led its editors to increasingly refrain from particularizing their addressees. That is, Chambers’s relies on the principle of democratic address to imagine the universal reading public that it originally sought to create.

Chapter two, “The Slow Death of the Dear Reader,” turns to the novel’s response to the idea of a universal reading public. I trace the course of direct address through some of its most significant stylists, namely Walter Scott, George Eliot, and Marie Corelli, as well as one of its most significant detractors, Henry James. Early-century invitations to readers to enjoy face-to-face relationships with “The Author of Waverley” and Scott’s fictional editors give way to spatial abstractions: Eliot pivots to forms of address that acknowledge readers without delimiting them, such as poetic chapter epigraphs; James takes up Eliot’s rarefying tone by retiring direct address altogether; and the populist bestseller Corelli, though she favors vehemently moralizing address, refrains from rhetorically delimiting her audience. In the story this chapter unfolds, then, abstraction becomes a means to open the novel to a mixed-class and mixed-gender readership representative of a broader British public. As the divergent paths taken by Corelli and James make clear, however, writers came to rely on this openness to tacitly shift the burden of carving up the reading public onto readers. The “democracy of taste” that emerges in full force by the end of the century, I show, is an eventuation of the evaporation of conventionalized forms of address into a broader category of style.
For much of the century, illiteracy was the last frontier for authors looking to democratic address to speak to a limitless public. My third chapter, “‘A People’ in Bleak House,” argues that Dickens’s mid-century, mid-career novel thematizes illiteracy to expand the horizon of the social body and anticipate a fully literate Britain. *Bleak House* probes the limit of inclusivity through illiterate characters such as the cross-sweep Jo and the brick-makers of the slum Tom-all-Alone’s. Through the novel’s famous double narrative structure, which addresses readers from disparate points of view, Dickens enjoins his readers to see their own place and the place of illiterate characters they encounter as contingently occupied roles within the same social body. Departing from the influential accounts of *Bleak House* that map its depiction of bureaucratic surveillance onto novel readers, I argue that Dickens uses address to situate readers within an abstract mass into which both the illiterate and literate constituencies of the public fall—thus revaluing what Boodle, one of the novel’s satirized politicians, derisively calls “A People.”

In chapter four, “Un-framing Address in Three Gothic Frame Narratives,” illiteracy is only one feature of depictions of otherness that task readers with re-imagining the makeup of the modern public. This chapter uses the gothic novel to examine the strongest case for anxious interpretations (then and now) of the rise of the reading public, given the genre’s deep affiliations with social, cultural, and political anxieties. I find a resonant pattern in *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness* in which frame narratives highlight distinctions among interlocutors only to then demonstrate the dissolution of those distinctions. Readers proceed through a series of interlocutor relationships that intensify as they approach Shelley’s Creature, Brontë’s Heathcliff, and
Conrad’s Kurtz. These relationships, I show, reflect the attenuated social boundaries that the spread of reading promoted: the structure of the gothic novel reinforces its reputation as genre for the masses. To this extent, the crises of delimitation these novels stage tap into the anxiety attendant to the mass public. At the same time, Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad are less telegraphing readerly merger as inviting their readers to see themselves as part of an inclusive yet necessarily virtual public. By the end of the century, the edges of this public necessarily lay outside a fully literate Britain; in his complex combination of an almost mythical storyteller and proto-modernist rarefied style, Conrad’s novel testifies to the spread of literacy both geographically and across the social stratum. Representing both the present voice of the storyteller and the abstract “voice” of textuality through the eerie disembodiment of its narrator’s speech, *Heart of Darkness* in particular internalizes the narrative “Broadly Speaking” unfolds while amplifying its stakes for imperial Europe.
CHAPTER ONE

Addressing the “Universal Appetite”

I. Reading For All

1832 is perhaps most remembered for the passage of the Reform Act. Years of political conflict over the expansion of the franchise—and, it seemed, the integrity of Britain’s institutions—paved a precarious path forward to the third and final reading of the Act before Parliament in the spring. Championing reform as Prime Minister, Charles Grey eased tensions by announcing that he was against universal suffrage and Reform “as a matter of popular right,” even as he invoked “the people” as the “fellow-subjects” of the ministers.¹ Growing cities like Manchester finally gained representation in Parliament, rotten boroughs were eliminated, and yet the electorate gained only 200,000 voters, reaching a total that fell under twenty percent of the population. For these reasons, the Act is now often hailed as a crucial turning point towards democracy despite its limited immediate effects. “The sovereignty of the people’ had been established in fact,” early

¹ Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates, Third Series, hansard-archive.parliament.uk/
twentieth-century historian G.M. Trevelyan says of 1832, “if not in law.” That is, the people took on weight as a politicized concept tied to democratic principles of inclusivity and egalitarianism even through the limited growth of a narrower constituency, the electorate.

These turbulent months also saw seminal events in the history of reading that bear on Trevelyan’s claim. The first issue of a new weekly miscellany out of Edinburgh, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, appeared on 4 February, selling tens of thousands of copies within months. On 31 March, Charles Knight, director of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), came out with the first issue of its weekly, *The Penny Magazine*. Although William Chambers doesn’t mention *The Saturday Magazine* in his account of the “cheap literature movement of 1832,”[4] this third weekly targeting working-class readers commenced 7 July, its provenance noted in on its masthead: “under the direction of the Committee of General Literature and Education, appointed by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge” (SPCK). All sought to give social currency to “the people” and the idea of a universal reading public: a public of readers not located unevenly in the city or among the upper classes, but anywhere and everywhere, both geographically across Britain and figuratively across social strata and the political spectrum. Their editors envisioned audiences so vast that they could rhetorically conflate them with the nation of readers they sought to create. When *The

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3 There is some confusion as to whether the number was closer to 30,000 or 50,000 in the first few months. See Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900, 2nd Edition* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1957), 393. *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* varied its official name a number of times, as discussed below. For consistency and ease of reading, I use *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* throughout.

*Penny Magazine* reached as many as 200,000 subscribers with a few months of its run, and when *Chambers’s* was successful enough in Scotland to expand into the English, Welsh, and Irish markets by its thirteenth number, these shared sweeping aims seemed based in a providential reality.

And yet, as much as *Chambers’s* and its competitors were invested in expanding the reading public, they also echo the limited impact of the Reform Bill. Just as Grey saw danger to “good government” in the idea of universal suffrage, they saw danger in appealing to what they perceived to be “low” taste. When William Chambers remarked on “the universal appetite for instruction” in his first issue, the faintly oxymoronic quality to pairing *universal* and *instruction* would not have been lost on cultural commentators who had for decades been debating the un-instructive recreational reading material associated with women and working-class readers in particular. As early as 1840, the Chambers—William was soon joined by his brother Robert as co-editor and primary contributor—acknowledged that the working classes were not reading their journal in significant numbers. Circulations well into six figures came to define, by mid-century, the mark of a popular periodical like *The Family Herald* and *The London Journal*. *Chambers’s* found a circulation, by contrast, ranging from 50 to 70,000 for most of its lifetime. In failing to amass readerships on the scale its editors originally imagined, *Chambers’s* compromised on targeting a narrower constituency comprised of middle-class readers and what Chambers deemed “the *elite* of the laboring community.”

Even as Britain marched towards mass literacy over the course of the century,

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5 According to Altick’s research, this number may reflect the accrual of readers over several years, not several months. Altick, *The English Common Reader*, 393.
largely without the distinct help of the Chambers, what remained for their journal—my case study here—was the ideal of a universal readership coterminous with the wider public. W. & R. Chambers settled on a view analogous to the one Trevelyan takes of the Reform Bill, which, he argues, “had asserted the power of the whole nation, enfranchised and unenfranchised, because it had been carried by the popular will against the strenuous resistance of the old order.”

A few decades later, reading historian Richard Altick asks: “Is it possible … to understand how the balance of political power shifted from a small oligarchy to a popular electorate without reviewing the spread of reading? Behind the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867,” Altick concludes, “lay the press and its steadily enlarging public.”

Notwithstanding their subscribers’ only partial representation of “the people,” the Chambers brothers saw themselves as advancers of this popular will by way of the press.

This chapter examines the ways in which Chambers’s sought to create a universal reading public by addressing their audience as such, and, failing that, found new ways to address the growing reading public in all of its diversity and sheer massiveness.

Chambers’s continued to channel “the power of the whole nation,” to borrow Trevelyan’s language, in strategies of address developed in response to both their failure to appeal to a broad reading public and to the expansion of literacy and reading that nevertheless continued to accelerate. The briefest sketch of this trajectory goes as follows: In their early years, the Chambers deployed a variety of ways to address every kind of reader that would make up an emerging mass reading public, notably including the working classes. Later, articles began recasting the working classes as a topic rather than an audience, and,

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10 Trevelyan, *British History*, 241.
later still, nostalgic retrospectives in the journal focused on anecdotal stories of working-class readers of the journal in its early days. Increasingly denying the specificity of its addressees, Chambers’s began finding markedly more oblique ways of invoking a general readership, figuring its audience as members of the public cast less as a numerable collection of readers than as an enumerable abstract concept. In short, a totalizing approach to addressing a universal reading public begins to overtake an accumulative approach that seeks to engender it.

In this way, Chambers’s brought the principle that lay behind their foundational argument to the fore: democratic inclusivity that depended neither on limitations in subscriptions, access, and interest in their journal, nor on class difference. Paradoxically, then, the failure of Chambers’s to amass an audience representative of the broader literate public created a new mode of address for periodical discourse through which writers imagined the public as a democratized concept. Even Chambers’s later strategies of address, however, retain the textural complexities of its earlier tendency to single out readers and arrange its potential readerships against each other. In this way, the transformation of the “common reader” into a democratic principle rather than a fleshed out, embodied example carries with it the tension between a localized audience and universal reading public. In this chapter and throughout “Broadly Speaking,” this tension characterizes a literary democracy whose provision for inclusivity comes to rely on ever more abstracted universalizations of form.

Tracing this narrative of address across the life of Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, I suggest, allows us to pursue the complex political implications of literary form that have been lost to two dominant interpretations of politics and reading audiences in
the nineteenth century. This dominance is especially felt in scholarship on periodicals. First, a theoretical and critical emphasis on the fractures within the reading public that resulted from its growth tends to isolate periodicals as emblematic of a certain political or religious or class identity; by extension, the audiences of these journals fall into their proper silos. Second, critical skepticism towards democracy by way of abstract universality—often collapsed onto a liberal democratic resistance to seeing difference—tends to encourage suspicious readings of paternalistic efforts to welcome all readers like those found in *Chambers’s*. While I unfold these contexts and claims in more detail below, I posit here that these interpretations occlude *Chambers’s* never fully stabilized imagination of the relationship between periodicals and their readerships, among possible readerships, or between itself and an even wider public. I argue that we can trace the prehistory of abstract forms of universalizing address to the early efforts of *Chambers’s* to address all readers. From this vantage point, *Chambers’s* attempt to parlay modes of address that designate certain readerships into a broader appeal that compasses differences only obliquely or not all reveals a complex of democratic possibilities for the relationship between print culture and the public that evolved over the course of the century.

This argument draws together the several reasons why *Chambers’s* is an important case study and apt starting point for “Broadly Speaking.” First, the longevity of *Chambers’s* allows me to examine the arc of the weekly miscellany alongside the rise of mass literacy through the end of the nineteenth century; in an era in which ephemeral publications were the norm, it did fold until 1956. Second, amongst the texts in this dissertation, its devotion to expanding the reading public is a most explicit raison d’être.
For this reason, focusing on Chambers’s helps animate the historical backdrop against which the authors in the subsequent chapters addressed their audiences, even though they were rarely as dedicated to enlarging the reading public as W. & R. Chambers. More generally, neither the massiveness nor the diversity that characterizes the nineteenth-century reading public would exist without the genre Chambers’s helped establish, the weekly miscellany, which purveyed genres as different as penny-dreadful fiction to sober Christian guidance. According to Altick, Chambers’s was “the most successful and influential of all the low-priced weeklies.” Some have called it the “direct inspiration” for Dickens’s Household Words, established almost two decades later in the wake of the demise of Chambers’s original competitors. Chambers’s, as we will see, believed that the “highly praiseworthy associations” that disseminated his competition undermined their chances at reaching a wide audience. The Saturday Magazine imparted a Christian perspective on their material wherever possible, narrowing their vision of a universal audience ever so slightly, and their ability to provide for more popular tastes more substantially; it closed in 1844. Ultimately, despite its avowed political and religious secularism, The Penny Magazine wore its Whig politics on its masthead, “Conducted by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.” It closed in 1845, after a precipitous decline in subscriptions.

The Chambers attributed their longevity to their studious refusal to engage in

13 John Sutherland, The Stanford Companion to Victorian Fiction (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989), 113. John Drew goes further, noting that despite Dickens calling Chambers’s “‘that somewhat cast-iron and utilitarian publications (as congenial to me, generally, as the brown paper packages in which Ironmongers keep nails),’” it “was the successful staple product which Dickens deliberately ensured he could match, week in week out, and use as a marker by which to gauge the superiority, in imaginative appeal and a journalistic impact, of his own offering.” John M. L. Drew, Dickens the Journalist (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 110.
partisan politics, another reason that the journal provides a particularly illuminating introduction to “Broadly Speaking.” I aim to recover the literary history of democratic address as a political development that evolved independent from, say, the Tory politics of Walter Scott. Following an impulse to write to “the people” but uninterested in democratic radicalism, the Chambers were in a sense living out the politics of address operative in “Broadly Speaking,” which hinge not on partisanship but on demonstrating to readers the scale of inclusion imagined for the expanding and diversifying public they come together to create. Chambers’s sought to turn what Patrick Brantlinger terms “apolitical politics”\(^\text{15}\) to their own account, on the principle that siding with no one meant speaking to everyone. This approach helps me describe the emergence of literary democracy predicated on a principle of abstraction as it developed alongside the rise of a mass reading public. The Chambers’s vision for their address to all is echoed by Rancière’s account of a nineteenth-century reading public comprised of “anyone at all, no one in particular,” a theoretical through-line for this dissertation. To confine the parameters of our claims to those that delimit author function or biography,\(^\text{16}\) circulation numbers, bibliography, or “the actual reader,” is to obscure the insights to be gained in analyzing a device as diffuse and constantly reformulated as address, particularly the context of the periodical press.\(^\text{17}\) In the case of Chambers’s, the avowedly apolitical but


\(^{16}\) Here I follow Meredith McGill’s demonstration of how the culture of reprinting in American periodicals undermines the fiction of author function in periodical contexts. The hierarchical world of British periodicals, in McGill’s analysis, motivate and counterpose the American effort to decentralize production of and access to periodicals. Nevertheless, the decentralized rhetorical structure of address in Chambers’s and other miscellanies similarly requires a wider lens for analysis. See McGill, “The Matter of the Text,” in American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853 (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2013), 18.

\(^{17}\) For the most polemical versions of this methodology, see William St. Clair, The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004) and Jonathan Rose, The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001). I discuss these approaches in greater detail when I
decidedly paternalistic approach to readers undermined their original goal to capture a universal reading public through their early strategies of address. And yet pronouncements of success on the part of contemporaries, themselves, and later historians (such as Altick, above) indicate the extent to which this “failure” should be read as an opportunity for literary historians: first, to understand how a certain modes of address were tried on and discarded in an effort to create a democratic reading public; second, to understand how the reformulation of address in turn produced new ways of imagining such a public. In this reformulation, I locate the persistence of universalizing appeals to readers recast as a principle rather than a practice of inclusivity.

This argument runs counter to a longstanding emphasis in periodical scholarship on the fracturing of the reading public into particular classes, tastes, and audiences. This emphasis is rooted in the defining characteristic of periodical culture: its multifariousness, the proliferation of journal upon journal, number upon number, that leads both the expansion of the reading public through the accessibility of affordable serials and the resultant fracturing of the reading public. Lorna Huett, discussing Wilkie Collins’s 1858 *Household Words* article “The Unknown Public” (of which more later), tellingly casts this fact as a premise rather than a claim: “An essential part of the creation of an audience for a periodical is the ability of the reader to characterize themselves as

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turn to the novel in subsequent chapters. For its part, scholarship on reading nineteenth-century periodicals is often responding to bibliographic and historicizing impulses to document a body of literary production characterized by ephemerality. Klancher’s *The Making of English Reading Audiences* is a notable exception to this tendency; I share with Klancher the premise that certain rhetorical conventions of periodical discourse play a role in shaping the audience and the larger publics that lay behind them. Robert Scholnick makes a similar point for *Chambers’s* specifically, though he turns his focus to supplying a much-needed account of the journal’s general interest to scholars of periodical culture and popular education. Scholnick, “‘The Fiery Cross of Knowledge’: ‘Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal,’ 1842–1844,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 32, no. 4 (1999). See Aileen Fyfe, *Steam-Powered Knowledge: William Chambers and the Business of Publishing, 1820–1860* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2012) for an exceptionally thorough account of the production processes that the Chambers developed alongside the rise of steam power.
part of a particular social and political and group, and therefore to define themselves against other groups. According to Jon Klancher, not just the reading public but social and even national collectives were shaped with unique force by Romantic era periodicals, which he argues “provide perhaps the clearest framework for distinguishing the emerging publics of the nineteenth century” because they were “supremely conscious of the audiences their writers imagine, assert, or entice.” This consciousness led writers and readers to “reorient themselves, find a position to occupy, classify others in the act of situating themselves,” a process that “would give rise to the great systemic culture whose battle lines, much more firmly drawn, were those of high culture and mass culture, bourgeoisie and working class, the imperial nation states of Europe.” As such a claim suggests, scholars of periodicals are not alone in this emphasis on a splintered public: related narratives of public space and social bodies, of taste and class, of the disciplines, and of reading culture all tend towards fracture. In Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo’s sweeping collection *A History of Reading in the West*, they define the nineteenth century, across Europe, as “the age of the sociology of differences.” Reading historian Martyn Lyon’s contribution to the collection on the nineteenth century rather

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20 Ibid., 13.
21 See James Secord, who examines Robert Chambers’s life as the popularizer of Victorian science. Secord charts the division between popular and professional science in the nineteenth century, but also helpfully distinguishes between popular and sensational as terms for a mass-audience phenomenon. While the term popular makes all readers of that genre into “invisible members of a mass audience,” he says, the “mass-communications industry never created a passive, homogenous audience: it stereotyped books and newspapers, not readers” (525). Sensation, Secord’s preferred term, simultaneously attends “to mass behavior and individualized response.” One might argue that Chambers, in his writing for the miscellany, approached readers with this kind of simultaneity in mind—as intimates that quickly amass into an undifferentiated abstraction. *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000).
bluntly makes this point in its title: “New Readers in the Nineteenth Century: Women, Children, Workers.”

These groups—women and workers, most notably—play leading roles in what Nancy Fraser calls the “revisionist historiography” of The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, which takes Habermas to task for asserting a disingenuous democratic universalism of what is in actuality an exclusionary social category, and for presuming that democracy is bound up with a universal public rather than “a multiplicity of competing publics.” Indeed, the need to respond first to Habermas and then to this historiography has fueled the focus among literary critics and historians on a fractured public. Following historian Geoff Eley’s claim that Habermas misses “the extent to which the public sphere was always constituted by conflict,” for example, Kevin Gilmartin and Ian Haywood have pointed to radical political periodicals as a key site of such formative conflict in the first half of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I engage with some of the notable caveats in Habermas’s conceptualization of a universal public sphere, whose growth depended on the eighteenth-century periodical culture of which Chambers’s saw itself a direct descendant. Drawing on the tension between universality and exclusivity in Habermas’s original account of the public sphere, I pursue the persistence of a similar tension between democratic universalism and stratified, segmented audiences that shaped the politics of address in nineteenth-century periodicals.

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23 See also Pam Morris, who argues that the increasingly inclusive public sphere of the first half of the nineteenth century creates the conditions for reactionary efforts to define the most impoverished pauper class as definitively un-includable. Morris, Imagining Inclusive Society in 19th-Century Novels: The Code of Sincerity in the Public Sphere (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004).
Habermas recognizes the limited scope of his public sphere, but he dispatches these limitations as relatively inconsequential caveats:

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who—_insofar as they were propertied and educated_—as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion.²⁶

It’s difficult not to be jarred by this contradiction, which is exacerbated by its later reassertion. Just after declaring that a “public sphere from which specific groups would be _eo ipso_ excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all,” Habermas notes that “education was the one criterion for admission—property ownership the other.”²⁷ And yet my claims here are guided by Habermas’s notion that “the same process that converted culture into a commodity… established the public as in principle inclusive” in part because the Chambers themselves so fully invested in this idea, just as they saw their miscellany as a testament to the idea of “the parity of ‘common humanity.’”²⁸ Fueling this belief, the Chambers and other nineteenth-century periodical writers looked not just on the educated and propertied but also on laborers with basic literacy as participating members within this increasingly virtual democratic space. As a result, while they took a liberal view of this space as a marketplace, they also more fundamentally saw the need to continuously reformulate their mode of addressing readers, and in particular the way in which they counted or classified them as members of a mass reading public. This chapter will show that over and against the distinctions that shaped the constituencies organizing the reading public internally, _Chambers’s_ sustained

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²⁷ Ibid., 85.
²⁸ Ibid., 36–37.
in discursive form the principle of inclusivity central to the modern concept of the public. The Chambers, in other words, found in address a way to authorize the indiscriminate relationship between text and audience that undergirds literary democracy, thereby tying democracy to totalizing universality rather than an enumerative approach that fixes particular audiences in place.

II. Seeking Readers

In “The Editor’s Address to His Readers,” the first article of the journal’s first issue, William Chambers lays out his aims for Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal. Written in “a fervid state of feeling,” Chambers recalled in his Memoir,29 it is the most thorough, vehement, and self-reflexive of such announcements, and therefore worth examining in detail. “It is a custom so ancient,” he begins, “that I do not know when it had a beginning, for editors of newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals, large and small, to commence their labors with an apology for their intrusion, and an expression of sorrow for their deficiencies.”30 Not coincidently, Chambers first presents his efforts to distinguish his new journal as a departure from conventions of address. “I make no apology, and seek no undue favour,” he asserts, before more explicitly connecting his manner of addressing readers to his “leading principle”:

to take advantage of the universal appetite for instruction which at present exists; to supply to that appetite food of the best kind, and in such form, and at such a price, as must suit the convenience of every man in the British dominions. Every Saturday, when the poorest labourer in the country draws his humble earnings, he shall have it in his power to purchase, with an insignificant portion of even that humble sum, a meal of healthful, useful, and agreeable mental instruction; nay, every schoolboy shall be able to purchase with his pocket-money, something permanently useful—something calculated to influence his fate through life—

29 William Chambers, Memoir, 232.
30 William Chambers, “The Editor’s Address to His Readers,” 1. Subsequent citations parenthetical in text.
instead of the trash upon which the grown children of the present day were wont to expend it. Entertaining such a design as this—one calculated to be of such extensive service to mankind at large—those apologies… would be unutterably ridiculous. (1)

In the link between conventional apologies for intrusion and a less “extensive service to mankind,” Chambers proposes a newly expansive relationship between address and audience, between periodicals and the reading public. On the one hand, the “universal appetite for instruction” is not a universal appetite for reading in general. On the other hand, this relationship is premised on inclusivity in the broadest possible terms. I quote at length here to illustrate the pattern in which Chambers toggles between examples of readers—“the poorest labourer,” “every schoolboy”—and a grandiose accounting of their total—“every man in the British dominions,” “mankind at large.” Although these phrases were more “an expression of optimism than a planned strategy,” according to Aileen Fyfe, the Chambers eventually found some footing in the colonies, as well as America.31

Here, in stipulating the content that the journal will trade in (opposed to the common “trash” that schoolboys and girls would find affordable), Chambers tacitly narrows his audience; one of his defining goals is to raise the literary and moral quality associated with weekly publications. So too does his emphasis on affordability indicate his target audience; not “every man in the British dominions,” particularly those already established readers, need worry about price. From the journal’s first address, then, Chambers invites readers to imagine a new reading public that is both universal in scope and in moral soundness, an imagination which requires ignoring certain contradictions in terms or readerships.

The balance between example and generalization in this manifesto-like first

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31 Fyfe, Steam-Powered Knowledge, 80.
article becomes a characteristic feature of Chambers’s style of addressing the journal’s audience as local, embodied, common folk vastly scattered across these dominions. Addressed as such, its readers stand in for an emerging mass reading public that W. & R. Chambers sought to create. More specifically, for Chambers, celebrating working-class readers as a great new constituency of the reading public while dissociating them from images of an indistinguishable crowd proved a crucial rhetorical maneuver vis-à-vis an expanding reading public. The image of representative readers reading everywhere—not just among the working classes—allowed the journal to diminish the pejorative force of the “masses” and, at the same time, appeal to its audience as a figure for the mass reading public. Or rather: figures for a mass reading public. This inconsistency in counting their readers as members of individual groups or of a typically non-count noun like “the public” reflects what Klancher calls an “inchoate cultural moment” for readers and writers. But where Klancher argues that this moment “compelled a great many writers to shape the interpretive and ideological frameworks of audiences they would speak to,” I suggest Chambers’s attempts to undermine the bounds of ideology by sporadically disavowing the very delimitations around audiences to which the journal gestures.

“The Editor’s Address to His Readers” exemplifies this complex admixture of differentiating and universalizing address. The “Address” turns into a list of particular readers that Chambers wants to solicit, a bid for universality by way of accumulated audiences that places working-class readers on the same plane as the rest. An exhaustive list of general topics, from “a regular series of papers explanatory of the British Constitution” to “the establishment of Ferries, the best means of Conveyance by Land and Water” is followed by an even lengthier series of contracts with particular readers.

32 Klancher, The Making of English Reading Audiences, 3.
(1) I enumerate them here, quoting their prepositional appeals and paraphrasing their offerings to the “meal of healthful, useful, and agreeable mental instruction”:

(1) “For the express use of the poor man” will be accurate information about emigration.
(2) “For the benefit of poor old men and women who live in cottages among the hills” will be “pithy passages from the works of the great British moralists,” in case they cannot travel to church.
(3) “For the recreation of those men who reflect deeply on the constitution of man” will be passages from Newton and Bacon.
(4) “To Artizans” will be particular instructions and notices of their industry.
(5) “To the Naturalist” will be, similarly, sketches “illustrative of his interesting pursuits.”
(6) “To the ladies and gentlemen of ‘the old school’” will be “traditionary anecdotes” and “curious particulars of old castles.”
(7) “With the ladies of the ‘new school,’ and all my fair young country-women in their teens, I hope to be on agreeable terms”—terms to be sustained, apparently, with a weekly “nice amusing tale” (“no ordinary trash about Italian castles, and daggers, ad ghosts in the blue chamber”) and “a thousand useful little receipts and modes of housewifery, calculated to make them capital wives,” and more.
(8) Finally, the intention “to do a great deal for boys” turns into an even longer description of information, including “matters which their papa does not think of speaking to them about because he is so busy.” (1–2)

This list—not represented quite in its entirety, even—reveals much about Chambers’ vision of the mass reading public of 1832. Its itemization demonstrates the challenge a miscellany with a goal like that of Chambers’s faces: how does one appeal both to the “old school” and “the new school,” schoolboys and villagers of the hills? Upholding the rigidly defined gendered reading practices of boys and girls, Chambers in fact underlines the divisions within his hoped-for audience of young people. Devoting his most assiduous attention to these groups, he may have had his sights set on potentially life-long subscribers and readers; certainly this attention shows the direction in which literacy rates were headed. The journal quickly followed through on this plan, with “Column for the Boys,” and “Column for the Working Classes,” for example, coming out in subsequent weeks. The directions in which this public had to grow were specific, and
young readers and working-class readers were some of the most significant constituencies in those directions. Signaling out only one of their hoped-for audiences in this way, however, the Chambers strike on the paradoxical demands on those at the forefront of creating a mass reading public. In other words, they confronted the question of what a universal reading public looks like both from above, as if they could address it in its entirety, and from the ground, where it takes on material contours.

Demonstrating the pervasiveness of this question, even clearly designated addresses in Chambers’s are marked by confusion about how to rhetorically scale their audience. “Column for the Working Classes” expresses in microcosm the challenge of accounting for individual readers, audiences, and classes at the same time. The column begins with a section called “Results of Machinery,” and wagers that some working-class readers will not yet have a deep enough interpretive framework to understand them: “It is just possible that some of you will say, It matters not to us, the working men of England, whether people of India sell us raw cotton or piece goods; or whether the trade in cotton amounts to one million a-year or thirty-six millions. You may want to know how you individually, whether labourers or mechanics, are benefited by these changes, which look so large in figures.”33 Several assumptions structure this address. First, that working class readers are reading the miscellany: this wager allows the Chambers to figure their dissemination of information as an exchange between them and their readers. Second, that they have a smaller experience of the world, and that, as a result, they are not familiar with abstractions and systems that affect those worlds. This disparity in scale

33 “Column for the Working Classes,” Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal (7 April 1832): 7. Robert Chambers is commonly credited with writing the majority of the journal’s content throughout its first series, from 1832 to 1844, and beyond. Where credit is not assigned in the journal or by the Nineteenth-Century British Periodicals Proquest database, however, I leave the author unassigned as well.
leads Chambers to intermix the counts he makes of his addressees. The “working men of England” as a class (an “us”) is set against “you individually.” But even “you individually” is quickly pluralized, “whether labourers or mechanics” (the slight grammatical unsoundness here indicates how difficult it is to render “you individually” a group). If the act of reading momentarily individualizes the labourer or mechanic, their force—including the force of their reading—is apparently only felt as a class.

Miscellanies such as Chambers’s were uniquely capable of making a case for an audience as diverse as the mass reading public precisely because they traded in so many genres and could speak to so many readers. As Robert Scholnick suggests, “[perhaps] the most difficult aspect of the Chamberes’ editorial job was to strike the right balance between the different but complementary kinds of literary expression—fiction, poetry, humorous essays, probing social criticism, and travel reports—that readers expected.” 34

In this respect, Chambers’s stock-list of future readers is striking not simply for its diversity but for its rhetorical pliability. He delivers his addresses mostly but not entirely to their most interested party, so that all readers are addressed, by turns, as “the poor man” as well as “the Naturalist,” and so on. Highlighting this pliability, Chambers loosens his mode of address by shifting prepositional cues of address across for, to, and with (“for the benefit of poor old men and women,” “To Artizans,” “With the ladies,” for example). Straightforward enough on their own, these prepositions accumulate into a confusion about how one can render the space of the audience through the implied spatiality of address: the poor man might emigrate soon, addressed only to be potentially exported from the audience; certain elders are located geographically; others (like the artisans) are apostrophized in an open, empty space; others still are cajoled into a

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34 Scholnick “‘The Fiery Cross of Knowledge,’” 344.
proximity “with” Chambers’s but without each other, like the ladies of old and new schools.

Chambers’s itinerary of audiences points to the challenge of imagining these readerships in one frame of reference, a frame only his address seems capable of supplying. Tooling together an assortment of prepositions to arrange his complicated readership, Chambers captures why the “spatial agnosticism” of beside proves so compelling to Eve Sedgwick in Touching Feeling. Sedgwick argues that beside “comprises a wide range of desiring, identifying, representing, repelling, paralleling, differentiating, rivaling, leaning, twisting, mimicking, withdrawing” (among other) “relations.”35 Many of these relations characterize both the weekly miscellany’s relationship to its various audiences and those audiences’ relationships to each other. For Chambers’s in particular, the aim to represent universality while attempting to differentiate its readers as informal learners involved no small amount of rhetorical maneuvering. Although Sedgwick suggests the “interest” of beside does not “depend on a fantasy of metonymically or even pacific relations, as any child knows who’s shared a bed with siblings,” it’s precisely this fantasy that Chambers’s opening address celebrates.36 The ultimate point of such new audiences (cast in this list as new bedfellows) was to contribute to a reading public made up, horizontally, of “every man in the British dominions.” Without recognizing a contradiction or imbalance between his audiences both as particularized groups and as exemplars of the “universal appetite” for reading, Chambers instead writes a tension between universality and particularity into his strategy of address. While this tension is never quite ironed out, it comes to demand a

36 Ibid.
reformulation of address towards totalizing abstraction.

In the middle of the list re-articulated above, in fact, Chambers loses the rhetorical momentum of his itinerary when he pauses to reflect more broadly on a general reading public. “My short extracts, relative to Domestic and Cottage Economy, will, I doubt not, be received with approbation, from their general utility,” he surmises. Received by whom, though? The passive voice here underlines their “general utility,” but stands out against the anaphoric series of addresses to specific audiences. Moreover, this “general utility” frames another promise directed to no one in particular: “I shall give short analytical Reviews of Books, pointing out which out preferably to be bought. In this department I shall be altogether beyond the reach of being purchased by publishers, and shall only consult the benefit of the reader” (1). Books would still be prohibitively expensive for most general readers to purchase; hence the need for periodicals costing as low as one-and-a-half pence. It’s telling, however, that the only content Chambers promises generally, outside of an enumerated audience, are book reviews and notes on running business out of home and cottage. Omitting a named addressee in these instances, Chambers makes two assumptions that come together oddly: he envisions a future with a reading public that can widely afford books, and yet his most generalizable readers will be interested in domestic and cottage economy, enterprises typical of the newly literate (if not yet literate) laboring class. (The subtile to William Cobbett’s 1821 *Cottage Economy* gives an idea of the concerns of this class: “Containing Information Relative to the Brewing of Beer, Making of Bread, Keeping of Cows, Pigs, Ewes, Goats, Poultry and Rabbits and Relative to Other Matters Deemed Useful in the Conducting of
the Affairs of a Labourer’s Family.” Chambers envisions a future with a public interested in books that even readers invested in domestic and cottage economy will be able afford. Yet the momentary collapse in his list of audiences and the strange conjunction of more obliquely addressed readerships anticipates the difficulty Chambers will have in drawing readers from such a vast spectrum of audiences. Indeed, the only way to imagine them together, to suggest a point of mutual belonging if not actual mutual participation, is through a fleeting, obliquely inclusive address. It is the difficulty of envisioning this scene—which quickly violates the boundaries of Habermas’s coffee house, even as a metaphor—that results in the complex variety of strategies of address that approach universal belonging in part by, paradoxically, underlining difference.

Later chapters pick up this thread as it weaves its way through the novel, which faced its own promiscuous audience. Few conventions are quite like the opening address of a weekly miscellany, however, in making explicit the political scale at which developments within nineteenth-century reading were cast. “Reading for All,” the opening address of The Penny Magazine embraces universalism immediately, bypassing the atomization Chambers’s lengthy index of the reading public. The article begins by speaking on behalf of a generalized social body in the royal we: “We laugh at the lamentation over the evil of stage-coaches, because we daily see or experience the benefits of the thousands of public conveyances carrying forward the personal intercourse of a busy population.” This “we” of modern times quickly becomes the “we” of the SDUK: “What the stage-coach has become to the middle classes, we hope our Penny

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37 Cobbett’s radical weekly pamphlet The Political Register (cost 2d.) was precisely the kind of politically charged publication from which Chambers wanted to distance his apolitical weekly, although he shared Cobbett’s resistance to taxes on knowledge.
Magazine will be to *all* classes—an universal convenience and enjoyment.”

Readers can distinguish, of course, between the global and local scales of this “we.” Nor would they assume that the leaders of the SDUK were “with” them as the first-person plural suggests, as if the unbalanced power relationship between middle class editors and writers and their working class readers were not clear. For their part, few upper-class readers of the purported “*all classes*” would feel that a journal addressed to those who are “disinclined to open a book” but have “half an hour for the reading of a newspaper” was courting their readership. As a convention of address, however, the editor’s use of the first-person plural affords rhetorical slips from one shared perspective into another as if these distinctions did not matter, a slippage that allows Knight to cast the Society’s ideological position about the “duty of every man” to gain “sound knowledge” like a net, over his audience.

In this uneasy combination of the paternalistic “we” of the SDUK, the would-be universal “we” of all classes, and the implied class demarcation of its readership, *The Penny Magazine* documents with rather more obliqueness tensions that similarly shape Chambers’s appeal to his anticipated readers. *The Saturday Magazine*, published like the SDUK under the direction of a benevolent Society, aimed to surmount these tacit demarcations by eliding class altogether. In their “Introduction,” the Society declares:

> our little Magazine will go forth every Saturday morning, like a skilful gardener, to plant in every corner of the land, within sight of every man’s door, and within reach of every man’s arm, a tree of true knowledge, which, growing out of the fear of God, will, under God’s blessing, we doubt not, bring forth in due season the fruits of honour and of power to the nation, and of plenty and peace and truth to all our loving country-men.

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39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
Here the picture of readers reading everywhere is captured not with representatives like elder rural folk or young schoolboys but rather with a spiritual universalism of “every man” under God’s eye. This elision of class helps *The Saturday Magazine* project to an audience coterminous with a Christian nation. Metaphor in these opening addresses allows these editors to refract reading, particularly of the working classes, as a healthy, natural phenomenon: reading periodicals represents a healthful meal, in *Chambers’s*, technological advancement in infrastructure, in *The Penny Magazine*, or a “tree of true knowledge,” in *The Saturday Magazine*. Here, however, with the eye of the Society overseeing the growth of this garden and restricting the material the journal offered to wholesome Christian knowledge, *The Saturday Magazine* demonstrates how such centralized dissemination of affordable print had built-in limitations. That is, universal reading for wholesome instruction was destined to remain as figurative as these metaphors for representing it. In this sense, the political scale of the nation or the British dominions at which these journals pitched their audiences functioned less as an aspiration than as the imaginative plane of reading that authorized the image of a reading public as an actually traversable country.

William and Robert Chambers, whose journal outlived its original competitors but never reached the vast audience of its original aims, determined the best way to sustain (even just) the imagination of a universal reading public was to rise above political partisanship. It has not been difficult for later readers to see why the periodicals put out by the SDUK and SPCK did not survive the competition of a print marketplace flush with ventures that more directly appealed to the recreational sensibilities of working-class readers. R.K. Webb, for example, suggested in 1955 that their journals “can excite in the
modern reader little but disgust.”\textsuperscript{42} The Penny Magazine did not appear until two months after the debut of Chambers’s. But Chambers likely had in mind the SDUK, a Whig organization modeled after the Christian tract societies and founded in 1827, when he declared that he would be “eschewing the errors into which these highly praiseworthy associations have unfortunately fallen” in their attempts to expand the reading public. (Looking back fifty years later, The Bibliographer claimed that Chambers had “thrown down the gauntlet to [Lord Henry] Brougham and the Society for the Diffusion of Knowledge.”\textsuperscript{43}) The Saturday Magazine of the SPCK also functioned as a mouthpiece for a circumscribed position. “I take a course altogether novel,” Chambers declares in the “Editor’s Address”: “Whatever may be my political principles—and I would not be in the least degree ashamed to own and defend them—neither these principles, nor any other, which would be assuredly destructive to my present views, shall ever mingle in my observations on the conventional arrangements of civil society.”\textsuperscript{44} In his Memoir, William Chambers offers the broader conjecture that “the treatises of the Society were on the whole too technical and abstruse for the mass of operatives,” making “no provision for the culture of the imaginative faculties.”\textsuperscript{45}

Literary historians commonly attribute the earlier demise of The Penny Magazine to its decision not to carry fiction, out of apparent loyalty to the SDUK’s understood definition of its namesake useful knowledge. There is no doubt truth to this effect; in 1864, for example, prolific novelist’s James Payn’s Lost Sir Massingberd raised

\textsuperscript{43} Thomas Fairman Ordish, “Chambers’s Journal,” The Bibliographer 4, no. 3 (1883): 58.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} W. Chambers, Memoir, 237.
Chambers’s circulation by 20,000. Payn served as co-editor and editor from 1858 to 1873, and several of his novels ran anonymously in Chambers’s throughout this time, to general public approbation. As the century progressed, Chambers’s secured a reputation inviting to popular but well-respected novelists like Grant Allen, Walter Besant, Anna Maria Hall, and Mary Russell Mitford. And yet the decision regarding fiction (which they often heavily edited to their own moral standard) appears less important to William Chambers in his recollection than the “matter of congratulation, that Chambers’s Journal owed nothing, in its inception or at any part of its career, to the special patronage or approval of any sect, party, or individual.”

Thus, the Chambers brothers attached their original competitors’ downfall to their link to associations and societies, which could not but constrict their enterprises by making them accountable not to the interests of a broad reading public but to an ideologically driven governing body. In other words, the issue of sectarianism was a matter of principle, of the marketplace—and of address, which served editors seeking to tacitly define the edges of their implied public.

This is not to say, of course, that widely popular general miscellanies could not also play on conventions of address to call forth distinctions among the reading public. Lorna Huett reads Wilkie Collins’s 1858 Household Words article “The Unknown Public” in these terms when she argues that Collins attempts “not so much to give an accurate picture of the periodical marketplace, as to address, and reassure, the new middle-class readership which Household Words was engaged in creating.” Such a reading reinforces the notion that the rhetoric of address in periodical culture was primarily enlisted to organize a vast and uncountable audience internally.

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47 Ibid.
48 Lorna Huett, “Among the Unknown Public,” 71. Italics mine.
Perhaps better known than the whole of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* among literary critics outside of periodical studies, Collins’s article has invited us to forever conflate the titular unknown public with “the masses” rather than a broadly literate Britain. But in part through the very energy Collins devotes to anatomizing it, “The Unknown Public” also testifies to the increasingly abstract, conceptual status of the reading public: a “reading public of three millions which lies right out of the pale of literary civilization, is a phenomenon worth examining—a mystery which the sharpest man among us may not find it easy to solve” (218). Countable but outside “the pale,” the unknown public serves to consolidate the “known” reading public comfortably within the borders of “literary civilization.”

For Collins, the variegations within the “Known Reading” public were so effortlessly discernible as to almost not be worth explaining: “We all know where to lay our hands on the people who represent these various classes,” he says in the guise of an anonymous investigative journalist: “We see the books they like on their tables. We meet them out at dinner, and hear them talk of their favourite authors. We know, if we are at all conversant with literary matters, even the very districts of London in which certain classes of people live who are to be depended upon beforehand as the picked readers for certain kinds of books” (218). Today’s historians of reading do not share this certainty, in part because of the “indiscriminate” reading Rose documents among the working-class readers. In *The Order of Books*, Roger Chartier reminds us that any history of reading “must postulate the liberty of a practice that it can only grasp, massively, in its determinations.”

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(“the very districts”) as equal to one such determination, as if in search of the borough-defining clarity provided by the Reform Bill or the census.

Recalling Chambers’s continual shifting of the scales through which it figures the reading public, Collins calls on a fictional investigative journalist, who secures his own anonymity as author and who pursues the unknown public all over London and the countryside, venturing into bookstalls, asking probing questions, and using a sample of five penny-priced weekly journals to discern its tastes and habits. Rehearsing a “dialogue between buyer and seller,” his journalist steps into the role of “Number Three Million and One.” The proper English spoken by three-million-and-one belies his cultural distance from the three million, however, and this distinction is sharpened by the dialect of the “Enterprising Publisher”: “‘Take ’em all the year round, and there ain’t a pin, as I knows of, to choose between ’em’” (218). The interchangeability of the newly discovered public’s desired reading material also characterizes the interactions Collins imagines to occur between buyer and seller, which he tells us always played out in the same form. Then and now, this quality of indistinctness characterizes “the masses” envisioned as a crowd. What is therefore striking about the Household Words report is the rhetorical shiftiness that allows Collins to count in both directions at once, towards computable distinctions and towards uncountable massiveness. His journalist’s odd title “Number Three Million and One” gestures to this contradiction, as does his opening gambit that the “minority” known reading publics are easily dissected and located in certain places. For both Chambers and Collins, the complexly textured scenes of address they create in already highly self-conscious meta-commentary on reading testifies to the scattering of the public to which they sought to speak.
III. Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal and the Politics of House Style

The early nineteenth-century periodical culture into which Chambers’s entered was fundamentally organized around politics: each major party, Whigs, Tories, Chartists, and the “philosophical radicals” had a major journal, each with an editorial disposition supported by the convention of address in periodical writing, unsigned first-person plural articles. Chambers’s, by contrast, wanted to revive the apolitical eighteenth-century essay on manners and society originally popularized by Addison and Steele in The Spectator and The Tatler for a much smaller literate public. (Although I attend to the tropes of address in the journal, the vast majority of Chambers’s material was formatted in essay form on the very topics promised in the prospectus—immigration, artistry, historical anecdotes, and so on). Brantlinger notes that the “apparently inoffensive non-partisan writing of The Penny Magazine and Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal disguises how controversial they seemed at the time.”

Caught between working-class readers who saw this writing as “obnoxiously bourgeois pabulum” and conservatives who saw it “as dangerous organs of religious skepticism and social discontent,” the Chambers sought to steer a middle course by casting the “space” of their public as altogether open. In this section, I show how the original goal of the journal to address a universal reading public formed a fundamental principle of apolitical, non-sectarian inclusion on which to call for the rest of the century, even as their readership narrowed to a largely middle-class audience. Within a periodical culture organized around politicized modes of belonging—with rhetorical strategies of address to promote them, embodied in “house style”—

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51 Brantlinger, The Reading Lesson, 97.
52 Ibid.
Chambers’s reorients the politics of address in nineteenth-century literature, shifting them towards universality, away from the “battle lines” of stratified audiences.⁵³

William Chambers lays out this goal in the “Editor’s Address”:

Nothing could afford me more unmitigated pleasure than to learn that CHAMBERS’ EDINBURGH JOURNAL yielded equal edification and delight to the highest conservative party in the state, and to the boldest advocate of an universal democracy; or was read with as much avidity at the cheerless firesides of the Irish Roman Catholic peasants, as at those of the more highly cultivated Presbyterian cottars of my native land. (1)

When Chambers weighs the universalizing implications of the aims he states in his “Address” against democracy exercised as a partisan position espoused by the radical press, he casts “universal democracy” as a limited position among others. Hence, here, the “boldest advocate of universal democracy” appears as an exemplar of his party, while “the highest conservative party” stands on its own, and while, further, poor or “cultivated” firesides stand in for religious and class difference. In this shuffling account of his readerships, Chambers again figures both representatives of discrete positions and divisions within a universal readership only to downplay their significance.

Note, too, that Chambers’s could not actually embrace one of these political positions without raising its price to abide by the so-called “Taxes on Knowledge” that taxed weekly periodicals for (among other things) carrying political intelligence, effectively censoring the press. Working class readers could not afford to pay for “stamped” papers that included these taxes in their cost to the consumer—seven pence in 1832. Chambers nevertheless maintains that “The matter which I am allowed by law to introduce into my paper is such as will, I trust, be of value to readers in all grades of society” (1). In this way, Chambers recasts this burden as a virtue of a democratic reading

⁵³ Klancher, English Audiences, 4.
public open to all. Not only is his ideal readership to reflect a public of different ages, occupations, and “grades,” but also to include oppositional political and religious sects. To compass these broader categories, Chambers addresses them, as potential readers, yet more indirectly than his anaphoric list: all are routed through his hope for his own “unmitigated pleasure.” Often, the highly conventionalized “addresses” of editors in first numbers or renewed prospectuses were among the few articles readers could expect to be signed rather than anonymous. And yet Chambers’s emphasis on personal politics is striking in announcing opinions only to efface them. By contrast, when The Penny Magazine and The Saturday Magazine (and others) drew on the widespread convention of anonymity and spoke in the first-person plural even in their opening addresses, they were channeling the ideology of their governing bodies.

An avowedly partisan weekly provides a yet sharper contrast. Take, for instance, G.W.M Reynolds, who emerged as a major figure in the Chartist movement and the cheap periodical press, and, through the fiction he published in his magazines, a competitor of Dickens and Thackeray. In the spirit of earlier Chartist newspapers like The Northern Star, Reynolds established Reynolds’s Political Instructor in 1849, following the 1848 political defeat of Chartism, and transformed it in 1850 to Reynolds’s Weekly Newspaper, a Journal of Democratic Progress and General Intelligence. Michael Shirley suggests that in this transition, Reynolds “dropp[ed] the somewhat superior tone in which the Political Instructor had often addressed its readers” to include them “within the gates of heaven.” Elaborating the spatial metaphor further, he says, “The reader assumed a place beside the editor and writers, looking out at the horrors of society.”

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casualness of Shirley’s invocation of spatial metaphors shows how integrally the space of address determines the way we understand the relationship between literary form and the public. Even the sampling of politically intense language Shirley takes from the

*Instructor* invites readers to share the author’s ideological position:

> We maintain, that the history of kings is the history of tyranny, and not the history of men or humanity in any individual or aggregate shape. We hold that the lives of monarchs form the genealogy of crime. … From this bloated tyranny, which feeds upon human flesh, and which grows greater as the years roll by into centuries, has the whole race of mankind drawn its endless and fertile source of wretchedness, famine, massacres, and legal assassination.\(^{55}\)

Edwin Roberts, the only signed author besides Reynolds himself in his publications, uses his journalistic “we” to speak the voice of the weekly—as well as *to, for,* and *with* all those men in “individual or aggregate shape.” Where *Chambers’s* provided informative essays on Scottish and English historical figures, the *Instructor* radicalized the rewriting of history. (The series was called “A New History of England”). Accordingly, where *Chambers’s* attempted to maintain the neutrality of abstract knowledge, the *Instructor* drew lines in the sand, marking the inside and outside a particular rhetorical, ideological, and class position through the spatial metaphorics of address.

An 1845 article, “The Newspaper Press in America,” demonstrates just how adversely the Chambers viewed political divisiveness as an organizing principle of periodical discourse—to the extent, perhaps, that they failed to appreciate the positive implications of political sectarianism for mass reading in Britain. The article begins by extolling the virtues of the newspaper press in America, noticing in particular the universality of its address: “In no other country in the world, perhaps, is the newspaper press so powerful an engine as the United States. Nowhere else is it so omnipresent in its

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\(^{55}\) Quoted in Shirley, “Reynolds,” 77.
action, so omnipotent in its influence. *It addresses itself not to a class or a section of people, but universally to the nation.*\(^5^6\) The article goes on to explain how this feat is made possible: a combination of affordability, a “constant yearning for political intelligence,” and basic education: “In the social structure of America there is no great class devoid of the first elements of education” (33). In a then-characteristic dynamic of these claims of universality, qualifications come creeping in only to be waved away. For instance, the central example the article provides is a regional paper addressed to local readers with local concerns. And without specifically acknowledging the fact that there is indeed such a “great class” without education—the enslaved population—the article stipulates that it is in “the northern states especially” that “the ability to read and write is universal” (33). Where race was the most forceful (and brutally enforced) determinant of literacy and access to reading in the U.S. context, class in Britain was the most salient division that *Chambers’s* sought to weaken. Eliding race in these pronouncements about “the nation,” the article first erases difference to organize the parallel between the United States and Britain it wants to construct. This elision, in turn, speaks to the impermissibility of insurmountable differences to *Chambers’s* vision of a universal reading public.

Elaborating a comparison between American readers and the destitute of London, the article distinguishes the scale on which popular fervor works in Britain in contrast to the United States:

The newspaper offices may be said to be, to the Americas generally, what the gin-palaces are to a section of the London population—the grand source whence they derive the pabulum of excitement. Such being the case, it is no wonder that journals should multiply amongst them. Almost every shade of opinion, political,

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social, or religious, has now its representative organ or organs. The press in America speaks to every one, and of every one. Its voice is heard in every cabin in the land; its representatives are found thickly scattered over every settlement; it is a power irresistible, and which must be conciliated; making itself felt in every public department and at the same time exercising a tremendous influence over private life. (33)

The gin-palace serves as a curious analogy not simply because the London poor found there are apparently less interested in politics and reading, but also because “a section of the London population” stands out against “the Americas generally” in scalar terms. And yet, according to the logic here, the leading virtue of the American press for Chambers’s—that it speaks to everyone—comes to depend not on universality as a collective ideal but on multiplicity. At least one organ for each cause come together to form a body of periodical writing whose “voice is heard in every cabin in the land.” Wary of such splintering but invested in the idea of a universally accessible press, Chambers’s would rather represent the singular voice heard in every cabin, or at every “fireside,” as its opening “Address” would have it. Chambers’s thus weighs the accumulative logic of accessing all readerships against a totalizing logic of speaking to all that the journal so freely combined in their first years. Both are figured as a problem of address, or how to have the “voice” of the press, whether as a unified or fractured organ, “heard in every cabin of the land.”

Turning to disparagement and echoing Dickens’s diagnosis in American Notes (1842), Chambers’s criticizes the American press for trading in the very political energy that apparently supports the universal interest in newspapers: “Into the political vortex they are all drawn, there to be tossed to and fro, in a delirious round; on one side or another, in the strife of party, they are all ranged” (34). This “great blemish on their character” also undercuts their literary merit (along with “vapid” essay writing and poor
poetry), as editors give over space to letters from aspiring politicians made up of “effusions” full of “gross abuse and acrimonious invective” (35). The result is that the American press is allegedly misusing its power, sowing “social disorders” instead of a “social cure” (36). It’s difficult to square the praise this article bestows on the American press for speaking “to everyone and of everyone” and the disparaging critique of its means of doing so: fueling political strife. In one gesture, everyone belongs to the same reading public and a universally accessible culture of reading. But the currency there turns out to be partisan belonging; one must join a side and contribute to the fracturing of the universal reading public into narrower constituencies. In this slippage between singular journal identities shaped around politics, social classes, religious beliefs and general accessibility and interest, the article arrives at a problem that Chambers’s, as a neutral journal, faces in Britain. If the rise of newspapers in the United States and Britain both expanded a reading public into an uncountable mass and parceled it into particular parties (and sects and tastes), how could Chambers’s address “the people” as a collective?57

I suggest the pressure to find this kind of address was not simply a matter of fantasy of homogeneity, but a principled if ineffectual provision for universal accessibility. If the U.S. had already achieved this accessibility in practice, the growth of the reading public in Britain appeared to be following suit, as the market fractured as it expanded. Trish Loughran has argued that, in the American context, “it was not the

57 This is not to say, however, that Chambers would opt to lose the centralized organizing principle advertised by their name and built into their operation if it meant that they might address more readers in print. Like Dickens, the Chambers were put off by unauthorized and unattributed reprints in the U.S. McGill, tracing Dickens’s American tour in 1842, notes that “Dickens’s lack of control over the circulation of his texts in America causes him to fantasize about a mode of relation to his writing and his readers that was never wholly within his grasp” in Britain (McGill, Culture of Reprinting, 118). Chambers’s excessive precaution over the tenor of their publication and their system of production and distribution seems to have satisfied the Chambers’s desire for such control, that is, obviated such a fantasy.
presence of a national print culture but the absence of one that ensured U.S. founding in 1776 and 1789: national consolidation happened by way of an *imagined* unification soon to be disrupted by the “scenes of deep division and dissent” revealed by the actual regional connections made possible by the spread of print and communication technologies. Countering long-held assumptions about the consolidating affordances of print, Loughran forcefully articulates a problem like the one *Chambers’s* confronts not just in the politicized periodical market it entered but in the disintegration of a unified reading public that co-evolved with the rise of mass literacy. As the article on the American press indicates, *Chambers’s* resolution in the face of this problem was to hold fast to the idea of imagined universality while sacrificing the notion of unification. In other words, the Chambers would refrain from invoking the particularized *besideness* so energetically expounded in their opening address.

*Chambers’s* uneven use of anonymity reveals the challenges in finding a mode of address that would allow the journal to speak on behalf of a public rather than a limited editorial position or political sect. The overarching convention of periodical discourse in Britain through the 1860s, anonymity typically served as a vehicle for distinguishing critical, political, ideological positions of the journal by undergirding an identifiable “house style.” While the Chambers disavowed all forms of sectarianism, they also espoused an openly masculinized form of objectivity, and they encouraged an association between the name *Chambers’s* and certain style of wholesome and entertaining fare—fit for all readers. Seeking to override the circumscription of house style by parlaying its “we” into a universal public, *Chambers’s* established inclusivity as a broad democratic

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principle that would supersede politicized, gendered, and classed distinctions that readers nevertheless “heard” in their forms of address.

The periodical press’s own metacommentary on these issues are fraught with the same tensions. In an exhaustive appraisal of anonymity in 1841 article in the Westminster Review “Errors and Abuses of English Criticism,” George Henry Lewes demonstrates how central anonymity was to periodical discourse, decades before the debates over “signature,” as Elaine Hadley shows, swept through the liberal press. Looking at those years, according to Hadley, it “appears inarguable that the use of signature participated in a general trend toward the marketing of journals and newspapers through the use of popular personalities,” with some key exceptions in the liberal press that instead saw signature as a form of rational, abstract impersonality. Lewes anticipates these exceptions, finding the charge of “egotism” used to discourage signed articles less “disgusting” than the “conceit in the constant intimation of an individual opinion for the vague and mysterious ‘we.’” “Admitted,” he concedes, the perpetual iteration of I think, I conceive, it is my opinion &c., would be unpleasant, if not arrogant.”

But on nearer consideration, is not this perpetual indication of the criticism being only an individual, not a collective, opinion, a very truthful and salutary matter? If John Smith were to talk of the aristocracy as ‘we,’ you would laugh at his presumption; yet why should he identify himself with the voice of the nation whenever he utters his limited opinion? Besides, after all, if egotism is disgusting, is, therefore, wegotism so fascinating?

For Lewes, the anonymous convention permits a kind of presumptive identification with a collective more vaguely defined than the aristocracy; normal “talk,” like the talk of

John Smith, would not allow for such identification. If writers can avail themselves of the anonymity of “we” to aggrandize what is an actually an individual opinion, the public would be better off with “egotism” than “wegotism.” Then, Lewes emphasizes throughout the article, the public could evaluate the authority of the critic more fairly while remaining free from any attempts at ideological conscription.

In this way, Lewes advocates for signature as a means to counter, in Hadley’s words, “the abstraction of print … that enables particular writers or magazines to arrogantly speak ‘as if’ for the general public.”61 Although he continually evokes the public as the greatest victim of “wegotism,” one wouldn’t know, reading him, that Lewes was aware a great segment of the population could not read at all, or that more readers existed than those who read the kind of criticism he discusses. Similarly, even while Lewes decries how “the anonymous” cloaks who is speaking and on behalf of whom in obscurity, he does not identify the cultural boundaries his own mouthpiece, audience, and the part of the public represents. In not designating his overwhelmingly highly literate, educated audience, he paradoxically suggests both that such a specification is hardly needed and that the public for the Westminster is tacitly open to all. This mode of universalizing the educated audience provides a framework for understanding what kind of inclusivity is at stake in Chambers’s transformation of address, in which the journal, turning away from the accumulative logic of “The American Press,” comes to project all of its readers onto a universalized audience.

A decade later, when George Eliot took the helm of The Westminster as its unacknowledged editor behind John Chapman, she again considered the collective voice of the periodical as she prepared for her and Chapman’s first issue for January 1852. The

61 Hadley, Living Liberalism, 161.
most pointed step Eliot took against the standardization of individual opinions was introducing a short-lived “Independent Section,” which she refers to in a letter to Chapman as “the dangerous ward.”62 As the Prospectus declares, the contributors to this section are “zealous friends of freedom and progress, yet differ widely on special points of great practical concern, both from the Editors and from each other.”63 Allowing the Westminster to collect and project a number of voices, Eliot maintains the journalistic “we” but applies it to a complex of voices. “Martineau writes much that we can agree with and admire, Newman ditto, J.S. Mill still more, Froude a little less and so on,” she says to Chapman, declaring that because “each can’t have a periodical to himself, it is good that there should be one which is common to them—id est, the Westminster.”64 In fact Eliot lightheartedly resents the responsibility attributed to the editors for all that lies outside the “Independent Section,” a reflective joke only possible because of anonymity. Critics have looked at the Independent Section in relation to Eliot’s minority status as a professional woman writer, suggesting that Eliot’s goal was “a dialogic forum of competing views – akin to Foucault’s heterotopia – which could allow otherness to be heard.”65 Otherness might be a particularly strong word for the intellectual diversity of what remained a largely male, erudite class. But it is important to note that the “we” of periodical discourse was almost always gendered masculine—as much in the miscellanies of Knight and the Chambers brothers as in quarterlies like the Westminster, along with its Whig and Tory counterparts, the Edinburgh Review and the Quarterly Review.

64 Haight, 49.
Anonymity therefore underwrote the association between abstract universality and what is actually a masculine-gendered voice. Nancy Fraser has shown how “the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a ‘universal class’” emerged out of “civil society” embodied in “clubs and associations—philanthropic, civic, professional, and cultural.” Such associations include, for the Chambers, the SDUK and the SPCK; the “intimation of an individual opinion for the vague and mysterious ‘we’” disgusted them when it was politicized or ideologically categorized. And yet, as Fraser shows, this “‘universal’” position spread to the “broader segments of society” like the “popular and plebian strata”—the classes on behalf of whom Chambers spoke. The anonymity of address in periodical discourse thus became a tool in the service of such universalization. The Chambers drew on this rhetorical tool assuming that they, without associational ties to undermine them in the marketplace, could speak more broadly: all the universalizing achievements of the American press, none of the partisanship. As Fraser’s line of argument shows, however, the use of address to adopt a universal voice could only include all readers in principle.

Reader Mary Nettles, for one, noticed this discrepancy in her time. Angered at a column that seemed to berate ladies for poor or late housework, and more generally that

Chambers’s doesn’t allow “[l]adies to speak for themselves,” she wrote in 1838, “I am

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66 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 60. Note that with the rise of New Journalism later in the century, which according to Richard Salmon incubated in the mid-century debates over anonymity, the turn to “personality”-rich periodical writing only exacerbated the generally masculinist voice of the press. Salmon quotes the leading figure of New Journalism W.T. Stead, for example, claiming that “‘Impersonal journalism is effete. To influence men you must be a man, not a mock-uttering oracle’” (42). Drawing on Adorno and Horkeheimer’s “critique of mass culture as a form of pseudo-intimacy,” Salmon shows that even the “‘intimacy’” of signed periodical writing “is itself a form of abstraction.” This claim accords with the rise of abstraction I trace across the life of Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal, though of course the Chambers brothers took a rhetorical position much more opposed to personality and intimacy in the hopes of preserving (I argue) a form of democratic openness in their mode of address. Richard Salmon, “‘A Simulacram of Power’: Intimacy and Abstraction in the Rhetoric of New Journalism,” Victorian Periodicals Review 30, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 41–52.

67 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 60.
resolved you shall hear me on the deafest side of your head, unless you shall say
something in praise of us sprightly girls. We shall combine against you, and depend on ’t
you’ll feel us.” Turning the tables to condescend to Chambers, she concludes,

Let me tell ye, if you have not yet made the discovery, a house requires looking
after, and if you grudge me time to look after it I should not have you for a
husband nor any one who should. Therefore, Mr. Editor, write something in praise
of us industrious lasses, and show the lords the reason of occasional delay… it is
for the interest of the lords and their property in which we are fully more
interested than they are themselves, because we are the more helpless and
dependent beings.68

As much as Nettles grasps on her own the form and implications of these gender roles not
just in the house but in the press and, by extension, “the public sphere,” she is also aware
that she need go through “Mr. Editor” as an authority and intermediary to convince the
“lords”—who apparently are persuasively addressed by men like themselves rather than
by “industrious lasses.” In effect, Nettles reveals that such “relationships of address”
remain “determined” (to borrow Rancière’s metric for democratic address) even when
they purport to universality.

Like the contradictions in “The American Press” and revealed by this letter to the
editor, later Chambers’s articles that call readers’ attention to their place as a periodical
audience reveal other cracks in the pretense to universality. If in his opening “Address”
Chambers vows to know no inside or outside of the reading public—to render the “we”
truly universal—an 1850 review of Frederick Knight Hunt’s The Fourth Estate
articulates a curiously hedging version of this claim. According to the review (titled
“Philosophy of Journalism”), a “journal does not, in the common phrase, address a

68 Letter from Mary Nettles to the Editor of Chambers’s Journal (April 1838), Chambers Papers 341/522,
National Library of Scotland.
certain class of readers: it is the voice of these readers themselves.”69 In principle
embracing a more sanguine view of the “intimation of individual opinion” for a larger
category, Chambers’s assumes the power of the public mind safeguards against egotism:
“A journal may be the voice of an individual; but the power of the voice depends upon
the echoes which take it up, and which prolong it and infinitely multiply its vibrations”
(406). At once an expression of collectivity and distinction (the “certain class”), this
claim suggests Chambers’s held fast to its motivation to remove barriers between the
press and the people, even as it noticed the distinctions that shape that relationship.
(Indeed, the article had just enumerated, from Hunt, statistics on liberal (218),
conservative (174), neutral (155), Irish (101), English (223) journals, and so on). A
similar equation works for the journalist: “No journalist is, in the strict sense of the word,
original,” it goes on to say; “he is merely the mouthpiece, the agent, the representative of
his readers” (406). Note, again, the way in which “he” becomes “we” by representing a
certain delimited set of readers, “his readers.”

The article ultimately observes that the “portions of the press which would be a
disgrace to any age,” which “draw a foul subsistence from the very garbage of human
nature,” are no different in their formal properties of address (406). Therefore, it is only
at the scale of journalism as an enterprise (not unlike the American press, it turns out)
that the press speaks as widely as Chambers’s had hoped to do as a journal: “Journalism,
in short, being simply public opinion expressed in a periodical form, is a perpetual
reflection of the sentiments and intellect of the nation” (406). Chambers’s implies that
journalists allow the people to address themselves, since it’s the voice of the people that

in text.
they are channeling, aided by the convention of anonymity. And yet, compared to the journal’s initial “Address,” there is no assertion of a universal people for which this special circular address could happen, nor a journal up to that task. In place of its once bold assertions of its own universality, Chambers’s demonstrates a devotion to the concept of a collective voice, casting “character” as a potential site of reform but the mode of “expression” in journalism as unchanging. This hesitation to reassert Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal as a totalizing voice not just in this article but across articles that reflect on the press signals its own recognition of its failure to amass the audience for which it had hoped—and, as I show below, of the need to parlay these aims into a principle of abstract inclusivity, predicated on the idea of universal reading. In this light, the fact that a portion of what Chambers’s referred to as the “elite of the working classes” read the journal points not only to their inability to amass a vast audience, but, more interestingly, to the tenuousness of the boundaries around its readerships that shaped its pursuit of a collective voice.

IV. Democratic Address and The Unknown Public

At stake in the attempt to maintain a mode of address that would open Chambers’s to all readers, no matter how tenuously, is the development of democratic inclusivity that holds to the founding principles of a print-consuming public. The prevailing interest in democracy in scholarship on periodical culture has tended to emphasize not the “principle” of universal inclusivity articulated by Habermas, however, but rather his emphasis on deliberative democracy supported through private persons’ use of reason in the public sphere. The “social text of periodical writing thus joins two
dissonant orders,” Klancher modifies Habermas: “inside the text, a communal, democratic exchange; outside the text, a hierarchically ranked world.” Klancher argues that “periodical writing is antithetical to the sermonic; it is a mode of interdiscourse, a text of ‘equality’ where ‘men of all ranks’ leave their social identities at the door.” On this logic, the audience steps into a democratic space, across a threshold, whether one enters the text or the coffee house. The actual public, however, is not addressed as a social body conducive to such a space. The guiding premise of Laurel Brake and Julie F. Codell’s Encounters in the Victorian Press is that the press was characterized by a wide variety of interactions between editors, authors, and readers—again, an interactive space. For Brake, democracy as “practiced” in the Victorian press matures into a theory of “direct democracy,” in which the people’s voice, synonymous with the fourth estate, threatens to supervene the traditional reserves of civic power.

The unevenness with which Chambers’s espouses this form of “democratic” periodical writing anticipates the journal’s later assertion of more oblique, abstract form of democratic inclusion in a reformulated mode of address to all readers. One of the most explicit manifestations of the participatory feature of periodical discourse are “Letters to the Editor” pages and the apparent accessibility extended to readers to participate in the production of knowledge. In an 1857 article on “Answers to Correspondents,” Chambers’s informs readers that the supposed correspondents of the Spectator and Tatler “were brain-products of Addisons and Steeles,” “simply pegs whereon to hang pleasant

70 Klancher, 23. Klancher is quoting the Bee, an eighteenth-century miscellany whose proclamations for a universal readership are later echoed in Chambers’s and The Penny Magazine.
71 Ibid.
The article also tacitly reinforces the link between such correspondence and democratic access to the public sphere represented in the periodical, the weekly miscellany in particular. The “majestic quarterlies,” the author says of journals like The Westminster Review, do not “come under notice: they scorn such small tactics as question and answer, being addressed to readers of education and high tone of taste and thought. The monthlies, too, though neither so few nor so ‘far between’ as the quarterlies, come pretty nearly under the same category in this matter.”

This anatomy of the periodical marketplace links modes of address to an order of taste, if not class, as if to celebrate relationship between “the people” and the weeklies. But for all the weight given to the weeklies’ efforts to keep the public itself in print through publishing correspondence, Chambers’s more continuously adverted that they do not seek submissions and that they are not accountable for lost manuscripts or cannot return correspondence.

Many unpublished letters to the editors held in the Chambers’ archives begin by openly acknowledging those notices. “Respected Sir,” writes a “working mechanic” in 1842, “Although I have seen it intimated in your ‘Journal’ that no communication from unknown persons would be inserted, yet I have, with that importunity which is generally characteristic of the scribbling tribe, ventured to ask a place in your highly esteem’d Journal for the following effusion.” Others used apologies about their class as a rhetorical convention: “Excuse me,” begins a “constant reader,” “altho’ I am one of the unshaven, the unwash’d, the swinish multitude, I sometimes feel an in-clination to pour out my little soul on paper” he writes in July 1833, expecting to see his anecdote placed

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74 Ibid.
75 Letter, 4 April 1842, Chambers Papers, Deposit 341/535, National Library of Scotland.
by September and demonstrating his comfort with rhetorical flourish.\textsuperscript{76} The nature of this correspondence suggests that many working-class readers—as they typically identified themselves in their signatures—felt included in the reading (and writing) public thanks to *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*. A writer from Leicester fulfills exactly *Chambers’s* hope that readers, through the kind of literacy they gain through journal, find themselves included not just in the “scribbling tribe” but in society more generally: “Many thousands I doubt not have through your instrumentality become readers and thinkers, and as a natural consequence respectable members of society, [with] the satisfaction of having benefitted our fellow creatures.”\textsuperscript{77} These submissions document not just the expansion of the reading public but also its participatory possibilities. While their writers often mark themselves by their class, they also seem to presume an equal footing among possible periodical writers, even re-appropriating Edmund Burke’s denigration of the “swinish multitude” as an ironic rhetorical flourish. They gesture to the democratic principle that Rancière attaches to “the reign of writing,” an era in which “any one at all, no one in particular” can address “any one at all, no one in particular.”\textsuperscript{78}

And yet: in the pages of the journal, the Chambers’s approach to the working classes as potential readers and writers becomes less than celebratory, or even explicit, about their inclusion in the world of letters. An 1847 article (“Our Correspondents,” again), for example, deems “the supposed obligation to read all the letters which the postman so obligingly brings us every morning” the “skeleton” in their publishing house. “[We] can scarcely give any reasonable account of these epistolary revelations,” the article notes, sampling from the variety of their topics. Unsolicited poetic contributions

\textsuperscript{76} Letter, 4 April 1842, Chambers Papers 341/535.
\textsuperscript{77} Letter, 9 August 1841, Chambers Papers 341/124.
\textsuperscript{78} Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 12.
fall under the most withering glance:

No one but the editor of a literary periodical can have the slightest idea of the number of persons who write, or suppose they write, verses. One day when we have time, we mean to do justice to this meritorious order of geniuses, by presenting specimens of their claims to immortality. We shall not have more than a hundred weight of note-papers to look over. Meanwhile, to be serious, we would earnestly discommend the too prevalent practice of wasting time in versification, in which mediocrity is not only intolerable, but profitless. 79

Perhaps in a journal as devoted to improvement as Chambers’s, such a discommendation of unprofitable time is not surprising. The disparagement of what the Chambers surely knew to often be working-class, newly literate writers is nevertheless a jarring dismissal of their initially hoped-for audience. Indeed, it was around this mid-century period that Chambers’s began definitively charting a path away from vocally advocating working-class literacy to advance, instead, the vaguer notion of a general reading public of indeterminate makeup and proportions. “Our Correspondents” draws a tenuous line between them: it suggestively embraces, in “our,” the correspondence the journal receives, even as it invites an ostensibly more knowing reader to laugh at them. If Chambers’s explicitly imagined in 1832 that a universal reading public might be “known” by way of representative readers, by mid century, they began accommodating a rather more faceless version of the public. In other words, they increasingly address their audience as unknown—not only in Collins’s sense, which conflates the unknown public with the crowd, but in the still broader sense that a reading public cannot be fully captured by individual figurations.

The reformulation of address in Chambers’s, that is, offers a more complex account of how periodical writers addressed working-class readers obliquely in the service of maintaining the principle of an inclusive, generalizable readership. In an 1840

“Address of the Editors” (one can hear the slight shift in emphasis from “The Editor’s Address to His Readers” of 1832), Chambers comments on this changed perspective towards working-class readers. The reserved manner in which he celebrates the journal’s success is indicative of the reckoning to come:

Again permitted by custom to enter for a few minutes into communication with our friends, we feel gratified in informing them that the circulation of our work continues undiminished, reaching from sixty-five to seventy-thousand copies weekly. We need scarcely say that we accept this fact as the best evidence that could be given that our labours are upon the whole appreciated by the public. That we may frequently fail to please, is to be expected from addressing so large and varied an auditory; but we can confidently say, that our anxiety to render the work generally attractive has never from the first experience the least abatement. (8)

Although he invokes friendship with his readers, Chambers also stipulates that such a self-reflexive address—that is, an address that interrupts a program of amusing and instructing content without commentary to call attention to the audience as audience—is acceptable here because “permitted by custom.” When he turns to articulate the scale of the audience, he reads the result as an averaging out of their success with the public: “upon the whole appreciated,” “generally attractive.” Five years later, in “The American Press,” Chambers decries the partisanship that supports the American universal reading public, but here he acknowledges that the attempt to address “so large and varied an auditory” will paradoxically entail sacrificing an audience of this national scale. In effect, Chambers implies that when one addresses the public as a totalizing concept, they address only the idea of a general public.

While these admissions anticipate the starker confession of their failed goals to come, Chambers maintains an insistence on addressing the working classes. Indeed, he pivots from the “large and varied auditory” to the claim that “the class we address” is “that large department of society, who, being engaged in the duties of the counting-house,
the shop, the work-room, or those of their private dwellings, have little leisure for the
between 1840 and 1843. As the article says, “a considerable number of persons belonging to the upper and leisurely classes” and “a class who may be called the elite of the labouring community; those who think, conduct
themselves respectably, and are anxious to improve their circumstances by judicious
means” (8). In short, Chambers’s asserts that the journal is addressed to a general public,
particularly to a large class within it, and is read by yet another class. These
contradictions require some explanation, which Chambers supplies by pointing to literacy
rates: “A fatal mistake is committed in the notion that the lower classes read. There is,
unfortunately, a vast substratum in society where the printing-press is has not yet
unfolded her treasures.” Chambers is not wrong to assert that illiteracy in 1840 accounts
for the great difficulty of reaching a large working class readership, along with “tastes
altogether inconsistent with literary recreation” (8). About half of the population could
read (sixty percent of men, forty percent of women). But as literacy rates climbed and the
unknown public for penny serials grew while Chambers’s readership did not, this 1840
address appears most perceptive not about literacy but rather about its understanding that
to address anyone and everyone—the “large and varied auditory”—is to paradoxically
undermine the appeal of the journal to that very same social body. Indeed, “the unknown
public,” at least as Collins’s characterizes it as wholly interested in penny-serials, would
be a larger but more uniform readership.

Evoking a difference understood as a crucial stratifying marker of an increasingly
literate public, “Address of the Editors” contrasts readers who have “little leisure” and
those of the “leisurely classes.” While the article avows that Chambers’s addresses both
of these readerships, the breadth of the “large and varied auditory” would come down to accommodating that distinction. If Rancière’s account of literary democracy foregrounds an analysis of literary prose “indifferent” to the opposition between such readerships, his earlier work in the archives of working-class writers centers on this issue of time. In *The Nights of Labor*, on worker poets in 1830s France, Rancière writes a “history of those nights snatched from the normal round of work and repose” while reminding theorists and critics to be wary of tales of formation and emancipation of an entire class. “Some have fixed in sepia brown the history of the worker movement on the eve of its marriage with proletarian theory,” he says, “transforming it into a family photo album” for paying “homage” to the laborers who “stick to their collective identity” and for justifying disregard “when they choose to live other than as legions and legionnaires, to claim for themselves the errant ways of individuality.” Skeptical of “the social category always defined by the positivity of its ‘making,’” Rancière theorizes a realization that the Chambers brothers made less than ten years into their work as editors: that they could not appeal to a “collective identity” of the working classes, as if to make them into the great new constituency of the reading public. In reformulating their mode of address, the Chambers were less motivated by the fact that doing so undermined “errant individuality” than by the challenges they confronted in imagining a universal reading public as a collective. Nevertheless, the forms of address to which they turned preserved an abstract space for working-class readers through oblique strategies of address; on the principle that by neither excluding them as a class nor including them as a class (a “legion”), they

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opened the gates to their originally inclusive concept of the reading public.

Shortly after their 1840 assessment of their audience, Chambers’s began tacking away from targeted appeals to working-class readers in a variety of ways. In 1844, the journal began appearing not just at weekly intervals but also in a monthly format. The weekly continued through 1931, by which time it had become “essentially a monthly.”

This change indicates an awareness of how many of their readers could afford a more costly compendium of the month’s articles. I quoted, above, from an 1832 “Column for the Working Classes.” Rarely is this version of address repeated, and its similar forms appear with ever-lower frequency over the years. “A Chapter for the Working Classes” from September 1833 espouses a liberal, free-market argument against “combinations,” or union-forming amongst the working classes. “To The Working Classes, on the Subject of Emigration,” from June 1834 follows through on the promises made in Chambers’s first issue to provide such topical information for “the poor man.” “Gardens for the Working-Classes” (1835) and “Warm Baths for the Working-Classes” (1840) take up household issues, and “A Few Words to the Labouring and Other Classes” (1835) takes up population, a concern that anticipates a mid-century turn to commentary on how the working classes live.

Consider these titles following 1840, listed here nearly exhaustively:

“Moral Elevation of the Working-Cclasses” (July 22, 1843)
“Mr. Love on the Working-Cclasses” (December 30, 1843)
“An Evening with the Working Classes” (March 16, 1844)
“Beneficial Co-Operation of the Working Classes” (January 4 and February 8, 1845)
“A Suggestion for the Improvement of the Working Classes” (December 12, 1846)

These articles are addressed to working-class readers in the sense that they interest them, or are about them; but by the same token, they cast the working classes not as readers so much as objects of analysis for Chambers’s audience. Once explicit that everyone belongs to their audience, this list suggests an increasing ambivalence about whether or not the working classes fall “within” the reading public. It anticipates a yet sharper shift away from addressing the working classes as an audience even in this ambivalent form. One might interpret this turn cynically to conclude that Chambers’s sought to distance itself (another spatial term) and its audience from the masses, not unlike Household Words—Collins’s reputation for sensation fiction embraced by the masses notwithstanding. On this reading, the common reader tacitly crystallizes as a middle-class reader, not “anyone at all, no one in particular,” but someone who reads about the working classes. But while Chambers’s unmistakably settled on a narrower base subscribing subscribers, their reformulation of address over the century suggests such an interpretation would be oversimplified. In turning away from explicit appeals to working-class readers, Chambers’s began invoking a more ambiguously defined reading public through an ever more abstracted mode of address.

For instance, the latest occurrence of a column specifically addressed to the
working classes, “Counsels to the Working-Classes” of 1849, is outsourced to an excerpt from the MP W.J. Fox, and denounces “the crooked tactics of faction” in favor of peaceful, gradualist acquisition of political rights. Several years later, reprinting Fox’s “On the Duties of the Press to the People,” Chambers’s endorses the inclusivity promoted by the press, if not of Chambers’s itself. “Around [the press] the high and the low, the rich and the poor, may gather together, all being represented; and its tendency, if not to make all men one great family, is at least to make them one great society.” But, tellingly, Chambers’s edits out some of Fox’s directed vehemence, shortening his title from “Reports and Lectures, addressed Chiefly to the Working Classes” to its original subtitle, “On the Duties of the Press towards the People.” Missing from Chambers’s excerpt, though in its vicinity in the original, are lines like “The power [the press] exercises, and the influence which follows in its train, identify the press with the interests and happiness of millions, and render it the means of communication between the most distant classes of society, as if the penny post sent letters open that all might be read by all.” Such an elision is predictable for a journal that vowed to maintain an apolitical tone, but is nevertheless remarkable in contrast to its earlier explicitness about working-class audiences. By 1856, it appears, Chambers’s seeks to purvey this idea of “one great society” without specifying the classes of readers synonymous with the “millions,” and without invoking “communication” across the classes. In the absence of these specifications, Chambers’s remains open to “the people” in the abstract, that is, to the people as a nation of readers who simply are readers, not those who would be reminded that they’ve just been recently constituted as a class of readers.

The index of titles above abruptly falls off in 1854 because Chambers’s stops including the “working classes” or the “laboring classes” in any of its titles. In this period, writers began recognizing that the spread of literacy over the past several decades was going to inevitably culminate in a mass literate Britain. Later chapters unfold this moment in greater detail, most notably through Dickens’s mid-century novel *Bleak House*, but also through the transitional role George Eliot’s career played in the trajectory of direct address over the course of the century. For Chambers’s, the suspension of titles invoking the working classes roughly corresponds to a new series beginning in 1854, when Leitch Ritchie took over as editor. In 1855, the newspaper stamp duty discussed above was abolished, one of the last “taxes on knowledge” to disappear. (The tax on paper, which most interested the Chambers, was abolished in 1861). One might conjecture that Ritchie thought the freer reign for politically radical weeklies would occupy the attention of many working-class readers. The market for weeklies had exploded in the 1840s, such that competition had ripened as more politically oriented or sensational journals like Reynolds’s or *The London Journal* found their stride with their audiences. Whatever the precise mixture of reasons that combined to provoke this turn away from the working classes as a specifically addressed readership, it takes us quite far from the foundational vision of an audience in which all classes come together as a diverse public that Chambers had articulated in his “Editor’s Address.” Initially held as a virtue precisely because the journal wanted to address the working classes without political motive, Chambers’s “apolitical politics” later became the basis

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85 Fyfe, *Steam-Powered Knowledge*, 140–141. Fyfe attributes the success of Chambers’s through these competitive years (that felled *The Penny Magazine*) to the highly organized system of production already under way at the Chambers headquarters in Edinburgh. William Chambers, in his *Memoir*, attributes it to their awareness of audience’s desire for a balance of amusement and instruction.
for not addressing them as a particularized audience and ultimately, a new formulation of democratic address.

The consistency of this principle in Chambers’s helps us document the persistence of the universalizing aim of the journal across the century. The earlier vision of the journal was premised on, if only rhetorically, enforcing a principle we now associate with Habermas’s eighteenth-century coffee houses, which he claims “preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether.” Chambers’s initial aim to speak broadly to a mixed-class public is a direct result of eighteenth-century periodical culture, and its initial execution depended on a revival of the eighteenth-century essay on life and manners. The Chambers saw the amusing, informative essay as a genre of the broadest possible appeal. By the same token, it became crucial material for an avowedly neutral political and non-sectarian journal. William Chambers makes much of his brother’s affinity for writing in this genre in his memoir, to which he attributes the journal’s “permanent hold on the public mind.” Amongst changes in format, editorship, and other strategies of address, the journal rarely wavered from this general approach. “So tranquilly and successfully does the work continue to go on, that we might be spared saying anything about it” disclaims an 1879 retrospective. “Till this hour, the work is conducted on the same principles on which it set out. The needle is not more true to the Pole, than the writer of this has been true to his original profession”: a striking claim to make given the steep drop-off in solicitations of working-class readers. But here again Chambers’s foregrounds the dissemination of knowledge, their original aim being “to amuse and instruct apart from controversial

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86 Habermas, 36.
87 Chambers, Memoir, 239.
subjects, and if possible to elevate the aspirations of the young” (16). It is, secondly, “inferred that the reading public approve of the course of policy,” an acknowledgement that, while making little of the scope of its readership, suggests it might be open to anyone. Compared to the remarkably long list of audiences Chambers initially identified as potential readerships in 1832, the elision of the object after “to amuse and instruct” appears yet more open-ended for its absence. Indeed, where the “Editor’s Address to His Readers” promised material to interest almost every conceivable audience, here Chambers’s reminds readers that in “being loyal to their own principles, the editors have never undervalued, or interfered with, the views of others. The world, as it has been thought, is wide enough for all” (16). With this piece of wisdom, Chambers’s addresses itself to a broad reading public, while relocating claims of universality from an exhaustive coverage of numerous audiences to the openness of elision and abstraction.

None of the reformulations in strategies of address I have examined here reflect the changes this 1879 article goes on to acknowledge, noting that, “although unchanged in character, it would be absurd to aver that Chambers’s Journal is what it was in the decade 1830–1840” (16). Character here means something like its moral quality, not mode of address. But the article accounts for “considerable changes in the style of writing for periodicals” by observing the “advance in the number of the population, the wealth, the intelligence, and literary tastes since the commencement of the Victorian era” (16). The link between a larger population and higher taste allows Chambers’s to gesture obliquely to the reading public without marking the edges provided by distinctions among readerships. In this light, it’s telling that it was Addison and Steele’s amusing essays that most appealed to Robert and William Chambers in the first formative years of
the journal. For Habermas, democracy required its members to converse about the public to which they together belonged: the coffee house served as the image of this democracy not simply because it convened readers across classes, but because it brought them together in deliberation. But for the Chambers brothers and their subsequent editors, it was the image of a cross-class, widely literate, inclusive public to whom they could address their journal that represented a democratic public. The essay form they adopted and which fills the bulk of their pages reflects this centrality, as in its “character” it is designed to be of interest to all readers.

The changes in title Chambers’s made over the years capture the trajectory from this assertion of a “universal appetite” for amusement and instruction (“Editor’s Address, 1) towards an increasingly open-ended appeal to the reading public. From 1832 to 1853, its banner read “Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal” or, later, “Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal.” Its first issues are clearly meant to engage a Scottish audience, featuring national histories and biographies of Scottish figures. From 1854, already a nationally circulated journal for over two decades, Chambers’s dropped the location of its original title and further emphasized the variety of their offerings: Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Arts. Finally, from 1898, editor Charles E.S. Chambers adopted the minimalist option, Chambers’s Journal, with a sparseness that invokes the longstanding history of the name “Chambers” and its association with amusement, instruction, and miscellany, but also elides any demarcations around its appeal for the reading public.

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89 Scholnick takes a pointed passage from the first issue’s biographical sketch of Alexander Adam, a Scottish writer and educator: “Perhaps no country in the world, in proportion to its size, has produced so many men who have risen from the humble ranks of life, as Scotland; and no species of reading with which we are acquainted can yield such striking instances of the value of honest perseverance, under the most adverse circumstances, as the biography of the individuals who have so distinguished themselves.” William Chambers, “Biographic Sketches: Dr. Adam,” quoted in Scholnick, “Fiery Cross of Knowledge,” 335.
In these final years of the century, the fractional remaining space specifically designated for working-class readers are nostalgia-toned retrospectives of a pre-mass-literate Britain. For example, 1847 (the same year the “Our Correspondents” column above revealed tenuous distinctions among its audience) features in a 1900 retrospective “My First Investment in ‘Chambers’s Journal,’ by a Working Man” as the rosily remembered date of this investment. “When I look at my fifty-one volumes of Chambers’s Journal, all of them uniformly bound, ranged upon my humble book-shelf, I think no bibliomaniac gloated over his books with more pleasure and satisfaction than I do,” he claims, before parlaying his individual experience into a testament of the progress of reading and education into remote areas of the country.  

“A Working Woman” authors “Do Public Libraries Foster a Love of Literature Among the Masses?” in the same year. This article takes a decidedly pessimistic view of the working class’s relationship to literature, but lays blame all around. Its title is therefore asterisked for an editorial note that disclaims the journal’s dispassionate position: “This article is published without prejudice, and is interesting as an expression of personal opinion on the part of one who has derived great benefit from the use of free libraries. The Editor does not hold himself responsible for all the conclusions contained in the article.” If Chambers’s was once confident in its ability to speak on behalf of the public mind, these later appeals to the audience by working class readers suggest a hesitation to own forthrightly the narrative of the same readers for whom the journal was largely established.

These retrospectives may “expropriate their role,” to borrow Rancière’s words for the fraught relationship between “complicit” intellectuals and readers of the laboring

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90 “My First Investment in ‘Chambers’s Journal’” (14 April 1900): 316.
classes, but they do so while finding other ways to indicate the classlessness of their audience. For instance, the reader who maps his own lifetime of reading *Chambers's* onto the spread of literacy across Britain, in the article above, does in 1900 what William or Robert Chambers would have asserted, aspirationally, in 1832. At the same time, the relative loneliness of the “Working Man” in the pages of *Chambers’s* at the end of the century marks the vast distance the journal had travelled away from explicitly soliciting its original target audience or, indeed, counting its readerships up in a tally. According to Rancière, “the old myth about who has the right to speak for others” can only be displaced if we resist the conclusions of proletarian theory that working-class intellectual emancipation was *either* in fact a form of “exploitation” *or* a purified “class message.”

*Chambers’s* later reformulation of address helps us see what an alternative option might look like, I argue, through the ambiguity with which they draw the boundaries of the reading public in their later mode of address. In this sense, the trajectory of reader address in *Chambers’s* uncannily mirrors the trajectory of Rancière’s theorization of literary democracy, which emerges from this resistance to a consolidated, homogenized conceptualization of the working classes, developed in the archives, into an account of democratic prose style that relies on a radical indeterminacy of relationships of address.

It’s this later work of Rancière that most directly shapes the following chapter. Turning audiences into figures for a public so broadly construed that it could only be imagined as a virtual object, uncountably diverse, writers took up the concept of universality as *Chambers’s* came to articulate it: tenuously and tacitly in opened-up forms of address that could compass such a public. As the often distancing rhetoric of *Chambers’s* changing relationship vis-à-vis the working classes shows, to claim this form

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of address is democratic is to risk eliding over the inequities and stratifications that organize the modern public. But even as this contradiction continues to organize literary culture, we call on the principles of universal and egalitarian belonging provided for in abstract formulations of address when we invoke the concept of the public. Looking to the novel’s response to the idea of a universal reading public that shaped the Chambers enterprise, one finds writers employing a wide range of strategies for appealing to their readers, increasingly, as figures for a vast reading public. The proliferation of forms of address across nineteenth-century novels that together tend towards abstraction accounts for the definitiveness with which, by century’s end, conventions of address have nearly evaporated into the more diffuse category of style. The form this principle takes in moments of address becomes as oblique as Chambers’s 1832 itinerary of audiences is structured: its transformation across the century thus testifies to the pliability of literary form as a rhetorical tool for responding to the rise of mass literacy, a mass population, and a democratizing public.
CHAPTER TWO

The Slow Death of the Dear Reader

_Literature is the reign of writing, of speech circulating outside any determined relationship of address._

Jacques Rancière, _The Politics of Literature_

I. A Century of Direct Address

One of the recurring fixtures in Walter Scott’s _Tales of My Landlord_ series is a stodgy fictional editor named Jedediah Cleishbotham, schoolmaster and parish clerk of Gandercleugh. Cleishbotham begins one of his many prefaces by addressing his ideal readership:

As I may, without vanity, presume that the name and official description prefixed to this Proem will secure it, from the sedate and reflecting part of mankind, to whom only I would be understood to address myself, such attention as is due to the sedulous instructor of youth, and the careful performer of my Sabbath duties, I will forbear to hold up a candle to the light, or to point out to the judicious those recommendations of my labours which they must necessarily anticipate from the perusal of the title page.¹

Cleishbotham’s pretentious address reflects on his own prejudices, not Scott’s readership. And yet its ceremonious, excessive precision also shows Scott parodying how much writers might expect, or rather hope for, out of addressing their readers. Coleridge, for

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example, defended his and others’ “directed” addresses in the *Statesman’s Manual*, published the same year Cleishbotham opened *Old Mortality*, 1816. Pointing simply to his name—a play on “Thwackbottom”—and official positions on the title page, Cleishbotham assumes he can “secure” a certain response, confidence and respect. He also assumes that he can delimit his audience, and thus deigns only to speak to a certain class of readers, those belonging to the “sedate and reflecting part of mankind.”

Cleishbotham is mistaken on both counts: invoking his name and position with such pretension will rather undermine his authority, and, after *Waverley*, Scott could count on a large, varied, often pleasure-seeking audience. It is precisely Cleishbotham’s assumption that he can foresee response and manage the character and size of his audience that allows him to enjoy the fantasy of knowing his readers. But if Scott wants us to laugh with him at his fictional editor, does that make Cleishbotham’s address an example of misguided principle, or simply failed execution? I suggest we take Cleishbotham as a comically poor example of a nevertheless important and longstanding rhetorical device, whose eccentricity opens up another set of questions about why the convention of addressing readers was so pervasively ironized in the nineteenth century—and if it could survive in any other guise. The “slow death” in my title is not tantamount to the death of address, but of the ironized, diminutive preciousness of the “dear” or “gentle” reader and related presumptions, like Cleishbotham’s above, that writers could dictate the size of their audiences against the indeterminacy of the reading public.

To trace the evolution of this form of direct address and its other extradiegetic cousins, from scholarly footnotes to lyrical chapter epigraphs, I examine three of its major practitioners at early, mid, and late periods: Walter Scott, George Eliot, and Marie

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Corelli, as well as its major detractor, Henry James. The continual reformulations of address that shape its path out of irony carry political implications for the novel’s relationship to an ever larger, ever more diverse reading public. Indeed, the irony with which Scott suffuses Cleishbotham’s address stems in part from his resistance to acknowledging this public: what appears to the parish clerk as a question about recognizing social authority contains latent political questions about the scale on which authors can rhetorically convene their readerships. Over the course of the century, novelists increasingly broaden the implied scale of their addressees by redrawing the spatial relations that organize them. By inscribing into their novels the major shifts occurring in reading practices and the reading public—most notably, its steady expansion and diversification—these novelists moved from ironized intimate relations between storytellers and readers to open-ended, abstract relations that acknowledge but do not delimit reading audiences. Through this abstraction, writers established a democratic principle of address that could compass a mass reading public as an uncountable and virtual social body. According to the intertwined histories of literary form and mass literacy I sketch here, the “politics of address” comes to signify the way writers could rely on conventions for appealing to readers (as readers) to imagine an open, inclusive, expansive public.

In this century-long reformulation, the spatial contours of scenes of address become the most pliable variable of the convention. In distinct ways, Scott and Eliot use address to suggest imaginatively shared spaces, facilitating the fictional co-presence of narrator and readers. In Scott’s fiction, the anonymous “Author of Waverley” and fictional editors like Cleishbotham address readers to invite them into scenes of
storytelling, almost always with a good-natured dose of irony. Eliot’s earlier narrators echo Scott in their use of direct address. But, in contrast to Scott, they implicitly invite the reader into narrative spaces, not fictional extradiegetic ones, like their own homely residences. In her later fiction, Eliot largely shifts from direct to indirect address in the form of poetic paratextual prefaces and epigraphs. Rather than emplace readers in the space of the narrative, her paratext calls readers up to the threshold of the narrative—to a graphical space—but refrains from inviting them in. Despite its central role in the reshaping of address over the century, this form of paratext has played only minor parts in already sparse scholarship on address.\(^3\) In part through Eliot’s turn to paratext, the spaces invoked by address becomes less suggestive of material places and embodied persons, more abstract and ambiguously defined, until they all but disappear entirely from the convention. Eliot’s career is a hinge-point in this trajectory: her later, more oblique paratextual address anticipates its apparent death at the hands of Henry James and high fiction more generally as well as the intensified moralizations of Marie Corelli.

The story of address as unfolded by the novelists in this chapter thus suggests that as the reading public grew, novelists were less inclined to figure the narrator and readers shared presence in a defined space, that is, to ask readers to conjure a world in which they and their fellow readers could be convened, even imaginatively. Even in early-century fiction, the irony accompanying Scott’s use of address indicates the difficulty of imagining such a space. Later novelists began to refrain from using address

\(^{3}\) A notable exception is Alex Howard’s article “The Pains of Attention: Paratexual Reading in Practical Education and Castle Rackrent,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 69, no. 3 (December 2014): 293–318. Howard argues that paratexts in Castle Rackrent, particularly the novel’s footnotes, “diversify—and intensify—a novel’s claims on its reader’s attention” (290), such that Edgeworth “offers attentive reading as a solution to the uncomfortable sensation of information overload that marks print modernity” (300). The paratextual reading of her title is, in short, synonymous with attentive reading. Where Howard is interested in how paratext shapes the practice of reading, I am interested how paratext shapes writers and readers’ imagination of a reading public.
to suggest that their voices belonged to an embodied storyteller. In these ways, the changes these authors make to the convention of address attenuate the association between voice and presence that has undergirded the fantasy of an oral storyteller. As I map what Michael Warner calls “complex repertoires of involvement”\(^4\) of voice, text, and audience across the century, I observe how they begin to register the increasing inevitability of an expansive—not just large, but also multi-class, mixed gender—reading public, which in turn fueled the imagination a democratized public in yet broader terms. If the politics of address were throughout most of the century tied to a highly conventionalized rhetoric in literary form, by the end of the century, the “democracy of taste” exemplified by the gulf between James and Corelli shifts emphasis to the way in which readers elect themselves into certain categories of audience. That is, when the convention turns to abstract forms of democratic inclusion, it tacitly falls to readers to determine the boundaries of their own internal constituencies—even as the absence of delimiting address conventions in late-century fiction testifies to the democratization of the public as an inclusive and egalitarian social concept to which all these constituencies belong.

My emphasis here on the link between democracy and abstraction offers a corrective to the long-held idea that direct address conventions register social anxiety about the spread of reading or nostalgia for a pre-print paradigm. Critics and theorists have grounded these claims in the conservative, alarmist reactions to the spread of reading, particularly novel reading, and particularly novel reading done by women and working classes. In the nineteenth century, social reading—reading aloud, often done in

family settings like the sitting room—was seen as a mechanism of control over the content to which young readers and female readers especially had access, in part because books appropriate for a family audience (for which the Bible was paradigmatic) were ostensibly more morally wholesome. Social reading combated the “potentially freer, more secretive, and wholly internal” nature of silent reading that, in spite of reactionary anxiety, culminated in the nineteenth century—in no small part through the rise of the novel. Martyn Lyons observes that the “passing” of the so-called “‘intensive’” relationship between reader or listener and print “was lamented by conservatives who regretted the way that individual, silent reading was dissolving traditional forms of sociability.” Extensive reading (focused on quantity) conduced to reading silently and alone, while intensive reading (focused on carefully reading select texts) often aligned with the directed nature of social reading, in which form it persisted in pedagogical contexts.

Although the gradual turn away from embodied voices and emplaced readers I trace here documents a preoccupation with these cultural shifts, it orients us not to a mythical sharp break between oral and print culture, but rather to the spatial arrangements invoked differently according to the stress (or lack thereof) on figuring authorial speech in print. Since Walter Benjamin enshrined the real, embodied voice as a “traditional form of sociability” lost to the rise of the novel, his lament for the disappearance of “living speech” has shaded the critical lens on novelistic address. For Benjamin, the novel plays

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a pivotal role in “remov[ing] narrative from the realm of living speech,” as well as in bolstering social isolation through isolated reading habits. Extensively engaging with Benjamin and speaking about the Victorian storyteller more broadly (not simply or even primarily address), Ivan Kreilkamp argues that “by defining a novel as the utterance of a powerfully authentic speaker, authors and critics can claim that novelistic language generates the same kind of community once defined by face-to-face oral exchange.”

This notion of “face-to-face oral exchange” is a kind of refrain echoing across accounts of nineteenth-century reader address, and it is often put in tension with the historical trajectory towards a mass reading public. Fredric Jameson, for example, calls the “gestures and signals of the storyteller” the novel’s symbolic “attempt to restore the coordinates of a face-to-face storytelling institution which has been effectively disintegrated by the printed book and even more definitively by the commodification of literature and culture.” Critics have since argued along similar lines: Garrett Stewart casts direct address as a means to rhetorically “reprivatize such an overgrown commonwealth of reading within an undeniable sales economy,” while Patrick Brantlinger argues that it produces a “simulacrum of face-to-face dialogue” as a defensive response to “social anxiety” over mass literacy.

As Jameson’s spatializing language of “coordinates” stresses, writers often use address to suggest emplacement, a model of sociability borrowed from oral storytelling

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8 Ibid., 372.
or reading aloud. Yet the authors in this chapter demonstrate a willingness to question and to give up such imaginatively shared spaces and the connection between voice and presence without giving up address altogether. It therefore seems to me that the story about nostalgia and anxiety is neither entirely accurate nor complete, but rather the most widely disseminated account we have for the relationship between literary form and the history of reading. Tracing direct address from its early-century rhetoric of emplacement to its later abstractions, it becomes clear that re-privatization insufficiently accounts for the political stakes of the convention. Moreover, emplacement need not indicate broad social anxiety. In contrast to that emphasis, Nicholas Dames’s work on “physiological novel theory” has unearthed a positive strain of nineteenth-century thought about the “solitary reader.” According to Dames, physiological novel theorists—a varied group including G.H. Lewes and Alexander Bain that focused on the experience of reading lengthy narrative—“attempt[ed] to place the solitary reader at the very heart of modern social interaction.”

In doing so, this theory viewed readerly engrossment “with neutrality” and could celebrate the spread of mass literacy. Though I agree with the critics above that singularizing the addressed reader is one way to rhetorically contain the expanding, unknowable reading public, I take Dames’s research as a welcome signal that we can step out of the loop in which anxiety is both the context for and implication of direct address.

As I have been arguing, Rancière’s theory of the “democracy of writing,” opposed to the “classical order of representation” helps us make that step. Both of these “regimes” are affiliated with respective forms of address and historical periods. Based on

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14 Ibid., 15.
the idea that speech belonged to a special public, men of action, the traditional order depended on “a relationship of address regulated between speech acts and defined audiences on whom these speech acts were supposed to produce the effects of mobilizing thoughts, emotions and energies.”

According to Rancière, “Voltaire, already, deplored the vanishing of this order. The audience for his tragedies was no longer the same as Corneille’s. It was no longer an audience of magistrates, princes and preachers. It was just ‘a certain number of young men an women.’ In other words, anyone at all, no one in particular, no social authority guaranteeing the power of discourse” (12). To address “anyone at all, no one in particular” was to address a wide and varied public full of normal people, people who would not necessarily be “sharing the same position within the social order and drawing ordered rules of interpretation and modes of sensibility from that ethos” (12), as would the men of action of the classical order. Rancière links this change underway in the drama of the eighteenth century specifically to the novel in the nineteenth: “This is exactly what the public who read the novels of Balzac or Flaubert was like, only more so. Literature is this new regime in which the writer is anyone at all and the reader anyone at all” (12). As his invocation of Flaubert suggests—Flaubert rarely if ever pauses to address his readers directly—Rancière has a wider definition of address in mind, a kind of prose rather than a kind of convention.

By contrast, Scott, Eliot, and Corelli often invoke the priority of speech, albeit the speech of a storyteller rather than a magistrate or politician. However, the gradual erasure of the implied boundaries around addressees and the turn to abstract, undefined spaces show points to a changing “order.” Rancière is thus all the more productive a frame for

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illuminating the latent states of these changes and, ultimately, for helping us revise the
now-consolidated assumptions about the disciplinary motives and nostalgic tones of
direct address. There is also a case to be made for focusing on a device as hyper-
conventionalized as direct address already was on the eve of the nineteenth century. First,
conventions of address reveal the way in which writers imagined their readers as central
figures in the continual reformation of the reading public. Balzac and Flaubert’s—Scott
and Eliot’s—this public made of up so many everymen (and women) only came into
being by way of reading audiences. Second, the series of authors in this chapter helps
account for the difference between Balzac, who often gestures to his readers, and
Flaubert, a difference echoed in Britain in the reformulation of over the course of the
entire century. At stake in this difference, I argue, is our appreciation of the gradualist
development of literary democracy alongside the intertwined rise of mass literacy and
evolution of novel form. Seen at this level, the reformulation of address illuminates the
very processes writers enlisted to break from the notion of a well-defined, encapsulated
audience and to usher in a new form of democratic belonging.

II. Lingering at the Post-Chaise with Walter Scott

“It could never occur to a novelist of Scott’s day,” says Q.D. Leavis, “that there
could be any other public to address than his peers, and Scott exhibits accordingly the
dignity of a well-bred man who is sure of himself and his audience, he has none of
Thackeray’s uneasiness.”16 Leavis describes a version of the trajectory I sketch here.
She too casts Marie Corelli as exemplary of the late-century relationship between the
novel and the public and, at its beginning, points to Scott as a marker of a “day” in

16 Q.D. Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public (London: Chatto & Windus, 1939), 163.
which writers were relatively more “sure” of their audiences. But “peers” and “public” even for Scott, I suggest, are not collapsible terms. Cleishbotham’s excessiveness alone is enough to demonstrate “uneasiness” about the parameters of his audience. When *Waverley* was published in 1814, the first marked expansion of the reading public had been underway for several decades. Although Scott’s novels set a prohibitively expensive standard price for new novels (an astounding thirty-one shillings), his fiction was received as both respectable and recreational. According to Ina Ferris, the Waverley Novels repositioned the genre as an acceptable literary form, in part by masculinizing the enterprise of novel writing and reading.17 This generality anticipates the larger cross-class audiences of Charles Dickens and Marie Corelli, and in Scott’s own time, undermined the fantasy of access and control in which Cleishbotham indulges. I suggest that the irony that pervades Scott’s use of direct address betrays this fantasy by playing on the supposed rift between print and oral culture, already intimately familiar to him as a balladeer.

Further, as a crucial component of this embryonic version of the democratic address that comes to characterize the convention later in the century, Scott’s irony encourages us to view the politics of his fiction from a wider angle. Scott’s well-known Tory sympathies have led critics to focus on his apparent neutralization of Jacobite rebellion by way aestheticizing Scottish history. Within the history of reading, however, Scotland played an outsized role in creating a novel-reading British audience; operating under different copyright laws, the book market in Edinburgh effectively forced

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17 Ferris, *Literary Authority*, 91. St. Clair also notes that Scott was permitted as serious and recreational reading. St. Clair, *The Reading Nation*, 254, and Altick opens *The English Common Reader* with an anecdote of his “fame among all classes of society” (2).
England to adopt reforms that helped expand the British reading public.\textsuperscript{18} In anticipating a form of address that could overwrite the political boundaries that shaped both this public internally and the plots of his novels, Scott’s ironic address puts in motion a democratization of address that can only come to fruition through the ongoing the expansion of reading and literacy.

Beginning with \textit{Waverley}, Scott published his novels anonymously, the standard for prose fiction,\textsuperscript{19} and maintained his anonymity for many years after his identity as author became known. As critics have pointed out, this anonymity afforded Scott room to play with the conventions of authorship and storytelling, including conventions for addressing readers.\textsuperscript{20} Cleishbotham—of whom more below—embodies one such experiment. In the “Introductory” to \textit{Waverley; or, Tis Sixty Years Since}, the narrator casts himself as a much more public-friendly speaker, reading aloud from the “book of Nature”: “It is from the great book of Nature, the same through a thousand editions, whether of black-letter, or wire-wove and hot-pressed, that I have venturously essayed to read a chapter to the public.”\textsuperscript{21} Noticing that the reading public shares the same “deep-ruling impulses” as their ancestors, the narrator approaches that public in an \textit{apropos} position: as the book of Nature transcends material changes in publication formats, the narrator’s appeal to reading aloud looks to the form of reading most

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{18} See St. Clair, \textit{The Reading Nation}, 115.
\bibitem{19} The leading contributing factor to this convention, according to St. Clair, is tied to the history of reading: the “ongoing attempt by the publishers and the circulating libraries to impose greater similarity, regularity, and predictability, on the nature and habit of novel reading, in other words to turn novels into uniform and mutually substitutable commodities, and the renting and reading of them into a regular habit.” \textit{The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period} (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 175.
\bibitem{20} Ina Ferris, \textit{The Achievement of Literary Authority: Gender, History, and the Waverley Novels} (Ithaca: Cornell UP), 98–99.
\bibitem{21} Walter Scott, \textit{Waverley: or, Tis Sixty Years Since}, ed. Andrew Hook (New York: Penguin, 1972), 36. Subsequent citations parenthetical in text.,
\end{thebibliography}
conducive to a time-tested, reassuring relationship between text and audience. Thus, it’s no coincidence that this appeal introduces his avowed prerogative, to convey “moral lessons” (36). In contrast to the timelessness of the book of Nature and these deep-ruling impulses, however, a notable change shadows over the reading climate in which Waverley’s story will be “heard.” “I am sensible how short these [moral lessons] will fall of their aim,” the narrator says, “if I shall be found unable to mix them with amusement, – a task not quite so easy in this critical generation as it was ‘Sixty Years since’” (36). It is precisely in achieving this mixture, Ferris argues, that the Waverley Novels repositioned the novel as an acceptable literary form.22 The historical status of reading in this moment thus shapes this opening address: the anonymous author’s remarks on reading aloud encourage us to take the narrator’s subsequent self-reflexive comments on storytelling, in particular his addresses to the reader, as evocations of this metaphor of narrative voice and its response to new developments in the reading landscape.

Waverley’s own reading habits reflect these developments, particularly the possibility of desultory (that is, cursory, perfunctory) reading and “extensive” reading—a habit with which Scott later claims to identify. Rehearsing Waverley’s education, the narrator makes him an example of a certain category of readers: “With a desire of amusement, therefore, which better discipline might soon have converted into a thirst for knowledge, young Waverley drove through the sea of books like a vessel without a pilot or rudder. Nothing perhaps increases by indulgence more than a desultory habit of

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22 Ferris, Literary Authority, 91. St. Clair also notes that Scott was permitted as serious and recreational reading. St. Clair, The Reading Nation, 254.
reading, especially under such opportunities of gratifying it” (14). With Waverley as a counterexample, the narrator comments on reading and erudition along class lines: “I believe one reason why such numerous instances of erudition occur among the lower ranks is, that, with the same powers of mind, the poor student is limited to a narrow circle for indulging his passion for books, and must necessarily make himself master of the few he possess ere he can acquire more” (14). The opposition the narrator draws between Waverley and the “poor student” provides a neat example of extensive versus intensive reading, as the generalizing language of ranks and drawing morals encourages us to take Waverley as a representative example. Indeed, he represents a young Walter Scott: in the “General Preface to the Waverley Novels,” Scott says of his library: “The vague and wild use which I made of this advantage I cannot describe better than by referring my reader to the desultory studies of Waverley in a similar situation, the passages concerning whose course of reading were imitated from recollections of my own. It must be understood that the resemblance extends no farther” (521).

That Scott persisted in seeing the necessity of the many introductory remarks to the Waverley, contra the opinion of his critics, indicates how strongly he perceived the connection between Waverley’s wavering reading habits and the political wavering that structures the plot of the novel. So too does the rhetorical excess of his paratext have

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23 Along with the reading material the narrator details, this description, Ferris points out, makes Waverley “a type of female reader.” Women are not responsible for all problematic reading, she notes, but “it is the female reader who stands for reading errors.” Ferris, Literary Authority, 99. Kelly J. Mays also refers to feminine reading as desultory reading “par excellence.” Desultory reading, in Mays account, “produced… a subject that was not one,” that is, “not merely an inanimate object, but one without coherence, integrity, wholeness, or the individuality these qualities guaranteed” (176–78). Mays, “The Disease of Reading in Victorian Periodicals,” in Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices, ed. Robert Patten and John Jordan (New York: Cambridge UP), 165–85. The association between desultory and feminine reading helps explain the importance of the social reading model to conservative cultural commentators, since that model typically set up the patriarchal family figure as the ideal reader.
political consequence. As a framing address to the discussion of Waverley’s reading habits, the projection of the narrator’s voice reading aloud to the public reminds us that the social reading model mitigated desultory, extensive, and absorbed reading, while silent reading facilitated those habits. In this context, the narrator’s addresses would serve as the “pilot or rudder” that Waverley lacked, steering readers on the right course. In the readings that follow, I unpack this would modality by describing the difficulties of convening the public audience—so confidently asserted in this introduction—that Scott’s narrators encounter when they use address to imagine shared spaces for storytellers and readers.

Critics interested in Scott’s address and self-reflexivity have not thoroughly attended to the suggestively material contours of his address, its implied scales, demarcating lines, and emphasis on shared space. Instead, Ferris sees Scott’s address as a device that creates distance between the reader and the novel in order to disrupt too-absorbed (i.e. feminine) reading. More interested in politics than the history of reading, McGann and Ian Duncan ground their arguments for an oft-overlooked liberal underside to Scott on his penchant for self-reflexivity, through which skepticism colors the eventual reaffirmation of more conservative, organicist politics. I share these interests in the relationship between address, reading, and politics. I suggest, however, that in extending our attention beyond Scott’s advertisements of fictionality to the spaces invoked through those advertisements, we gain an understanding of why almost all of his address could not but be suffused with an undermining irony: that is, his narrators cannot naïvely or straightforwardly invoke such spaces because they have begun to

evaporate with the expansion of the reading public. In Scott’s self-reflexive irony, what may look like a surprisingly liberal encouragement of skepticism, then, is also an illustration of the need for a new kind of politics for the novel that can encompass a growing and diversifying reading public. In an early moment anticipating later authors’ positive formulation of such a politics, Scott’s addresses are marked by a tension between earnest investment in the idea of a shared space for storytellers and readers and a self-consciousness about the fantasy of such a space, given the size, shape, and habits of his reading public.

Another early address in *Waverley* illustrates this combination of conjuring and undermining the narrator and readers’ shared space. After detailing the political history of Waverley’s family—his father turning Whig, his uncle maintaining the family’s Tory lineage—the narrator addresses the reader to justify himself: “I beg pardon, once and for all, of those readers who take up novels merely for amusement, for plaguing them so long with old-fashioned politics, Whig and Tory, and Hanoverians and Jacobites. The truth is, I cannot promise them that this story shall be intelligible, not to say probable, without it” (26). The apparently earnest tone of these remarks quickly becomes more difficult to parse, in part from sheer extensiveness. Hence I quote at length:

I do not invite my fair readers, whose sex and impatience give them greatest right to complain of these circumstances, into a flying chariot drawn by hippogriffs, or moved by enchantment. Mine is a humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his Majesty’s highway. Those who dislike the vehicle may leave it at the next halt, and wait for the conveyance of Prince Hussein’s tapestry, or Malek the Weaver’s flying sentry-box. Those who are contented to remain with me will be occasionally exposed to the dullness inseparable from heavy roads, steep hills, sloughs, and other terrestrial retardations; but, with tolerable horses and a civil driver (as the advertisements have it), I engage to get as soon as possible into a more picturesque and romantic country, if my passengers incline to have some patience with me during my first stages. (63)
While the elaborate metaphor describing the narrative with which the passage closes pushes it into the realm of ironic self-mocking, Scott outlines several serious principles about readers here. Distinguishing the “humble English post-chaise, drawn upon four wheels, and keeping his Majesty’s highway” from mythical and eastern air-born vehicles, the narrator associates Englishness with groundedness and direction, and typified female reading with Easternness. This distinction not only sanctions male readers’ choice to read the novel, a feminine-gendered literary form that will end up venturing into the picturesque and romantic. It also distances the English women reading *Waverley* from the “bad” type of female reading, and thereby incorporates the “fair readers” into a more general sense of national belonging. Scott thus imagines a place for both male and female novel readers, and underlines the political nature of that place.

Now that all of England has been invited into the post-chaise, however, it’s a large, inclusive group. A less obvious layer of the humor here—a mismatch in the scale of the reading public and the space that they are asked to share—complicates the picture of access to readers suggested by this invitation. The narrator opens that small, intimate, and class-delimited space to a plurality of readers, but the “public” addressed so earnestly before can neither fit into nor equally afford the post-chaise. While the serious indication that the safest choice is the English post-chaise conveys a desire not

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25 Mays notes that besides feminine reading, desultory reading was often associated with “orientalization,” because of the fear that the individual might dissolve into the nation, as in representations of China (“Disease,” 178). Ferris’s reading of this passage—“There is a kind of sober heroism to realist reading, it seems, that contrasts positively with the flighty self-indulgence of female reading” (*Literary Authority*, 97)—similarly defines types of readers against each other, but does not acknowledge that female readers are invited to join a different space than stereotyped female readers, or that such a space used to describe “realist reading” comes with its own set of problems.
just for a common ground but a proper common ground to which readers should be invited, the mismatched scale of the image readers are asked to conjure reveals the need to reimagine a space and a politics that can operate on a larger scale than the kind of paternalism the narrator seems to desire with readers. In this way, the invitation into the post-chaise incorporates the political discussion surrounding the address into the address itself: whither Waverley’s politics; how does one enter into the right political sphere, and who belongs there; what principles of exclusion and inclusion obtain for that space?

Scott reinforces the connection between irony and spatialized scales when he cleanly juxtaposes humor and politics at the end of the novel, in “A Post-Script, Which Should Have Been a Preface.” First, the narrator ratchets up the self-mocking tone when the addressed reader is fully coterminous with convention—that is, singularized and gentle:

Our journey is now finished, gentle reader; and if your patience has accompanied me through these sheets, the contract is, on your part, strictly fulfilled. Yet, like the driver who has received full hire, I still linger near you, and make, with becoming diffidence, a trifling additional claim upon your bounty and good nature. You are as free, however, to shut the volume of the one good petitioner, as to close your door in the face of the other. (491)

Here Scott harkens to Fielding’s farewell address in Tom Jones (already invoked in the stage-coach metaphor): “We are now, Reader, arrived at the last Stage of our long Journey. As we have therefore travelled together through so many Pages, let us behave to one another like Fellow-Travellers in a Stage-Coach, who have passed several days in the Company of each other.”26 Where Scott earlier pluralizes his “fair readers”-cum-travellers, at the end of the novel he borrows the same singularizing convention

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popularized by Fielding. This inconsistency in Scott suggests the transitional state of the reading public’s own journey during Scott’s career. As critics basing their claims about anxious containment of a swelling reading public have noted, too, the “gentle reader” is in itself an instance of mismatched scales. The “gentle reader” is supposed to stand in for a plurality: if not the entire reading public, all women readers. But, while the narrator suggests that the freedom allotted to the reader to shut the book, to step away from the threshold, and to steal away from the lingerer is a safely neutralized, contained freedom (given the reader’s gentleness and singularity), the heavy-handed ironic tone undermines this management. It’s not difficult to imagine an actual singular reader, alone with a book and reading silently, of course; the difficulty is in knowing that reader amongst an unknown public. Reflecting this problem, irony permeates the elaboration of the “gentle” reader’s assumed characteristics, “bounty and good nature,” as well the more physical points of access to her: the return to the journey metaphor in which narrator and reader share “our” space, as the narrator “lingers” there, the tangibility of the book’s sheets, its shutting, and its comparison to a “door,” i.e., a physical threshold. The narrator almost invites us to collapse the book’s tangibility, the real possibility of the real reader shutting and leaving it, onto the fictional threshold and fictional shared space—as if he could make narrative voice and implied reader into tangible, embodied entities as well. But with irony preserving the distance between real and figured readers, Scott lends substantial weight to the uncertainty about the convention of representing the reading public in a singularly addressed reader.

When the narrator sharply turns to a larger scale, history and politics, the irony vanishes. Having done with the commentary on the order of preface reading, the narrator
begins the next paragraph with an about-face to Scotland’s recent past and to a
historiographical rather than storytelling mode, what Ferris calls the “history-effect”:
“There is no European nation which, within the course of half a century or a little more,
has undergone so complete a change as this kingdom of Scotland” (492). Lest we think
the number of changes the narrator goes on to list and the short timeline too hazardous,
he assures us that “the change, though steadily and rapidly progressive, has nevertheless
been gradual; and, like those who drift down the stream of a deep and smooth river, we
are not aware of the progress we have made until we fix our eye on the now distant point
from which we have been drifted” (492). In this formulation, Scott routes serious
historiography through the narrator’s penchant for metaphor, but, notably, without the
undermining irony that characterized the figurative language in previous addresses. Note
too the use of more encompassing grammar—the expletive “there is” and the first-
person-plural “we” after so much first- and second-person singular—and the
correspondently sober and straightforward rather than ironic tone. Juxtaposed against the
previous, self-mocking address to the conventional gentle reader, the narrator here
attempts to head off readerly skepticism, gesturing to a serious desire for both communal
space and communal knowledge for readers in their capacity as political subjects.

Why the narrator’s presumption to know the reader and expect the conventional
addressee to stand in for the reading public comes with an undermining ironic tone, while
the equally difficult presumption to make broad historical claims about an entire nation
does not, begs for some explanation. The sense of community the narrator describes here
depends on collecting writerly and readerly agency in retrospective realizations, not in
driving history-making changes. Evidently, this sense of community does not involve the

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pretense of its members knowing one another personally. Rather than the roles of face-to-face storyteller and listener, the narrator speaks from the historian’s perspective, and thereby asks us to collectively see from that perspective as well. Whereas the historian’s address maintains its serious, clear sobriety, the storyteller’s mode of address is suffused with irony. Similarly, the historian continues to be able to generalize about his subject, the nation, while the storyteller’s capacity for convening the public begins to fracture under the weight of not just print, but also a different kind of reading public for that print.

In *Waverley*, the narrator’s paratextual direct addresses bookend the extradiegetic interruptions made throughout the novel. But in subsequent novels, Scott’s paratextual address becomes more elaborately structured and polyvocal. Layers of paratextual address begin to pile up at the edges of the narrative—subtitles, epigraphs, prefaces, footnotes. Address in the form of epigraphs more oblique than the “dear reader” formulations just described, but nevertheless directed to the reader, often abuts direct address from Scott’s fictional editors. Scott’s propensity for address in the form of paratextual thresholds emphasizes a desire to invite readers into the narrative, but the sheer abundance of these thresholds turns into a hyperbolic paratextuality that suggests concern over the effect of these invitations, whether readers will get the point to come in or will sit at their designated gateway, stymied by the delays they encounter there. Through the repetition of these invitations into the novel, as through his ironic tone, Scott heightens awareness of the fictionality of communal ground for narrator and readers, while simultaneously signaling an unwillingness to drop the pretense of laying out that ground.

The series of prefatory gateways to *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818), another
Tales of My Landlord novel provides an exemplary case.28 In later editions, after Scott’s identity as author became known, a standard title page (The Heart of Mid-Lothian, A Romance, Scott’s name, and publication information) precedes the fictional title page, which is then followed by several other pieces of paratext. Here is the exhaustive list: a few series title lines, Tales of My Landlord, collected and arranged by Jedediah Cleishbotham; an excerpt from a Burns poem; an excerpt from Don Quixote in Spanish and in translation; an “Introduction” added by Scott in 1829 explaining the premise for the novel, the story of Helen Walker, in which he primarily quotes a letter given him by a Mrs. Goldie; a “Postscript” from the editor, filling in a few particulars left out by Mrs. Goldie, which the editor found from a different volume, “Sketches from Nature, by John M‘Diarmid”; Cleishbotham’s overwrought, comic address to the reader; a footnote to Cleishbotham’s long address, several paragraphs long, which details the history of Scott’s family in relation to the Quaker faith and comes with its own very brief footnote referring us to a page of a Baronage; the novel’s title for a second time, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, with the first chapter’s title below, “Being Introductory”; and, finally, a chapter epigraph, “So down thy hill, romantic Ashbourn, glides / The Derby dilly, carrying six insides.”

From its opening lines, the reference to the landlord and the collector, Scott records in the novel’s paratext an investment in printing, reading, transmitting, moderating, and sharing texts. In emphasizing intertextuality both thematically and formally, the prefatory material suggests the need for a textual structure that supplements the metaphorical voice of the storyteller as the sole locus of meaning for

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28 I refer to an 1868 edition that contains all of Scott’s original and eventual paratext. The “General Preface” originates in the 1829 Magnum Opus editions, a production related to the need to increase profits following the financial crisis of 1825, which greatly affected Scott’s publisher and tied Scott to his pen for the rest of his life. Scott, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, A Romance (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1868). Subsequent citations parenthetical.
the narrative. Through the epigraph from Burns, for example, the novel addresses its English audience by way of Scotland: “Hear, Land o’ Cakes and brither Scots.” With the implicitly doubled address here, to both England and Scotland, Scott indicates an oblique sense of national union while announcing the geographical and social purview of the novel. More specifically, the poem’s injunction to Scotland to “hear”—hear a warning that “A chiel’s amang you takin’ notes, / An’ faith he’ll prent it!”—suggests the interdependency of rhetorical orality and print journalism. Following the Burns poem, the excerpt from *Don Quixote* involves sharing text on a much smaller scale. The excerpt depicts a priest requesting that the landlord bring him three books and some manuscript papers from a pad-locked bag. As it minutely presents this small interaction, a request and compliance to see books, the reference to *Don Quixote* illustrates a kind of quiet, intimate sociality around discussing reading material.

Even over just the space of two epigraphs, Scott moves from poetry to fiction, from journalism to monographs, and from explicitly national to intimate domestic scales. Through this diversity, Scott multiplies the sources of address while using each of them to comment on the relationship between voice and print. Without sifting through each piece of paratext’s particular commentary on that relationship, suffice it to say that their proliferation allows Scott to diffuse the force of the oral storyteller of *Waverley*. If the diffusion of narrative voice in this paratext points to an abstractly defined, open-ended space, Jedediah Cleishbotham, unwilling to cede the authority he expects his speech to convey, is the tyrant who comes to reclaim a clearly demarcated kingdom. Cleishbotham—notably, both an editor and the would-be oral storyteller of the other novels in *Tales of My Landlord* series—hyperbolizes the kind of scene-setting the
narrator attaches to address in *Waverley* when he invites readers into the post-chaise.

With even more enthusiasm than the “Author of *Waverley,*” Cleishbotham’s address tries to overcome abstract textuality, first by referencing a figuratively embodied reader:

“Courteous reader, If ingratitude comprehendeth every vice, surely so foul a stain worst of all beseemeth him whose life has been devoted to instructing youth in virtue and in humane letters. Therefore have I chosen, in this prolegomenon, to unload my burden of thanks at thy feet” (6). This passing reference to the reader’s feet, a gesture towards embodiment, might be overlooked were it not for the material details that follow it. As if he might make good on that gesture, Cleishbotham emphasizes with particularity the tangible contours of his home and the material interactions he wants to have with the reader in that space. For part of this “burden of thanks” is the promise that, should the “gentle reader” find himself in Gandercleugh, Cleishbotham will not only show him Pattieson’s manuscripts, but also give him some snuff and a dram from his bottle (6).

Finally, he comments on the conceptual crux that his own invitation to see him as a tangible, real person presents: “It is there,” Cleishbotham goes on, “O highly esteemed and beloved reader, thou wilt be able to hear testimony, through the medium of thine own sense, against the children of vanity, who have sought to identify thy friend and servant with I know not what inditer of vain fables” (6). Frustrated over those doubting his existence, Cleishbotham asks a prescient question about persons, intellectual property, and print: “[W]hat can a man do to assert his property in a printed tome, saving to put his name in the title page thereof, with his description, or designation, as the lawyers term it, and place of abode?” (6). As an object of humor, Cleishbotham is a fictional body wanting to be taken as real, and his series of absurd addresses invite us to
laugh at the convention of direct address to gentle readers. However, his question about what constitutes property in print, and what real persons lie behind names on the page, whether the author or the addressed reader, should be taken seriously. What Cleishbotham hopes for is an interpersonal interaction on a small scale, better suited to validate his actual existence; meanwhile, the baffled tone of his question points to the irreversible loss of that scale as an always growing print market trades in re-printable texts, not storytellers. Even then, Cleishbotham implies that the “place of abode” on the title page is as necessary a detail as the author’s name. In this light, the more fully fleshed out, figuratively embodied editorial characters Cleishbotham and Pattieson in the Tales of My Landlord series ratchet up the level of marked individuation seen in the disembodied though personable voice of the anonymous “Author of Waverley.” Thus, the strenuously delineated material space into which Cleishbotham’s address invites the reader doesn’t just form Scott’s response to the reading public as an increasingly vast and unknowable body; it also evidences Scott’s need to continually to alter that response. Yet, by the same token, Scott’s formulation of the sharp juxtaposition between the embodied fictional editor and the proliferation of other, more explicitly literary (poetry, prose, letters, etc.) paratext is another such alteration.

The key difference between the epigraphs as entry points and Cleishbotham’s preface is their sense of space, the kind of “passage” they offer.29 In Cleishbotham’s address, the emphasis is on the imaginative space for storytellers and readers, on getting past textuality. In the epigraphs, Scott is most clearly advertising textuality, emphasizing

29 Note, in this vein, the possible double-meaning of “passage” in McGann’s account of the opening of Old Mortality: the novel’s readers, as he describes them, “are entering NeverNeverLand in a self-conscious passage of style”—passage doubling as both a conduit and a quoted, partial selection of text. (McGann, “Romantic Postmodernity, 116-17).
graphical spaces. With this difference, Scott plays the figurative face-to-face interpersonal scale and an unspecified scale of addressees alongside each other. Taken together, then, we might see Scott’s epigraphic paratext and his editor’s penchant for direct address as one of Eve Sedgwick’s “periperformative” neighborhoods: that is, a performative utterance whose force is diminished and diffused by the surrounding utterances about the performative (that is, the periperformatives). This formulation, Sedgwick notes in aptly spatial terms, constitutes “a crisis in the ground or space of authority.” By not naming the size and personality of its audience, the more oblique paratextual address in Scott implicitly incorporates a greater plurality of readers, beyond the bounds of a single voice of social authority. This phenomenon will become a defining feature of Eliot’s paratext. Meanwhile, whether underlying the direct “gentle reader” convention or his extensive layers of epigraphs, Scott’s irony alerts us to the cracks already wrinkling the surface of a paternalistic, face-to-face version of direct address. We laugh at Cleishbotham’s reach for “authority” and respect precisely because we know that he, like his readers, have always belonged to Fielding’s “large body of irregulars.”

III. Political, Paratextual Eliot

Eliot’s career in fiction provides a fulcrum point for the narrative of address that I trace in this chapter. Her first fiction, three long stories, were collected as Scenes of Clerical Life in 1857 and followed by seven novels, from Adam Bede in 1859 to Daniel Deronda in 1876. Including the preceding decade in which she had worked as translator and an editor and writer for the quarterly periodical press, Eliot’s career spanned a

31 Ibid., 70.
notable period of rising literacy rates and an expanding reading public. Thanks in no small part to Scott, the novel’s reputation inched towards respectability, particularly the realist and historical genre in which both Eliot and Scott wrote. But more generally the fiction-reading public grew through the popularization of the serialized novel from the late 1830s through the 1860s. During Eliot’s career, education reforms in the 1860s and legislature from 1870, resulting in compulsory elementary education, solidified the inevitability of a mass literate England and with it, a diverse reading public.

Here I examine how the reformulations of Eliot’s address over the course of her career register the trend towards expansion, and argue that they illuminate the general fate of address in serious fiction from mid- to late-century. In her early fiction, Eliot favors address that flirts with the embodiment of her narrators and a tangible sense of space. We can see her contemplating the same problem that Scott is contemplating earlier in the century, that is, the conditions under which writers can attempt to convene readers through address and the effect of those conditions on the form of address. Dallas Liddle suggests of Eliot’s move to fiction: “Hers was not, George Eliot seems to have decided after her brief stint as a journalist, a set of lessons that a distant critical voice—the kind required by the mid-Victorian genres of journalism—was capable of teaching at all.”32

And, indeed, her early narrators do affect an intimacy (though often ironic) with readers. However, where Scott intertwines one strain of address emphasizing the present storyteller’s “close” metaphorical voice and another strain emphasizing the textual, graphical space at the threshold of the narrative, Eliot’s largely decouples these different types of address. She moves away from the direct form that she and mid-century

32 Dallas Liddle, *The Dynamics of Genre: Journalism and the Practice of Literature in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2009), 121.
novelists like Thackeray and Trollope inherited from Scott, to more aesthetically rarefied and less embodied forms of address, which she fixes in place in regular paratextual networks of prefaces and epigraphs.

The larger trend to which these changes point is the expansion of the reading public, through which it outsized the possibility of shared space and posed a problem of social promiscuity. Eliot begins to let the implied spatial contours of the scene of address evaporate, I argue, because even the pretense of that common ground becomes untenable in the face the vast and variable reading nation. Recall that the premise of Collins’s “The Unknown Public”—published one year before *Adam Bede*—is that a whole reading public had never been addressed by serious literature, whose authors and readers did not know of its existence. Collins’s attention to so-called low-brow readers (whose literal addresses are separated from the homes of the “known reading public”) reminds us that, because certain spaces are more appropriate for certain readers, novelists cannot but imply an association between space and status when they use address that demarcates and figuratively emplaces readers. Before, Scott could only take recourse to an ironic tone to index the impossibility of actually realizing a shared space for storytellers and readers. Now, if we take Eliot’s later fiction as an example, they do not even raise the illusionary version of this space as a desired but regrettably impossible occurrence. Eliot’s reformulations of address, then, allow the convention to rhetorically compass a larger, more diverse body of addressees on a political scale. Known for her emphasis on the smaller scale of ethical interaction suited for sympathizing with those in our reach, and for her distrust of the masses Collins “discovers,” Eliot is a prime case—because an
unlikely candidate—for demonstrating the democratic effects of opening up the address convention.

This effect is there in her texts, however, if in its corners and creases; again, Rancière helps illuminate it. Using his account of address as a theoretical framework for reading Eliot thus helps us overcome difficult-to-see biases in Eliot criticism. Middlemarch has been called encyclopedic because it bears fruit for almost any critical interest available to scholars today, from evolution to music, and yet we have not paid due attention to the uncountable masses in Eliot’s novels. The familiar figures of the encyclopedic and sympathetic Eliot suggest her magisterial range and her complex psychological and moral realism, but precludes attention to a different kind of excess: the aesthetic material not counted and categorized in the critical index of her fiction that scholars have built up. Another inevitable focus of work on Eliot, her tightly woven plots and characters, has had a similar effect. Not coincidentally, then, the outlying territory of the novels, addresses directed to readers that spill over and out of these carefully knit narrative webs, is both an understudied critical outlier and the place where the outlying masses of readers exercise their presence in Eliot’s fiction.

Even when Eliot’s early narrators use direct address that tonally echoes Scott’s fiction, the way in which they delineate space differs. Where his storytellers create space to co-occupy with the reader, Eliot’s early narrators more typically use address to frame the careful detailing of diegetic spaces into which readers are implicitly invited. While they lay out spaces full of sensory description when addressing the reader, they refrain from explicitly inviting readers into the same space and scene from which the narrator’s voice projects. Take, for example, this emphatic address in “The Sad Fortunes of
Reverend Amos Barton” from *Scenes of Clerical Life*:

Reader! *did you* ever taste such a cup of tea as Miss Gibbs is *this moment* handing to Mr. Pilgrim? Do you know the dulcet strength, the animating blandness of tea sufficiently blended with real farmhouse cream? No—*most likely* you are a miserable town-bred reader, who think of cream as a thinnish white fluid.33

After filling in more suspected details about the reader, the narrator concludes, “If I am right in my conjecture, you are unacquainted with the highest possibilities of tea; and Mr. Pilgrim, who is *holding* that cup in his hands, has an idea beyond you” (11). This kind of energetic address is typical of Eliot’s early narrators’ tendency to suspend the suspension of disbelief to implicitly invite readers into a narrative scene. The level of minute detail and the pronounced use of present tense—“*is this moment* handing,” “*is holding* that cup in his hands”—encourages readers’ entry into a scene unfolding twenty years prior. Yet at the same time, the narrator emphasizes the distance between the “miserable town-bred reader” of the present and the provincial sitting room of the past through the disparate quality of their experience with cream. One might also sense an ironic edge to the same emphatic present tense through which Eliot draws readers into the scene. With this push and pull on the reader, Eliot implies the possibility of interactions between narrator, reader, and character, but hesitates to explicitly provide or endorse a common ground for that interaction. Relative to Scott, her storytellers and readers are already at a greater remove from each other, with the narrative standing between them as a potential but fraught mediating space.

The opening lines of Eliot’s first novel, *Adam Bede*, more explicitly promise to make the past present. Setting up a pattern for address in the novel, the narrator makes a pact with the reader:

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With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal to any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen, I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr. Jonathan Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord, 1799.\textsuperscript{34}

Like in “Amos Barton,” the narrator does everything but explicitly invite this individuated reader to enter the workshop. Instead, the careful delineation of sensory detail—the feel of the sun, the scent of the wood, the presence of the dog, Adam’s tone of voice, the lyrics of his song—serve to implicitly invite the reader into the scene. As in “Amos Barton,” the descriptive specificity the narrator gives to the workshop accords with the individuation of the reader, as the narrator moves from the general “any chance comer” encountering the mythical Egyptian sorcerer, to a singular second person, “you, reader,” to a precisely drawn scene. Eliot again catches readers in a temporal and spatial limbo, between the extratextual present of reading highlighted by the narrator’s direct address and a diegetic past, the workshop in 1799. Framed by the Author of \textit{Waverley} and Cleishbotham’s addresses, Eliot appears keen to maintain the threshold-like in-betweenness of readers’ present and narrative past. The narrator’s “drop of ink at the end of my pen” makes this clear: where Scott’s editor Cleishbotham resists his life in ink, Eliot’s narrator embraces it. The opening lines of \textit{The Mill on the Floss} (1860), like those of \textit{Adam Bede}, enlist a thick description of the scene to implicitly invite readers into the narrative. The narrator shares effusive personal feelings for the river Floss outside Dorcote Mill: “It seems to me like a living companion,” “I am in love with the moistness.”\textsuperscript{35} At the end of the passage, though, the narrator awakes with “benumbed” arms, not from the cold bridge as she thought but from her armchair. The narrator then

\textsuperscript{34} Eliot, \textit{Adam Bede}, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: Penguin, 2008), 10. Subsequent citations to this edition parenthetical in text.

addresses an ambiguously numbered “you”: “I was going to tell you what Mr. and Mrs. Tulliver were talking about, as they sat by the bright fire in the left-hand parlor, on that very afternoon that I have been dreaming of.”

Through the precisely delineated, quaint localness of these spaces, Eliot’s use of address to invite readers into the narrative excludes the unmanageable masses. But other layers of formal complexity in these passages turn on this very problem, undercutting the pretense to such exclusion. The ironic undertones of the address in “Amos Barton,” the invocation of the mythical Egyptian sorcerer in Adam Bede, and the strange blurring of narrative and narrator’s place in The Mill on the Floss, diagnose a pervasive problem for the address convention: how can it continue to be used to imagine and figure shared spaces for readers, given the vast scale of the reading public and the precise scale of the narrative scene?

To unpack this problem and to account for Eliot’s shift to new kinds of address in later fiction, I turn to the canonical instance of her penchant for interruptive address: Adam Bede’s Chapter 17, “In Which the Story Pauses a Little.” Chapter 17 strikes a tone both inspirational, fit for making the moral aesthetic manifesto, and yet dismissively ironic. With this double tonality, Eliot explores other ways of manipulating voice to overcome the readerly skepticism that such irony encourages. The focal point of many readings of the chapter is its ekphrasis, the avowed appreciation of Dutch painting and its “old women scraping carrots with their work-worn hands” (196). For Caroline Levine, the “non-narrative suspension” of Chapter 17 aligns it with the stillness of the paintings it describes, a connection which “invites us to consider the links between visual beauty and

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36 Ibid., 8.
ethical action.” Through the extensive narrative interruption that makes up Chapter 17, however, Eliot emphasizes not just vision but also voice. For example, providing testimony from the “witness box,” another pact made by the narrator in Chapter 17, is a particular kind of address, here directed to an ambiguously numbered singular or plural “you.” Because the narrator’s method for making readers “see” the moral significance of acknowledging the persons and scenes around them is not simply to show them those people in art, but also to address them on this topic, Eliot suggests that address might be the link between “visual beauty and ethical action.” Put differently, she contemplates the role of the storyteller: if simply witnessing beauty provokes ethical action, then the storyteller’s task narrows to painting pictures for readers in words—a task exhausted in the diegesis—and extradiegetic address becomes superfluous. Self-reflexively asserting the storyteller’s voice in Chapter 17, Eliot guards against this irrelevance while apparently recognizing the storyteller no longer has a “place” among readers.

In one form of this assertion of voice, the narrator addresses readers in response to their own quoted responses about Hayslope’s Reverend Irwine. As a sympathetic and sympathizing man, Irwine is the occasion for Chapter 17: “‘This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!’ I hear one of my readers exclaim,” the narrator exclaims (194). Echoing a similar construction in “Amos Barton,”—“‘An utterly uninteresting character!’ I think I hear a lady reader exclaim—Mrs. Farthingale, for example, who prefers the ideal in fiction” (43)—the first edition of Adam Bede specifies that a “lady reader” makes this comment about Irwine. While the “lady reader” conjures up a rather “lower” image of a naive reader, Eliot’s generalization to “one of my readers” catches the response of a

reader from a wider net, cast among any one at all, no one in particular. Whatever the reader’s gender, the fiction of being within hearing distance of a singular reader’s responses hints at the fantasy of intimate, face-to-face storytelling. Conspicuously absent from this version of the fantasy, however, is the evocation of shared space that makes overhearing possible. A stand-alone chapter that self-consciously interrupts the story, Chapter 17 offers no narrative scene into which readers might be invited, unlike the workshop at the beginning of the novel. As a result, the interaction between narrator and reader occurs entirely through voice. Indeed, by including the reader’s response, the narrator only further underlines the significance of voice and makes the absence of any space in which to hear it even more striking. While the reader may address herself to a “present” storyteller in her midst, the space of response is also more open than that: she might be speaking to an absent storyteller, aloud to the room or a friend, or silently to herself. Chapter 17 thus posits the possibility of simultaneously gesturing to face-to-face storytelling and forgoing the elaboration of storytelling or narrative scenes.

Disarticulating the link between voice and presence, Eliot evades the problem of finding a space that a whole host of readers and her storyteller can share. Yet the irony that accompanies this very problem in Scott continues to mark Eliot’s tone in these ventriloquized responses, indicating an intellectual distance between the narrator and these commonest of readers.38 Though one could argue that the contemptuous adjectives

38 Particularly when Eliot asserts it in this kind of gendered address, this odd combination of distance and familiarity demonstrates the reason why her narrators have proven difficult to assign a gender, a challenge originally exacerbated by the use of a masculine pen name. Robyn Warhol encounters this difficulty in her account of Eliot and gendered address in the nineteenth-century novel. Writing from the perspective of feminist narratology, Robyn Warhol claims that critics overlook interventional conventions of address are gendered feminine. Whether or not one accepts Warhol’s claims about why address has never received the same kind of critical energy as narrative, this fact has not changed much in the twenty-five years since she published it. See Warhol, Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel (Columbus, OH: Ohio UP, 1989).
merely ventriloquize the views of the reader,” Ruth Yeazell suggests, “it seems truer to say that George Eliot speaks for both parties here, and that her aggressive defense of Dutch painting testifies to a conflict that is first of all internal.”\textsuperscript{39} In the terms I’m using, the ironic bite to Chapter 17 conveys Eliot’s conflicted feelings about the readers it addresses and the subjects it “paints” as objects for their sympathy. Just as she directs her readers to narrative space in the addresses above, she directs them in Chapter 17 to visual art, a space for everyday “clowns” and carrot-scrapers, representatives of the masses not represented en masse. If readers (or viewers) share in that space, they do so obliquely, from an outside position. If they resist sharing in that space in this way, they may belong to that unforgiving class of readers whose reported speech Eliot’s narrator mockingly ventriloquizes. And yet this group, ironically, overlaps with the prosaic people cast as worthy objects of sympathy. As this crux suggests, this capacious middling group presents one the biggest challenges to Eliot’s relationship with the reading masses. This challenge manifests in the double tone of Chapter 17 in \textit{Adam Bede}, and it continues to shape her approach to readers through address in her later fiction.

Folding another layer of this tonal complexity into latter pages of the chapter, the narrator retools the same technique that mocks readers’ responses to appreciate someone we do know, Adam Bede. In contrast to the narrator’s dismissal of these readers’ passing comments, the conversation with Adam affects an enjoyable if exclusive camaraderie. While Eliot’s narrators often implicitly invite readers into diegetic spaces, in this case the narrator takes his own entry into the story as a given, almost off-handedly beginning to recount a conversation with Adam Bede in the middle of a paragraph. Referring to the

more dogmatic preacher who succeeds Irwine, the narrator says, “But I gathered from Adam Bede, to whom I talked of these matters in his old age, that few men could be less successful in winning the hearts of their parishioners than Mr. Ryde” (198). The narrator goes on to endorse Irwine’s respect for what Adam calls a “man’s inward life.” In Adam’s words, the strongly doctrinal preaching of Mr. Ryde is found wanting because “‘there’s a deal in man’s inward life as you can’t measure by the square, and say, ‘Do this and that’ll follow,’ and ‘Do that and this’ll follow’” (199). The moral of their conversation seems to be at odds with the narrator’s preacherly commands regarding realist art, which suggest that feeling a certain way about certain art will produce certain feelings: “‘let Art always remind us of [common coarse people]… let us always have men ready to give the loving pains of a life to the faithful representing of commonplace things” (196–97). In appreciating personal spirituality over doctrinal instruction, Adam reminds us that the narrator’s moral injunctions about art and sympathy, if received as doctrine, will not achieve their desired impact. Instead, the threshold-like space between the narrator and reader becomes an open-ended, virtual receptacle for these lessons.

Formally, the abstractly spatialized interaction between Adam Bede and the narrator provides a version of this kind of interaction. Dissolving the scene of even an apparently extensive face-to-face exchange—“voice to voice” might be a more accurate description—Eliot poses the possibility of speaking closely with others in and from abstracted spaces.

In so doing, she takes a step towards the purely virtual interaction between readers and storytellers that the disembodiment of the storyteller’s voice in a print marketplace and a vast reading public inevitably entailed. In Chapter 17, presenting both ironized and
serious outcomes of this possibility in her ventriloquized readers and in the conversation
with Adam Bede, Eliot renders the mediating role of the storyteller an open question.
This open question is a provisional response to the inevitable disembodiment of the
storyteller’s voice in the print marketplace, a response Eliot continually adjusts through
the aesthetics of address. The tensions in Eliot’s earlier fiction—implicit invitation
following abrupt and explicit address, continual insistence on the importance of voice but
not on shared presence, moralizing at large and then undercutting the preaching of
“notions”—are the forerunning symptoms of a greater reserve around address in her later
fiction.

In tracing the trend towards abstracting space in Eliot’s address across her fiction,
we run into the odd conjunction of two well-known truisms: that she encouraged
sympathy for prosaic people within our reach, and that she felt uncomfortable about the
masses those prosaic people comprise. These facts have been reconciled by questioning
the scale on which Eliot articulates political commitments. Avrom Fleishman, for
example, has taken Eliot’s politics to be a set of ethical principles; to class them
otherwise is to commit a “category error.” Jameson bases his claim that the nineteenth-
century novel scales political issues down into ethical ones on a narrative focus on the
“foreground,” to borrow Eliot’s term from Chapter 17. “I want a great deal of [love and
reverence] for my everyday fellow-men, especially for the few in the foreground of the
great multitude, whose faces I know, whose hands I touch,” the narrator says (196).
Though we may hear an echo of Collins’s description of tactile access to certain
readerships here, unlike his confident journalist, Eliot’s narrator casts this reach for those

40 Avrom Fleishman, George Eliot’s Intellectual Life (New York: Cambridge UP, 2010), 158.
Jameson, Political Unconscious, 193.
41 Jameson, Political Unconscious, 193.
in front of us as a particularly challenging task. The narrator of *Middlemarch* expresses a similar problem when famously insisting that her “light” “must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.” With *Middlemarch*’s “universe” and *Adam Bede*’s “great multitude,” Eliot places the masses in the background in order to focus the floodlights of sympathy on the “particular web” and “everyday fellow-men” we already know. Note, however, the telling shift from the personalization of Chapter 17, grounding a theory while speaking in the first person of “my everyday fellow men” to the more abstract language of *Middlemarch*’s “tempting range of relevancies called the universe.” It’s true to say that Eliot’s later forms of address sustain relationships with readers on both interpersonal, or ethical, and political scales.

We can distinguish, then, between nostalgic tones of face-to-face relations and interpersonal relations that just happen to be accommodated by abstracting the space of address. In a set of changes to her use of conventions of address that bend towards non-delimiting abstractions, Eliot finds more oblique ways to address readers while reducing the frequency of abrupt, emphatic addresses to individuated readers. Her narrators increasingly focus their self-reflexivity on writing, not readers, and they increasingly drop any reference to spatial dimensions, even diegetic ones like the sitting room and workshop. Finally, Eliot’s later paratextual networks of prologues and chapter epigraphs address an unspecified number of readers and evokes the threshold of the text—an abstract space suspended between novel and audience—without asking them to cross it. In these ways, Eliot’s later forms of address acknowledge without delimiting readers,

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whether by number or by disposition.

For instance, prefacing *Middlemarch*’s famous “particular web” are two other addresses that highlight writerly self-consciousness: a chapter epigraph written by Eliot and a comment on Fielding, who serves as a point of contrast. “We belated historians must not linger after [Fielding’s] example,” the narrator declares in a first-person plural that doesn’t quite line up with Rancière’s class of “anyone at all” writers, but seems to approach it: “[I]f we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a campstool in a parrot-house” (137). Here the narrator neither troubles the metaphor of authorial voice, which the parrot metaphor rather underlines, nor associates voice with the readers’ presence. In fact, according to the narrator, that association is a luxury belonging to a time when time mattered less, when “the days were longer” (137). In the narrator’s estimation, Fielding “glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his armchair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty easy of his fine English” (137). The playful irony here cannot be missed: as Eliot’s narrator incorporates plenty of paratextual and digressive conventions, and is doing so in this very moment, she does in fact “linger after his example.” Thus the distinction between these kinds of digressions is all the more significant: without muting the storyteller’s self-reflexivity, Eliot disarticulates voice and an implied, shared presence, as at Fielding’s armchair. Her “proscenium” is plainly a textual one. She also drops the fiction of the “voice-to-voice” version of shared presence seen in Chapter 17, which, though spatially abstract, still relied on figuring reader response. These revisions of address demonstrate a new level of modesty about implying
access to the reader, coupled with greater openness to a wider readership. Precisely because of the way an expanded reading public demands a grander picture of inclusivity while rendering all-inclusiveness a greater challenge, the concept of the reading public begins to bend away from “the reader” and the audience towards a more capacious abstraction.

The narrator of *Middlemarch* later stages this openness as a hesitation over attributing a response to the reader by not attributing response to anyone in particular: “One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage?” (242). Despite its interrogative grammar, this interruption isn’t clearly issued from or addressed to any one point of view in particular. The narrator might be doubling back to address her own scene setting, ventriloquizing the reader’s reaction, or rendering a miffed Casaubon in free indirect discourse. Without naming a singular responsive locus, Eliot leaves that position open for the many real addressees making up her audience. In his analysis of this moment and other “interruptions” that remark on the scope of sympathy, James Buzard claims that Eliot’s “raise[s] visions of a boundless commercial or imperial domain in order to stimulate a return of the gaze to local and national contexts.”\(^{43}\) In other words, Eliot’s address becomes an impetus for readers to envision delimitations of Britishness; for Buzard, this “return of the gaze” encourages readers to see “the nation as setting the outer limit of any workable sympathy.”\(^{44}\) By contrast, I take Eliot’s open-ended addresses to imply an un-seeable, abstract space, a feature made clearer by the trajectory from emplacement to abstraction in the contours of her address. Seen this way,

\(^{43}\) Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction*, 284.
\(^{44}\) Ibid., 286.
rather than return readerly sympathy to a bounded domestic scale, whether local or national, Eliot unsettles the delineation of the appropriate scope and space for their sympathy through addresses issued from and to no one in particular.

Moreover, while the unannounced presence of a mass reading public I locate in these non-delimiting addresses does largely align with national boundaries, the distinctions between local and national scales matter differently for Eliot’s relationship to the reading public than they do to her relationship to empire. In the logic of a return to “local and national contexts” from implicitly imperial ones, where the definition of British culture may be precariously diffuse and unclear, the tightly knitted local settings of Hayslope, St. Oggs, or Middlemarch (for example) better serve as metonyms for a larger British nation. But within a mass literate Britain, distinctions between kinds of readers—working class readers, female readers, educated, literary readers—were of central importance to the way writers addressed the reading public, particularly as the reading public grew through the expansion of the first two groups just mentioned. For Eliot, the nation as a delimiting scale poses a problem, not a solution, because it necessarily blurs the boundaries between kinds of readers. Most publicly in “Silly Novels by Silly Lady Novelists,” as well as in private correspondence, Eliot expresses distaste for what she saw as vulgar production and consumption in the literary marketplace. Nevertheless, Eliot’s qualms about the masses did not result in an attempt to maintain the fiction of a comfortable space for the “right” kinds of readers and storytellers—like Scott’s English highway. Nor did she belabor the point of an expansive reading public by depicting a wider, more diverse, perhaps more cosmopolitan space for her addressees to share, which would change according to circumstance. Instead, and surprisingly, the
abstracted spaces of her later fiction’s addresses formulate a democratic aesthetic
principle for address. This principle is a provision for, not just an instantiation of,
Rancière’s literary democracy based on addressing “any one at all, no one in particular.”

This provision is most developed in Eliot’s paratextual networks of prefaces and chapter epigraphs, which appear in her last three novels, from *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866) onward. It’s not a coincidence that both Buzard and I find in Eliot’s later fiction a more marked presence of “boundless” domains. Though he does not make particular note of her paratext, her later fiction’s paratextual address becomes a primary means for implicitly expanding the scale of her addressed audience. Eliot’s paratext, like Scott’s, structures threshold-like passages at the edges of the narrative. Though Gérard Genette doesn’t mention Eliot in *Paratexts* (whose French title, *Seuils*, means thresholds), Eliot, in the process of rewriting address conventions, is deeply invested in what the specific threshold-position of paratext can suggest about and to readers: a place for rhetorically convening a mass reading public whose features align both with the disembodied abstraction of print that reshaped the role of the storyteller, and the conceptual abstraction that the public more generally had become.

Unlike in Scott’s fiction, Eliot’s paratextual address, particularly her prefaces and regular chapter epigraphs, begins to take over from the ironic use of direct address to singular readers. Following the spontaneous interruptive addresses in *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede, The Mill on the Floss* unfolds two extensive and strange addresses to readers, much in the same tenor as the opening of *Adam Bede* and parts of Chapter 17,

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45 Eliot referred to her epigraphs as “mottoes,” a word that lends them more directive meaning than the basic spatial description of “epigraph.” For information about and general discussion of Eliot’s use of the epigraph, see David Leon Higdon, “George Eliot and the Art of the Epigraph,” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25, no. 2 (1970): 127–51.
but does not regularly address readers. Eliot then sharply drops direct address in *Silas Marner* (1861), which never refers to the reader as such. By returning to address in paratextual forms in later novels, she indicates the need for *some* kind of space for rhetorically convening readers. *Romola* (1863), published without the chapter epigraphs that appear in the manuscript, also never mentions the reader explicitly. The novel’s prefatory “Proem,” however, incorporates readers in a self-consciously universalizing use of the first-person plural. In *Felix Holt*, the narrator again never mentions the reader as such explicitly. Instead, if addressed in text, he is either presented with a parable, wrapped into a general “our,” or incorporated through a grammatically elided “you,” and not tagged as “reader” (for example, “Suppose only…”). Coupled with the lack of individuated readers, these novels’ use of the first-person plural and ambiguously numbered second-person forms for address quietly but definitively enlarges the scale of the addressed audience.

Compare, for example, *Adam Bede*’s first lines, “This is what I undertake to do for you, reader,” to the opening lines of *Middlemarch*’s “Prelude”: “Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa…?” (31). One would have to wager that the rhetorical tone of the question belies the small number of people who have contemplated Saint Theresa in this precise way. But this odd combination of openness and implicit exclusivity becomes a typical peculiarity of Eliot’s paratextual addresses: they can account for both a small-scale “who” and a larger-scale

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46 Concordance based on a simple interrogation of searchable text on Project Gutenberg, removing diegetic instances of the word “reader.” Of course, there are other ways to address the reader (my friend, my audience, etc.), so this gauge should not be taken as absolute. It does, however, index the removal of the paradigmatic convention, a reader tagged as such.
“who” simultaneously by pointing neither to the “reader” nor to the “reading public.” Leaving “who that cares much to know the history of man” open to anyone, the narrator implicitly acknowledges the impossibility of delimiting or tangibly accessing her addressees, without explicitly giving up on her interest in the foreground.

The narrator goes on to gender the importance of indeterminacy later in the “Prelude”: “if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count to three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than any one would imagine from the sameness of women’s coiffure and the favorite love-stories in prose and verse” (32). What these “wider” “limits of variation” are, and what kind of social phenomena we might see within them, remains unspecified. Still, Eliot suggests the “clusters of signs” (137) to which we have access, choices about style or literary taste, are not enough to ground real knowledge of others. Rosamond Vincy’s preference for the gaudy and sentimental Keepsake, for instance, should not index female readers’ taste in general. Particularly in the case of women, so long the representatives of bad reading habits, novels, and the “gentle reader,” Eliot’s widening of the “limits of variation” beyond what we can know is a significant amendment to conventional direct address. In this way, calling up an unspecified number of un-gendered addressees, Eliot moves closer to a more explicitly democratic address convention.

Eliot, of course, would not characterize her literary project as democratic, a term that carried revolutionary political, social, and economic connotations, beyond the pale of the reform politics featured in Felix Holt and Middlemarch, set in the early 1830s, the
First Reform Bill era, and beyond the pale of Eliot’s conservatism. In particular, *Felix Holt*, often seen as a testament to the failure of radical politics, has challenged critics grappling with that conservatism. The novel is also a pivotal one for her address. One of the most fraught scenes in this novel features Felix Holt’s address to a representative assembly of working-class masses. (Following the Second Reform Bill of 1867, Eliot then revived his voice in “Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt” for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1868, which was ironically issued not to working men, by and large, but to an educated, conservative *Blackwood's* audience). Given this explicit attention to addressing the working-class masses as political subjects, the novel’s paratext addressed to readers becomes a correlated and politically charged layer of address in the novel. If, to borrow David Kurnick’s phrase, Felix uses his address to make “his case that an inward transformation take the place of outward agitation,” and thereby suggest a means of protection against the riotous swell of assembled masses, the epigraphic addresses sidestep the problem of assembly. That is, they sidestep the problem of shared spaces, not simply the assembly of potentially riotous masses but also the socially mixed space of the clash between represented and representatives and the invasion of quiet rural spaces by profiteering politicians. By not delineating shared space, the novel’s epigraphs can address any one at all, both the masses and the typical educated reader of *Blackwood’s*. In calling this address democratic, I suggest that if Felix’s “radicalism” is really disguised conservatism, there remains a radically open-ended form of address in the paratext of the novel, one that acknowledges the futility of trying to bound the masses

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and bind them to a certain political platform.

In a final paring down of address, Eliot’s last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), drops the preface and leaves the regular chapter epigraphs to serve as the primary paratextual structure. The first chapter epigraph of the novel does, however, comment on its own status as a beginning:

> Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a beginning. Even science, the strict measurer, is obliged to start with a make-believe unit, and must fix on a point in the stars’ unceasing journey when his sidereal clock shall pretend that time is at Nought. His less accurate grandmother Poetry has always been understood to start in the middle; but on reflection it appears that her proceeding is not very different from his; since Science, too, reckons backward as well as forward, divides his unit into billions, and with his clock-finger at Nought really sets off *in medias res*. No retrospect will take us to the true beginning; and whether our prologue be in heaven or on earth, it is but a fraction of that all-presupposing fact with which our story sets out.49

Befitting its in-between placement on the threshold of the narrative, neither fully inside nor fully outside the novel, Eliot multiplies the contradictory tensions in this epigraph. It encourages and yet puts the reader’s “hermeneutic capacity”50 on guard by marking a beginning but advising wariness of beginnings. In keeping with the arbitrariness of beginnings that it announces, it is positioned like any other epigraph, but it does particularly remark on prologues. It emanates neither clearly from the narrator nor clearly from the author’s voice. Compared to the implicit invitations into the quaint spaces of her earlier fiction, here the intense level of meta-commentary and contradictions express Eliot’s doubts about using address to invite readers into a relationship with the storyteller, much less into a demarcated, shared space. In the same vein, the first line of the novel—“Was she or not beautiful?”—makes a disorienting jump to an unnamed but focalized

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point of view. 51 The narrator posits several more questions, holding off on the scene setting we saw in earlier novels, before eventually describing the scene in which Daniel Deronda watches Gwendolen Harleth gambling in Germany—a world away from the settings of a rural England past. The openings of Eliot’s earlier fiction that had once implied something like “Men can do nothing without the make-believe of a familiar storyteller” have become, by Daniel Deronda, “Men can do nothing without the make believe of a graphical, textual, abstract beginning.” Even then, the novel’s first diegetic lines do not presuppose the need to immediately orient readers within a precisely spatialized scene.

In contrast to this exercise in stylistic power, most of Eliot’s epigraphs in Felix Holt, Middlemarch, and Daniel Deronda are not especially noteworthy. They mark beginnings for their chapters but do not make noticeably substantive contributions to their meaning. Simply marking this edge of the text is their most important function. Genette describes the effect of this kind of “random” “semantic relevance”: “without the least ill will, one can suspect some authors of positioning some epigraphs hit-and-miss, of believing – rightly – that every joining creates meaning and that even the absence of meaning is an impression of meaning.” 52 The English subtitle of Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation, points to this inevitable meaning-making effect of Eliot’s epigraphs. They may enjoin readers to pause their momentum to indulge in non-narrative sententiousness, as in Leah Price’s account, 53 or ask them to engage in critical connective thinking, what

51 Eliot, Daniel Deronda, 3.
52 Genette, Paratexts, 158.
Alex Howard calls “attentive reading.” Conjectures like these about reading practices emphasize the novel’s ability to discipline the reading experience, an emphasis that might obviate the notion of democratic address. But, practically, to the reader who skims over them or immediately forgets them, the epigraphs merely send a signal, “you’ve been addressed,” before the narrative picks up again. This minimal address function of these epigraphs allows Eliot to negotiate both a fore-grounded, smaller scale and a larger political scale for rhetorically convening readers. Their situation at the edge of the text is thus significant not only because it facilitates potentially disciplinary interruptions, but also because it opens up a certain kind of abstract space. Literature is political, according to Rancière, because it “intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds” (12). When Eliot reformulates address to dissolve the implied spatial boundaries circumscribing the novel’s audience, her fiction takes on a specifically democratic charge, as it gestures to a space in which any one at all, no one particular, can convene. In other words, the “common world” it “carves up” through writing is far broader than internal constituencies arranged around classes of taste or shaped by specific voices. Democratic abstractions abide these internal tensions rather than resolve them.

IV. Henry James, Marie Corelli, and The Democracy of Taste

As two emblematic routes out of Eliot, Henry James and Marie Corelli demonstrate the counterintuitive possibilities of thinking about address on this kind of democratic scale. The literary style and vocational purpose of Corelli and James are at sharp odds; as Q.D. Leavis put it, “Dickens and Eliot were near neighbors, but there is an

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54 Howard, “Paratextual Reading,” 300.
unbridged and impassable gulf between Marie Corelli and Henry James. There is one bridge, however: significantly, they both tack away from the delimiting rhetoric of address with which this chapter began, towards the abstract mode picking up momentum in Eliot’s late career. This surprisingly shared feature of their otherwise distinct modes of appealing to readers suggests that the culmination of mass literacy in late-century Britain had rendered even the fantasy of a shared space between “storytellers” and readers an impossibility. Leah Price has suggested that “Eliot’s career paved the way for both” Corelli’s brand of “feminine moralism” and “the avant-garde doctrine of art for art’s sake” (as well as “the narrative pleasure of romance,” which also lacks “didactic digressions”). For Price, Eliot anticipates these paths by “replacing the figure of the self-indulgent female reader with the specter of the self-important female sage.” I suggest, however, that the particularly abstract quality of the rarefied mode of address of Eliot’s late career is the precondition for this variety of routes later authors take out of her career. More generally, for a fully literate public, the spatial metaphorics of address necessarily operate through abstraction.

The prophecy Collins made in “The Unknown Public” in 1858—that the previously unknown public’s taste simply remains to be elevated—had not been realized. Debates focused on whether or not people should read novels at all had long been overtaken by debates over the tastes of a mass reading public. With the achievement of mass literacy, however, the issue of taste could not but dominate attention. Rita Felski places Corelli in this context: “Corelli’s career offers a striking example of the widening gap between serious literature and popular fiction that was coming into force at the end of

55 Q.D. Leavis, Fiction and the Reading Public, 169.
56 Price, Anthology, 153.
the nineteenth century… never had the contrast between the rewards of capital and cultural capital seemed quite so dramatic.”

Describing a reading public whose internal divisions were determined not by class but by taste, Felski explains that “[a]ffiliation with an increasingly educated and professionalized literary intelligentsia, rather than socioeconomic status alone, seemed to be the crucial factor in determining whether one abhorred Corelli rather than adored her.” I frame my reading of Corelli with James as a representative of this “intelligentsia,” rich in cultural capital. Observing too their surprising likenesses and shared concerns, I suggest that taken together, James and Corelli exemplify the outcome of a literary democracy predicated on abstraction. If “the public” as an abstract concept authorized this form of democracy, it also allowed a “democracy of taste” to take its place. More than inclusivity, this late-century formulation emphasizes freedom of choice and identification, whereby readers, less beholden to class, pursue their “natural” inclinations. Taste had shaped the development of a reading public throughout the century, of course. Nevertheless, by the end of the century, the achievement of mass literacy made possible a paradigm shift: even as we continue to imagine egalitarianism and inclusivity when we invoke the concept of the public, this abstraction left in its wake fertile ground for the development of other formulations of democratic belonging.

Thus, the politics of address in James and Corelli emerge less from imagining a space for the masses than indicating the abstract spatial relations that differentiate certain kinds of novels and readers from others. Taking up the rarefying reformulations of address in Eliot’s later fiction, James intensifies that trend until it all but evaporates from

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58 Ibid., 144.
the pages of his novels. In James’s earlier fiction, nearly contemporaneous with Eliot’s later work, he doesn’t hesitate to adopt a muted form of address by acknowledging the reader in passing. *Roderick Hudson* (1875) uses reader reference in this way: “…as a rapid glance at [Mallet’s] antecedents may help to make the reader perceive” (54); “It is a question whether the reader will know why, but this letter gave Rowland extraordinary pleasure” (154); “She put the case with too little favor, or too much, as the reader chooses” (193); “She had been present, the reader will remember…” (336). *The Portrait of a Lady*, published six years later, evinces a similar approach: “it may interest the reader to know that…” (87); Isabel “would be an easy victim of scientific criticism if she were not intended to awaken on the reader’s part an impulse more tender and more purely expectant” (105); “it may be confided to the reader that if the young man delayed to carry them out it was because… (118)”; “the reader has a right to a clearer view” (169). Rather than invite readers into a shared space, these near-addresses reflect the security of Dames’s solitary silent reader, spoken to in passing asides. Though not as emphatic as the century’s earlier longwinded convention, such glancing reader references do break the frame by calling attention to the reader’s place on the other side of the text. And many of them place the reader in a position of esteem, someone whose “right” and choices must be respected, who may be “confided to,” whose desire for clarification should be acknowledged.

Even after “The Art of Fiction” (1884), in which James decries “certain accomplished novelists,” Trollope in particular, for “giving themselves away” when they


use asides, digressions, and parentheses to own that they are “‘making believe,’” he continues to cite the reader ways akin to those listed above. But these citations run contrary to James’s theorization of the novel as an art form carried on in his non-fiction commentary, which helps explain why his later work drops even these muted addresses to the reader. What irks James about the device-baring mode of address is that it caters to the reader’s perceived needs and preferences, not unlike his own passing references to the reader. In aspiring to a higher artistic plane, James wants to move beyond the prevailing assumption that the novel has two main purposes, both of which are oriented towards the reader and cast the novel in an instrumental role: amusement and instruction, the very goals that Scott avows wanting to unite in the opening pages of Waverley (and the guiding principle of all the fiction ever run in Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal). The “producer” therefore has more difficulty elevating the novel as a higher art form, one with “a theory, a conviction, a consciousness of itself behind it.” In short, James comes to find that outward-looking address conventions hamstring artistic production.

At the same time, the persistence of digressive address in authors like Marie Corelli (and others—Garrett Stewart arranges her alongside R.L. Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard, for example) became associated with mass-market fiction. While James expects a higher standard of reader to result from providing a higher standard of art, and in that sense respects reading immensely, he does not respect the tastes of the mass reading public. In “The Future of the Novel,” he says: “The sort of taste that used to be called ‘good’ has nothing to do with the matter: we are so demonstrably in the presence of

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52 James, “Art,” 52.
millions for whom taste is but an obscure, confused, immediate instinct.” In keeping with this kind of commentary, the trace residue of the reading public that appears in James’s earlier fiction through the passing citations of the reader disappears from his later work. *What Maisie Knew* (1897), *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Golden Bowl* (1903), and *The Ambassadors* (1904) never refer to the reader. James removes any hint of a guide to readers approaching his novels, leaving his rarefied style, slow pacing, long, difficult sentences, to signal to readers that they too should appreciate higher aims for art. In this way, James’s turn to non-address (or, address fully diffused into style—a kind of Flaubert-like, diegetic, silent address exemplifying Rancière’s “mute speech”) inscribes into his novels the aims for the art form that he theorized in his non-fiction.

The spatial term we use for aesthetically difficult art is borne out of this change: “inaccessible.” Mark McGurl, using spatial terms to describe the wider trend towards inaccessibility that James’s late fiction commences, incidentally reminds us of what those terms looked like before or as higher fiction began erasing designated spaces once reserved for readers. He asks,

> What might it look like to possess culture—cultural capital—in the form of the novel? Alternatively, what would it mean to think of the novel as offering a kind of imaginary social space, something like a school, where one could enter into culture? Or, perhaps more pertinently, as offering only an impenetrable surface, a kind of bolted door?

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64 Of course, again as with Eliot, there are other ways to refer to a reader besides naming one as such. In *What Maisie Knew*, for example, the fact that the last lines of the book are also the title might be read as a faint form of extradiegetic address. The circle that repetition draws can only be directed towards the reader, as the title of the novel does not matter to Maisie and the other characters.
65 Mark McGurl, *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction after Henry James* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 10. Note the subtitle’s sense of space (“elevations”) also hints at these questions of spatial relation and accessibility, or being out of reach. Also see John Carey, who in a British context connects the modernist push towards high art to the fallout of universal education. Carey puts his point bluntly: “The intellectuals could not, of course, actually prevent the masses from attaining literacy. But they could prevent them [from] reading literature by making it too difficult for them to understand—and this is what they did” (6). *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice*
In this formulation, the reader and the novel can access each other, as if there were a throughway laid out between them, through which culture can pass to the reader and the reader can pass into the “school” or other “social space” representing culture. We have seen how moments of address, creating thresholds between the narrative and readers, can become self-reflexive advertisements of that throughway. But for the modernist novel, without such extradiegetic cues to the reader, we are asked to take the whole novel as the threshold, one that readers are challenged rather than casually invited to cross, “the impenetrable surface.” (Recall, for instance the absence of chapter breaks or titles in Mrs. Dalloway, a notable erasure of standardized paratext that highlights how even minimal paratext addresses readers). An “imaginary social space” like a “school” may once have implied spatiality as in bounded area; in James, the “impenetrable surface” can only imply inclusion and exclusion.

In contrast to James, Corelli staunchly defended what he called the “immense” and “inarticulate but abysmally absorbent” public. Corelli’s vastly popular, prolific output of fiction from the 1880s to the 1920s demonstrates the limitlessness of the “imaginary social space” at the end of the century. Even a small sampling of her hyper-conventionalized, ubiquitous use of address serves as a corrective to the idea James has the last word on outward-looking appeals to readers. I focus on three novels that display some of her most emphatic address: two variations on her romantic-mystic genre, A Romance of Two Worlds (1886) and Life Everlasting: A Romance of Reality (1911), and a quasi-autobiographical Faustian society novel about the English literary establishment, The Sorrows of Satan (1895). Corelli does not sustain once-conventional modes of direct

among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939 (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1992).

address in these texts so much as strip them of their irony and ratchet their tone up to a
sermonic pitch of intense moralization. Most broadly, Corelli aligned herself with the
people over the press, with the taste of the masses over the preferences arbitrated by
reviewers. In the very first address of *The Sorrows of Satan*, an advertisement on the
novel’s title page, for example, she levels the press and the public’s standards of
judgment: “No copies of this book are sent out for Review. Members of the press will
therefore obtain it (should they wish to do so) in the usual way with the rest of the public,
i.e., through the Booksellers and Libraries.”67 Through addresses like these, Corelli saw
herself as an equalizer, bringing the press down to the level of the people. Elsewhere she
elevates readers to the level of critics: remarking on her prolix paratextual address,
Stewart tracks an addition to the 1887 “New Edition” of Corelli’s *A Romance of Two
Worlds* in the form of an “Appendix” affixed to a coda in which she prints ten “‘selected
commendatory responses of her readers,’” to whom she allots the textual real estate that
would soon become the designated space of the critical blurb.

According to Corelli, the press finds her distasteful while the public does not
because of her subject matter: explaining that critics are “‘down upon’” her because she
writes about the supernatural, she says, “I know that unrelieved naturalism and atheism
are much more admired subjects with the critical faculty; but the public differ from this
view. The public, being in the main healthy-minded and honest … like to believe in
something better than themselves.”68 Note here the sudden shift from the noncount
“public” to a pronoun form that doesn’t quite match, “themselves”: across this shift,

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67 Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1900), A. Subsequent citations in
text.
68 “‘A Romance of Two Worlds’ by Marie Corelli” in *My First Book* (London: Chatto and Windus,
1897), 214–15.
readers (pluralized but still countable) come to represent the public as a general category, a rhetorical possibility facilitated by mass literacy. At the same time, the difficulty of keeping straight these numerated or uncounted versions of “the masses” points to the formation of a democracy of taste at the end of the century, which depends on the abstract nature of a democratic public but is organized by specific readers or readerships identifying with larger categories—even categories as large the one Corelli invokes here, “the public.” Despite the gendering of popular romances like Corelli’s (and her mass-market competitors, men like Hall Caine included), for example, Corelli tellingly emphasizes the generality of the public, whether or not that concept is fleetingly concretized in a pronoun like “themselves.”

Of all the authors in this dissertation, the diverse, massive public was most forcefully present for Corelli. Not only did she outsell her contemporary novelists by miles, she “had no consistent reader base,” and counted as admirers Queen Victoria and the Prince of Wales, Tennyson and Gladstone, in addition to her large number of “low-brow” readers. If James and Corelli demonstrate two poles organizing the democracy of taste, the social promiscuity of her public exemplifies the need for a new democratic model that covers not only James and Corelli but also the actual or possible diversities of their audiences. For this reason, although Corelli has proclamations to make about the masses, she refracts this relationship through a commentary on genre. Taken together (and taken seriously), Corelli’s theory of genre and her practice of regular reader address

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70 Her novels sold, on average, 100,000 copies a year, the next best-selling average (Hall Caine) was slightly less than half that amount; Conan Doyle and H.G. Wells averaged around 15,000 copies. Annette Federico, *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 6.

indicate that only genres still amenable to breaking frame can appeal to readers as such; realism and naturalism need exclude extradiegetic address. Not only for Rancière, as we have seen, but also for Jameson, Flaubert portends this exclusion. In The Political Unconscious, Jameson credits Flaubert with dispatching reader address in a fell swoop, noting that “the gestures and signals of the storyteller” were “perpetuated in the English novel well beyond 1857, the year Flaubert abolishes them with a single stroke in France.” While Corelli is not connecting naturalism to a rhetorical tendency like address but rather to content, the process of showing the public “something better than themselves,” according to her fiction, involves a great deal of an explicitly moralizing approach to readers.

Corelli, therefore, often casts herself as an inheritor of a sermonic tradition accessing truth through spiritual focus, rather than of the temporal trajectory of nineteenth-century novelists accessing truth through realism. In the preface to the second edition of A Romance of Two Worlds, for example, she declares that the “old forms of preaching do not move the minds of the present generation. There needs fresh fire, more touching eloquence, more earnestness of purpose.” In keeping with this proclamation, Corelli and her narrators turn away from the necessarily ironized oral “storyteller,” as well as from the undermining irony of free indirect discourse, to instead assume a voice of first-person preacherly command. Her narrators confront the readers of the “present generation” with moral and spiritual rebuke in extensive addresses, particularly in paratextual material at the beginnings and ends of her novels. In doing so, Corelli finalizes the disarticulation of narrative “voice” as a metaphor and its association with

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72 Jameson, Political Unconscious, 154.
73 Marie Corelli, A Romance of Two Worlds (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1886), 15. Italics original (in some editions, rendered as capital letters). Subsequent citations in text.
shared space. When the narrator’s voice does appear to permeate the space of the reader, it does so on the strength of its spiritual power, like the disembodied voice of a divine being; it needs no attachment to a tangible, materially drawn space.

In drawing a parallel between her narrator and God in *Life Everlasting*, for example, Corelli makes explicit the irrelevance of spatial proximity to the far-reaching force of her address. We might typically assume the basis of the connection between omniscient third-person narrators and God is their mutual unlimited access into others’ minds. Corelli, however, reveals a connection appropriate for a first-person narrator: “whether you prefer to turn away from me altogether into your self-created darker depths, is not my concern. I cannot force you to bear me company. God Himself cannot do that, for it is His Will and Law that each human soul shall shape its own eternal future.” The narrator recasts her own limitations as a source of power by equating the inevitable reality of a narrator’s perspective (partial access to readers, at best) to the inevitable outcome of a divine perspective (despite omniscience, “I cannot force you to bear me company”). In this case, the emphatic address to the reader highlights a second-person mode of relationality: calling out readers’ spiritual integrity, she suggests, mitigates against the possibility of an inward turn towards “self-created darker depths.” But the spiritual realm in which Corelli projects her narrator and reader exists on a different plane than the tangible, delimited, “face-to-face” rhetoric of the second person relations with which this chapter began; God’s facelessness handily stands in for the narrator’s facelessness.

The contradictory dynamic of this address in *Life Everlasting*, in which our

freedom is offered to us under threat, and in which the narrator implies much concern over our moral welfare and then denies that concern, is characteristic of Corelli’s confrontational but often contradictory mode of address. As above, her narrators may suggest that they want to direct the moral compasses of real readers and yet for some reason must refrain from doing so, or they may suggest that they desire sympathetic understanding from readers and yet doubt the possibility of that understanding. The “Author’s Prologue” to Life Everlasting is rife with such qualifying tags: “You who read this page,—(possibly with indignation) you call yourself a Christian, no doubt. But are you?” After Corelli quizzes the readers’ avowed theological tenets, namely their opinions on life everlasting, she checks again:

Do you believe in the actual immortality of your soul, and do you realise what it means? You do? You are quite sure? Then, do you live as one convinced of it? … Are you bent on the very highest and most unselfish ideals of life and conduct? I do not say you are not; I merely ask if you are. (11–12)

The narrator’s sudden curtailment—“I do not say you are not; I merely ask if you are”—undercuts her own address, as if her hectoring is actually a casual inquiry. Corelli catches readers in a bind: even if they do believe in their souls’ immortality, perhaps they don’t “realize what it means”; even more likely, they cannot avow to be “as happy in poverty as in wealth” (12). Back and forth Corelli goes, making assumptions then qualifying them: “I know very well, of course, that I must not expect your appreciation, or even your attention, in matters purely spiritual. … Nevertheless, as I said before, this is not my concern. Your moods are not mine, and with your prejudices I have nothing to do” (12).

In a pattern of dramatic reversals, Corelli’s narrators back away from any assumption made about readers, regardless of its specific content. On the one hand, this tendency participates in the rhetorical drama conventional to preaching. This quality of her address
contributed to her categorization as a mass-market writer, deploying intertwined stylistic and moralistic excesses that drew masses of readers. On the other hand, Corelli’s hesitation to own assumptions about readers, the sentiment on which these reversals ultimately land, bespeaks a broader predicament for late-century writers, Corelli and James included: the impossibility of delineating the responses of readers and readerships to a particular mode of narrative voice.

In the closing moments of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Corelli’s narrator again endorses readers’ independence by paradoxically demanding independent thinking. The narrator-protagonist is a proponent of the Electrical Creed, a belief uniting science and Christianity (she owes her recovery from nerve weakness to the nervous force of spiritual matter around her). She speaks on the authority of direct experience:

> [W]hy all this universal complaint and despair and world-weariness, if there be *no hereafter*? For my own part, I have told you frankly *what I have seen* and *what I know*; but I do not ask you to believe me. I only say, *IF*—*if* you admit to yourselves the possibility of a future and eternal state of existence, would it not be well for you to inquire seriously how you are preparing for it in these wild days? Look at society around you, and ask yourselves: Whither is our “progress” tending—Forward or Backward—Upward or Downward? Which way? Fight the problem out. Do not glance at it casually, or put it away as an unpleasant thought, or a consideration involving too much trouble—struggle with it bravely till you resolve it, and whatever the answer may be, *abide by it*. (296).75

With encouragement to “fight the problem out,” to “struggle with it bravely till you resolve it,” to only “abide by” the conclusion of that struggle, the narrator issues imperatives intended to fortify the reader’s intellectual and moral autonomy. This

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reading might appear too generous for Corelli’s heavy-handedness, since the answers to the questions the narrator asks the reader are hardly ambiguous: believe in the life everlasting, break out of regress, achieve real progress. But in emphasizing her own individuality, the narrator suggests individual experience is the metric by which she should be judged, as well as the reason she refrains from asking the reader to believe her. In consistently attaching her preacherly intensity to consciously adopted, qualifying modesty, Corelli’s addresses underpin her version of the democracy of taste in which readers are supposed to exercise freedom of choice, elevated to the status of a moral code, if not a religion. Corelli’s status as queen of the mass market made escaping this stance towards a democratic public difficult. Through the provocations of her address, she consciously writes the issue of exclusion from or inclusion in the enterprise of “difficult art” into her fiction. Rather than simply letting the masses “absorb” her romances, she suggests a desire to actively shape the moral integrity of the democracy of taste her fiction upholds.

Distinct from the “public” whose literary taste she usually admired, Corelli regarded “society” with derision. In asking readers to take society in general as an object of analysis, the narrator places them in a position of relative intellectual and moral authority. With respect to the public, Corelli perceived much less tension than Eliot between the mass and the individual; not thinking through a spatialized model of background and foreground, she places the mass and individual on equal footing. Not just in the address above but in most of her addresses, Corelli’s ambiguously numbered but direct use of the second-person “you” and propensity for first-person narrators reflects a comfort with their coexistence, in contrast to Eliot’s oblique epigraphs and at-odds
combination of scales. Indeed, with the stress Corelli places on activating readers’ independent thinking, she suggests that a robust democracy of taste will depend on the coexistence of a morally strong individual reader and the masses.76

Corelli’s tendency to step back to either acknowledge readers’ independence or enjoin them to use that independence in her own addresses reflects her skepticism towards the way the literary elite asserted its power to make decisions for others. Where the previous examples of this contradictory dynamic centered on readers’ moral and spiritual vitality, this issue converges with literary taste in The Sorrows of Satan. In this novel, the opening address of the narrative from the narrator-protagonist Geoffrey Tempest again couples confrontation with partial retraction. Tempest defies the reader in the first lines: “Do you know what it is to be poor? … downright, cruelly, hideously poor, with a poverty that is graceless, sordid and miserable?” (5). Put in such emphatic terms, Tempest’s question is intentionally divisive. But he quickly clarifies his prerogative for the novel, which leaves the reader to his own will: “I do not write with any hope of either persuading or enlightening my fellow-men. I know their obstinacy too well;—I can gauge it by my own” (5). With his retraction, Tempest counters his own divisiveness with sympathetic sociality, establishing a balancing act between individual experience and “fellow-men.” The novel follows Tempest, an impoverished author who inherits a fortune from a relative, into the hands of Lucio, his Devil-incarnate financial advisor fluent in the

76 Corelli’s insistence on the individual is related to her spiritual views: in the preface to Life Everlasting, she explains, “There is yet another intention in [Ardath, another novel of hers] which seems to be missed by the casual reader, namely,—That each human soul is a germ of separate and individual spiritual existence. Even as no two leaves are exactly alike on any tree, and no two blades of grass are precisely similar, so no two souls resemble each other, but are wholly different, endowed with different gifts and different capacities. Individuality is strongly insisted upon in material Nature. And why? Because material Nature is merely the reflex or mirror of the more strongly persistent individuality of psychic form” (21).
publishing world. The foil to Tempest is the morally upright author Mavis Clare, a surrogate for Corelli, who is derided by the literary establishment but confident in her own skills and well liked by the public. In many ways a self-admiring and self-justifying work, *The Sorrows of Satan* makes the mass reading public into a heroic figure, and casts publishers and reviewers as villains who would determine not just taste, but also the health of the soul. As Lucio quips at one point, “‘I daresay that in the various ‘phases’ or transmigrations of the spirit into different forms of earthy matter, the devil (should he exist at all) has frequently become a publisher, and a particularly benevolent publisher too!—by way of diversion’” (141). Tempest misses Lucio’s meaning at the time, but by the time he writes a retrospective prologue has learned to refer to reviewers as “‘readers,’” always in scare quotes expressing derision, as if they do not deserve the name (18).

In writing a Faustian novel about authorship and the literary institutions, Corelli does more than interfuse a worldly novel with fantastic, otherworldly themes. She also emphasizes her perception that the upper echelons of literary culture exercised a sinister, duplicitous, and overwhelming power over taste through evil publishers and pawn-like authors. For his part, in a careful evasion of hypocrisy, Tempest rescinds his right (or desire) to persuade readers to take his position. For her part, however, Corelli, through her thinly veiled characterization of Mavis Clare, does take that high ground. To heroicize the taste of the public, she gives it what she thinks of as a qualified leader, one who does not live to placate the masses but nevertheless holds credit with them. As Tempest reflects on his ignorant and hasty dismissal of Mavis Clare, he comes to understand the public’s ability to determine taste:
If this Mavis Clare was indeed so “popular,” then her work must naturally be of the “penny dreadful” order, for I, like many another literary man, labored under the ludicrous inconsistency of considering the public an “ass” while I myself desired nothing so much as the said “ass’s” applause and approval!—and therefore I could not imagine it capable of voluntarily selecting for itself any good work of literature without guidance from the critics. Of course I was wrong; the great masses of the public in all nations are always led by some instinctive sense of right, that moves them to reject the false and unworthy, and select the true. (170)

This distinction between the “‘penny dreadful’ order” and Clare’s fiction helps us understand the significance of Corelli’s focus on moral wellbeing. Corelli casts Clare’s (and by extension, her own) position with respect to the mass public as a safeguard against the potential for the democracy of taste to morph into a swelling anarchy, a dissolution of author and public facilitated by blind pandering to what both James and Corelli deem unsavory literary tastes. In formulating her version of the democracy of taste through her confrontational address, Corelli saw herself moving away from those who derided “the masses” while still seeking their approval, like Tempest. That phenomenon, for Corelli, is more symptomatic of bad-faith democratic support of the people than her tyrannical imperatives. In these terms, Corelli’s odd coupling of heavy-handed moral rebuke and insistence on readers’ autonomy makes sense. In Corelli’s thinking, the public should be acknowledged, and should be jarred into exercising its independence, precisely because it is already pursuing the path towards the “true,” “led by some instinctive sense of right.”

If Corelli’s popularity made her acutely aware of the association between the masses and passive consumption, her address becomes a way of protecting both herself and her readers from succumbing to what critics (including James) said about the “absorbent” reading habits that underlay their undiscerning tastes. This is Habermas’s
“culture-consuming public,” which, he argues, overtakes the “culture-debating public” in the nineteenth century. Once the “public that had been ‘left behind,’” Corelli’s readership is readily taken to stand for a “mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical.” Not only does the diversity of Corelli’s readership belie this generalization, her strain of vehement address shows that authors of widely appealing novels may have had just as much desire to challenge the public as those writing aesthetically difficult fiction. To use McGurl’s terms, Corelli is no less uninviting and inaccessible, no less interested in constructing a barrier to easy reading to counter the problem of passivity than James was. Corelli, rather than tacitly selecting a certain class of reader, places individual readers in an independent relationship from the mass without devaluing the whole. Both approaches, however, allow James and Corelli to cast themselves as upholders of a democracy of taste that asks readers to take up the responsibility of arranging themselves within metaphorical spatial arrangements of their own choosing, whether inside the general public, at its very upper reaches, or looking down into it from above.

Corelli highlights the fact that mass literacy created the conditions for this formulation of a literary democracy in an essay called “A Vital Point of Education,” collected in Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct (1905). (Roundly discredited by the critics in gendered terms, the book reaffirms Corelli’s contention that the sway of the “literary intelligentsia” suffocates free opinion and expression). Corelli opens the essay with a section facetiously called “The Necessity of Teaching People to Read.” Commonly found addressing readers in her

78 Hammond, The Formation of Literary Taste, 142.
fiction, here Corelli takes the reading public as her theme, animating its exposition with villains and heroes (or rather, hopeful protagonists). “This essential education is sadly lacking among the general majority of ‘educated’ persons in Great Britain, and I think I may say America. Especially among the ‘upper’ classes, in both countries,” Corelli begins, singling out a group less often targeted for such derision. The scare quotes around “‘upper,’” “‘educated,’” and (later) “‘cultured’” indicate this derision, of course, but also remind us of the disarrangement of spatialized hierarchies Corelli’s vast readership had created at the end of the century. The essay seems to be addressed to a middling public, and she liberally insults these classes, referred to with an othering “they” throughout. Specifying that she does not claim that they lack literacy, but comprehension, Corelli says “Anyone can prove this by merely asking them what they have been reading. In nine cases out of ten they ‘don’t know.’ And if they ever did know, during one unusual moment of brain-activity, they ‘forget.’ The thinking faculty is, with them, like a worn-out sieve, through which everything runs easily and drops to waste” (2). Only a salacious “divorce case” can draw their attention, and they “comment upon it afterwards with such gusto as to make it quite evident to the merest tyro, that they have learned all its worst details by heart” (3). Corelli thus reverses the Habermasian account of the nineteenth century, casting not the lacking education or culture of “the public that had been ‘left’ behind” in the past century as the problem case from which the “disintegration of the public sphere” originates, but their ostensible betters.

Corelli characteristically flourishes her depiction of the hopeless “cultured” class, but the million push her to remarkable heights of rhetorical excess:

80 Habermas, Structural Transformation, 174.
[T]heir reading is of a most strange, mixed, and desultory order—and who can say what wondrous new notions and disturbing theories may not leap out sprite-like from the witch’s cauldron of seething ideas round which they gather, watching the literary ‘bubble, bubble, toil and trouble,’ wherein the ‘eye of newt and toe of frog’ in the book line may contrast with something which is altogether outside the boiling hotch-potch,—namely that ‘sick eagle looking at the sky’ which is the true symbol of the highest literary art. (3)

I began this chapter claiming that even these kinds of fantasmatic emplacements of the reading public—like at Scott’s post-chaise or, more tenuously, in Adam Bede’s workshop—evaporate into abstract address over the course of the century. Here the “million” “gather” around Macbeth’s witch’s cauldron, leaving us with another tellingly impossible image. The wildness of Corelli’s descriptive language however, mirrors the same roiling energy she attributes to the reading of “the million,” emphasizing the unfinished, indeterminate quality of their tastes and habits. In this light, she cites Macbeth as a taken-for-granted reference for the masses, Keats’s “sick eagle” an additional aspirational reference that, “altogether outside the boiling hotch-potch,” suddenly takes the scene away from the cauldron and into an as-yet undetermined space of the future reading of millions. Such a space both provides for horizontal, democratic inclusiveness, and underwrites the democratic possibilities of pursuing “wondrous new notions and disturbing theories.”
CHAPTER THREE

“A People” in Bleak House

“Is it not enough to be fellow creatures, born yesterday, suffering and striving to-day, dying to-morrow?”

Dickens, The Uncommercial Traveller

“Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds.”

Rancière, Disagreement

I. Dickens, Public Best Friend

On the frontispiece of the first edition of the first series of Sketches by Boz, Dickens and artist George Cruikshank look down at a crowd of well-wishers from a hot air balloon: Dickens’s first reading audience. With a hesitant tone soon to be expunged from Dickens’s prefatory addresses, the preface that follows elaborates an extensive metaphor explaining the image and describing the release of Sketches in collected form to the public: “In humble imitation of a prudent course, universally adopted by aeronauts, the Author of these volumes throws them up as his pilot balloon, trusting it may catch
favourable current, and devoutly and earnestly hoping it may go off well."¹ The assembly below the balloon, then, represents Dickens’s newly forming reading audience, a group of shadowy figures gathered to see what the fuss is about. The subsequent reprinting and re-prefacing of Sketches documents a growing confidence in Dickens’s address to the reading public. The developments in these paratextual addresses to his reading audience show us the origins of Dickens’s imagination of the wider reading public, which continued to shape his rhetorical play with conventions of address when Bleak House began its serial run in 1852.

Our reading of Bleak House should better integrate both this context and the forms of address through which Dickens responds to it in the novel. Without understanding the way in which Dickens uses address to imagine the reading public for his readers, we overlook a countervailing force to the pervasive institutional control Dickens documents on the level of plot and that has so shaped the criticism of the novel. Given Dickens’s central role in the development of a mass reading public, the repercussions of this oversight extend beyond Bleak House criticism: we fail to understand the novel’s relationship to literary democracy at a crucial moment in their mutual development. In this chapter, I argue that Bleak House—through a mode of address that stresses readers’ mobility within and around the public and private spaces presented in the novel—ultimately constructs a democratic vision of the public by projecting its addressed audience onto an even wider and amorphous group called “A People.” That is, this emphasis on mobility ultimately generates a sense of placelessness for the novel’s reading audience fundamental to the development of a literary democracy

predicated on the fantasy of writing for all, by all. To make this argument, I first examine the genesis of Dickens’s relationship with his reading audience, as it manifests in his penchant for addressing it, as well as the historical context in which that relationship unfolded. This background, I then suggest, helps us understand how the double narrative of Bleak House works as an important reformulation of nineteenth-century reader address. Finally, the last section of this chapter takes up this claim about address to show how illiteracy, one of the novel’s thematic concerns, becomes a crucial site for examining the limits and stakes of literary democracy.

Turning now to the evolution of the Sketches prefaces as a significant moment in Dickens’s developing relationship to an emerging mass reading public, in many ways coterminal with his reading audience, I ground the often more oblique addresses to readers in Bleak House in Dickens’s thinking about the dynamic between the scale and space of the reading public. In his Sketches prefaces, even as Dickens gradually became more assertive and less pleading while gaining a larger audience, he developed a vision of the reading public that could compass both the individual household and the growing mass public: the hoped-for public assembly gathered below the balloon and then some.

For example, in the advertisement for his upcoming Christmas piece that he writes into

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2 In the Preface to the Second Edition of the First Series, for example, Dickens plays tongue-in-cheek with the public’s initial approval: “If the pen that designed these little outlines, should present its labors to the Public frequently hereafter; if it should produce fresh sketches, and even connected works of fiction of a higher grade, they have only themselves to blame. They have encouraged a young and unknown writer” (8). And by the preface to the Second Series, a few months later, Dickens seems to have gained confidence in the art of the preface: “If brevity be the soul of wit, anywhere, it is most especially so in a preface” (9). In the preface to Oliver Twist a few years later, he (after a lengthy consideration of moral lessons to be gained in attending to “miserable reality”) famously asserts that he has no interest in writing to those readers who would protest to reading about prostitution: “I have no respect for their opinion, good or bad.” This level of confidence in his artistry and intention (he casts himself in “the noblest” of company, like Fielding and Defoe), marks the distance he has travelled over a short time with respect to hoping for or placating an audience. This confidence is grounded not only in his art but in his certainty of an audience, a certainty that underlies the ability to project the audience onto the public. Dickens, Oliver Twist, ed. Fred Kaplan (New York: Norton, 1993).
the preface to the Second Series of Sketches (it was now December 1836), the Public appears not as a crowd in public space, but as an individual or household in a semi-private space:

“Publisher (to Author). — You knock.
“Author (to Publisher). — No — you….
“Public (suspiciously, and with the door a-jar). — Well; what do you want?” (9)

Eventually, the “Author lingers behind, for an instant, to repeat an old form with much sincerity; and to express his hearty wish that his best friend, the Public, may enjoy ‘a merry Christmas, and a happy new year’” (10). The private scene at the doorway with “his best friend, the Public,” recasts the hot air balloon and crowd into a different kind of figure, one that handily distills a vision of the audience as a public (whether in the form of an abstraction or an embodied mass) into a private reader at home. Part of Dickens’s growing confidence in his relationship with the Public is a comfort with the way the “Public” easily moves for him from delimited household scenes to larger collective assemblies to an abstraction. Under the name “the Public,” a generally non-count noun that we assume refers to either a social body, already a metaphor, or the abstraction that such a group suggests, Dickens sees both individual readers and his wider audience as a familiar friend.

Dickens’s public readings, begun a few years after Bleak House, gave Dickens the opportunity to comment on this view. In a local newspaper account of a public reading of A Christmas Carol he gave in 1854, for example, a viewer paraphrases the “two wishes” Dickens made in his introduction:

The first is that you will have the kindness, by a great stretch of the imagination [note: there was 3700 people present], to imagine this is a small social party assembled to hear a tale told round the Christmas fire [applause and laughter]; and secondly, that if you feel disposed as we go along to give expression to any
emotion, whether grave or gay, you will do so with perfect freedom from restraint, and without the least apprehension of disturbing me.\(^3\)

Dickens is familiar with this “great stretch of the imagination” not only as an orator, but also as an author; it’s the same one he employs when addressing the “Public” at the doorstop as his friend. His encouragement of those bodily reactions that are part of the scene of public performance is designed most immediately for the tangible presence of a large audience, but also speaks to the freedom of independent reaction, “without the least apprehension of disturbing” the author, that characterizes private reading.\(^4\) In short, Dickens invites slippages from one scale of audience to another, presenting to readers the range of sociable positions they might occupy in the act of reading.

By the time Dickens began serializing *Bleak House* in 1851, the notion of a hearthside friendship with a large audience had become a refrain for Dickens, his reviewers, and his readers. As one American critic put it, “No one thinks first of Mr. Dickens as a writer. He is at once, through his books, a friend… He is not so much the guest as the inmate of our homes.”\(^5\) Early on into its run, an *Examiner* critic frames his review of *Bleak House* in these terms (though, admittedly, he holds Dickens off as a friendly “guest” rather than an “inmate”): “Already judgment has been passed upon this First Number at many thousands of English firesides. There, already, it has kindled

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\(^3\) Quoted in Susan L. Ferguson, “Dickens’s Public Readings and the Victorian Author,” *SEL* 41, no. 4 (2001): 742. Comparing the Carol text to the reading text, Ferguson notes that “the depersonalization of the narrator’s role” involved the removal of reader address (she counts eighteen in the print version) and the narrator’s use of personal pronouns. Ferguson surmises that this removal diminishes the connection between narrator and author and strengthens the performance of Dickens as a reader, like other readers, playing all the characters’ parts. In effect, Dickens’s performs the mobility of character that I argue his address in *Bleak House* instigates for readers.

\(^4\) Also see Ivan Kreilkamp, who argues in *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* that Dickens’s career—he does not discuss *Bleak House* specifically—need be understood in the context of what he calls “mass reading,” which is in part characterized by somatic responsiveness, “involving a performance or display of physical reaction” (91). Kreilkamp’s claim further undermines the distinction between private reading and “mass reading” or reading associated with a newly massive reading public. Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005).

expectations which will make a particular day, in each of the next twenty months, looked forward to as for the coming of a friend.” The Examiner is alluding to Dickens’s unique penchant for managing his familiarity and his ubiquity simultaneously, making the impossible feat of becoming everyone and anyone’s friend appear nearly effortless.

“Dickens seems exceptional in wanting not only celebrity but also friendship, personal affection, a permanent place in people’s lives, and a corner in their homes,” Malcolm Andrews argues, noting that serialization “bonded writer and reader over a long period” to facilitate this kind of relationship. (Note the Examiner’s emphasis on the calendar of Dickens’s regular visits, to extend over twenty months). Behind both this “exceptional” desire and his reception in the Examiner is Dickens’s tendency to address the “Public” as a flexibly scaled figure, as a familiar face as well as a mass audience. Dickens thus conflates the public as a conceptual abstraction that can’t “fit” anywhere, as an assembled crowd, and as a real person one might meet on the doorstep or at the hearth. The cheering parting he offers readers in the preface to the volume edition of Bleak House—“I believe I have never had so many readers as in this book. May we meet again!” succinctly nods to all of these possibilities.

Juliet John has suggested that “Dickens’s sense that a personal tone was, paradoxically, the most universal was rooted at least in part by an instinctive humanism.” One of the humanistic issues of Dickens’s time, of course, was the spread of literacy and reading to a wider and wider swath of the general public, and Dickens was a vocal advocate for the working class, literate and illiterate, to enjoy recreation without

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9 Juliet John, Dickens and Mass Culture, 120.
judgment. Perhaps more than any other author in this study, at least until Marie Corelli, who tapped into the tastes of a mass market that Dickens helped create, Dickens embraced a cross-class reading audience, and his comfort with that mass shaped his approach to addressing readers.\textsuperscript{10} His paradoxically universal intimacy thus creates a mode of address, both in his prefaces and in his public readings, that speaks to all scales of an imagined audience. As a result, to a much greater extent than Eliot (for example), Dickens maintains his familiar, personalizing speech even while refraining from the delimiting address that we have seen adhere to such speech. In short, Dickens establishes a rapport of sorts with the public, even in its form as an abstraction, channeling the “collectivist imagination”\textsuperscript{11} David Kurnick locates in nineteenth-century theatre for the broad range of collectives that make up the reading public.

I dwell on these tendencies in Dickens’s early paratextual address both because it shows how Dickens forged a unique route among nineteenth-century novelists reshaping address conventions to compass a growing reading public, and because it anticipates his own most unique formulation of address in \textit{Bleak House}. Indeed, \textit{Bleak House} dynamizes this notion of compassing the reading public by putting several of its denotations in play together. First, the novel famously maps and measures a cross-section of British society. But this is no stationary, descriptive map: while in his paratextual address to his “best

\textsuperscript{10} This is not to say that Dickens’s relationship to the mass was uncomplicated or remarkably radical. Dickens’s 1842 trip to America, most notably, had tested the extent and durability of his “radical” liberalism. See, for example, Juliet John, “‘A Body without a head’: The Idea of Mass Culture in Dickens’s American Notes,” in which she concludes that Dickens’s “was a paternalistic populism, fueled by a genuine belief that popular culture could benefit the many as well as the few” (195). While contemporaneous ideas about the mass and its intellectual or cultural achievements (or lack thereof) are central to the context of my study here, my methodology for reading Dickens is, like that of reading the authors in the last chapter, concerned less with their specific political sentiments than the political implications of their chosen forms of address. Juliet John, “‘A Body without a head’: The Idea of Mass Culture in Dickens’s American Notes,” \textit{Journal of Victorian Culture} 12, no. 2 (2007): 173–202.

Friend, the Public,” Dickens captures both the reader and the reading public by collapsing their scales of figuration, *Bleak House* disarticulates the intimate scale of hearth-side friendship and that of the abstract everywhere-ness of the public. Alternating between a third-person omniscient narrator who speaks in a magisterial, confident present tense and the demure Esther Summerson, who speaks in a first-person past tense, the novel addresses readers in two voices attached to disparately scaled points of view, a disparity that the tone of their address often exaggerates. Neither Esther nor the third-person narrator seek to figuratively contain the addressed audience, the problematic identified in the last chapter. Rather, they address readers from the doorstep or the hearth’s limited, specifically located view and from the non-delimited, ranging the view the anonymous narrator provides. Esther and the anonymous narrator share the narrative in an equalized allocation of the space of address in which Dickens’s previous experiments with his tenuously embodied authorial voice and the scale of his public culminate. In *Bleak House*, I argue that Dickens plays with address less to measure implied spaces for a mass audience as to explore a corollary issue: how readers move from one version of narrative space to another and how, in doing so, they might imaginatively redraw the boundaries that determine both public and private life.

Famous for its concerns about how political and social institutions determine characters’ places within the totality they come together to represent, *Bleak House* also articulates, through address, an indeterminate sense of place for its readers. The novel voices not just the would-be unassuming female first-person narrator (in the style of Jane Eyre’s “Reader, I married him”), and not just Dickens’s (or Thackeray’s, or Trollope’s) sweepingly magnificent, masculine, third-person social observers, but both. Or rather,
both and: the shifts in perspective and voice between Dickens’s anonymous narrator and Esther Summerson create a structure through which Dickens asks readers to continually redirect their attention to distinctly gendered voices and their distinctly scaled purviews.\textsuperscript{12} By addressing readers in two different voices, \textit{Bleak House} creates a structure of address that provides for contingency and mobility as antidotes to the way in which institutions like Chancery force subjects into contained, instrumentalized places. I do not mean to rehearse the claims about the \textit{illusion} of freedom actually supervised by state control, as in D.A. Miller’s influential argument of the novel, but a freedom provided for in the abstract placelessness generated by readers’ traversal of the novel. In tasking readers with navigating their roles as simultaneously public and private subjects, Dickens enjoins his audience to see their subject positions as provisional: contingent on their shifting relationship to a larger whole. Through address, then, Dickens upends the concepts of emplacement within, belonging to, and counting among depicted on the level of plot by turning them back onto his indefinite audience.

In this way, Dickens generates a democratic form of address predicated on what one of Rancière’s commentators succinctly calls a “continuous mobility within the social configuration.”\textsuperscript{13} Using the language of the last chapter, we might say Rancière helps us see how the abstracted imagination of a reading public comprised of “any one at all, no one in particular” leaves open-ended the relationships between author, reader, audience,

\textsuperscript{12} As Audrey Jaffe and other critics have noted, omniscience isn’t total in \textit{Bleak House}, but is rather “paradoxically proscribed, limited to one half of the novel.” Jaffe concludes that the “idea of omniscience as all-knowing is thus undermined by Esther’s narrative,” which works like a Derridaean supplement to reveal a “lack in what is supposed to be complete.” This paradoxical incompleteness of omniscience is crucial to my claim here about the politics of address in \textit{Bleak House}, which are rooted in the subversion of what are “supposed to be complete” boundaries around its subjects and the places to which they belong. Jaffe, \textit{Vanishing Points: Dickens, Narrative, and the Subject of Omniscience} (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft038n99m1/: n.p.

and an even more widely defined public. Here, however, I turn from Rancière’s account of literary address in *The Politics of Literature* to engage with his broader theorization of art and democracy. “Democracy is not a regime or a social way of life,” Rancière claims, but rather “the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their ‘nature’ and places corresponding to their functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency.”

(Recall here Rancière’s skepticism about the “sepia-toned” histories of the laboring classes elaborated in *The Nights of Labor* and discussed in chapter one). This definition of subjectification provides a pointed contrast to the Foucauldian sense of the word that has so shaped the critical response to the novel since Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*.

Like Foucault’s, Rancière’s subjectification denotes the complex process in which persons become political subjects. For Rancière, however, Foucauldian subjectification would look more like the establishment of what he calls the “police logic of roles and parts” (*Disagreement* 42). By contrast, his own account of subjectification is based on the refusal of this kind of emplacement, construed not only as “who fits” but “who fits where,” whether that place is determined by a Foucauldian process of producing liberal political subjects or by a Marxist process of locating subjects within a narrative of economic classes. Rancière thus helps illuminate a counter-narrative to the critical history of *Bleak House* in his theorization of a contingent, provisional definition of place within

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15 The English translation of Rancière’s French *subjectivation* and Foucault’s *assujettissement* that renders the two distinct terms by the same English word invites confusion into the comparison of the concepts they designate. Thinking that this confusion speaks to a productive tension between their conflicted operations in *Bleak House* on the level of plot and address, I leave both translations as is. See Samuel A. Chambers, who renders Rancière’s *subjectivation* as subjectivation for clarity, for a thorough account of the distinction between Rancière and Foucault’s theories. Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière* (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 99–101.
social configurations, which, I’ll be arguing, is made manifest for readers through its unique structure of address.

This claim depends on situating *Bleak House* in a surprisingly under-theorized context, the growth of the reading public. Dickens’s palpably felt influence on this growth makes this oversight surprising. We might attribute this oversight to the less surprising lack of attention to address, or more specifically in the case of *Bleak House*, the underestimated connection between narrative structure and reader address that necessarily implicates questions of audience and the reading public. Some of the social and political developments against which critics have read *Bleak House*, do, however, overlap with the history of reading and the spread of literacy in particular. According to Chris Vanden Bossche, for example, “Dickens wrote Bleak House at the moment when spokesmen for the emergent Liberal party began to appeal to a broadened concept of ‘the people,’” and shared with this vision an opposition to “exclusionary discourses of class.”

For James Buzard, a prototypical ethnographic understanding of British culture leads Dickens to offer *Bleak House*’s “iconic space as an analogue for the space of the culture that might unify and demarcate the nation.” “In doing so,” Buzard claims, the novel “exemplifies the way in which standards of textual and social integrity came to invoke and stand for each other in English fiction around the middle of the nineteenth century.” These readings, interested as they are in locating *Bleak House* in specifically mid-century ideas about how political and cultural definitions of “the people” emerge in literary form, share the premise of my claims here. But taking the novel’s innovation in address as a response to the growth of the mass reading public helps specify the political

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17 Buzard, *Disorienting Fictions*, 107.
stakes of literary form independent from surrounding political ideologies in whose service we are often quick to put the novel. As a record of how writers reckoned with the redefinition of the reading public, Dickens’s formulation of address in *Bleak House* instantiates a version of literary democracy that works by situating readers as indeterminately positioned in an amorphously scaled public.

As these critics suggest, the impetus to undertake such a reckoning was particularly urgent at mid century, another reason *Bleak House* merits its own chapter-length study. Richard Altick casts the 1850s as “the great turning-point in the history of the English book trade’s relations with the mass public.” In his account, the 1850s saw the development of a “crisis” of “conflicting forces” that would play out for the rest of the century, in which “loyalty to traditional attitudes and policies” that largely embraced state controls clashed with “the tempting commercial possibilities inherent in a vastly enlarged market.” In 1852, the year *Bleak House* commenced its serial run, several events converged to set off major changes in the public’s access to reading material: the establishment of the expanded headquarters of Mudie’s Circulating Library in New

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18 Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900, Second Edition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 294. Before this decade, the Penny Post, introduced in 1840, made written communication more affordable; more industry jobs required basic reading and writing skills, and reading matter was generally growing more affordable thanks to the spread of the newspaper (Altick 175). After it, education reform and legislature ensured the spread of literacy to its final frontiers, the most impoverished classes and regions of the nation. (This too however dates back to this middle decade: revealing that three of five million school-aged children were not in school in England and Wales, the census of 1851 incited an intensification of campaigns to broaden educational opportunities [170]). Other major relevant events in the 1850s include the redefinition of the bestseller and the mass audience by the British publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1851. This was the year of the Great Exhibition, which Pam Morris reads in relation to *Bleak House*. “The moment in the nineteenth century that marked [the public sphere’s] transformation into a heterogeneous public was probably symbolized for many people, at the time, by the Great Exhibition of 1851,” Morris says, noting that it “was attended by a spectrum of the entire nation—almost certainly the first occasion in history that such a collective event had occurred. It was the public demeanor of working-class families at the Crystal Palace that consolidated the post-Chartist view that the respectable laboring men could safely be accommodated, in some limited sense, as citizens of the nation.” Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society in Nineteenth-Century British Novels: The Code of Sincerity in the Public Sphere* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), 111–12.

Oxford Street (while newly released texts were often priced out of range the literate public, circulating libraries stepped in to provide it); W.H. Smith’s establishment of railway bookstalls that raised the quality of reading material offered on the railways to a more respectable level; and a victory for free trade thanks to the dissolution the New Booksellers’ Association, which had been established in 1848 to continue the fight against the practice of underselling. Together these changes tipped Britain towards a mass reading public largely buoyed by marketplace supply and demand, rather than one artificially constrained by state policies. They signaled an inevitable future: a trajectory towards mass literacy, and with it, a reading public basically coterminous with the nation. Note, in this vein, that while Altick’s seminal study has cemented our conflation of “common reader” and the working-class reader (his object of analysis), through the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century “common reader” simply designated a general, recreational reader—someone who did not read or write for a living. It’s this capacious understanding to which Virginia Woolf’s collection *The Common Reader* (1925) refers, though her general focus on the experience of reading and the importance of intellectual freedom marks her distance from the nineteenth century’s inextricable concerns over the spread of literacy.

Dickens represents this momentum towards a mass literate public; under his aegis, popularity—ubiquity—becomes the most immediate way to practice literary democracy—literature addressed to all. His recurring reference to his reading audience simply as “the Public,” as if his audience was coterminous with that wider group,

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20 Ibid., 304.
bespeaks this verge towards inclusive abstraction at mid-century. As one reviewer of
David Copperfield (1850) put it, as the “true humanizers, and therefore the true
pacifiers of the world,” Dickens and those like him “sweep away the prejudices of
class and caste, and disclose the common ground of humanity which lies beneath
fictitious social and national systems.”²² But how does one visualize this handy
metaphor, the “common ground of humanity”—and how would a writer “disclose” it?
While literacy became increasingly key to the notion of belonging to informal public
systems and cultural phenomena like the literary marketplace, the growth of the reading
public also outgrew countability by feeding the notion of a “common ground” that
resisted systemic organization.

Bleak House sustains this tension between inclusive, indeterminate abstraction
and a numerative, systemic “count” of who belongs through the tension between its mode
of address and its thematic social emplacement, or inclusion in “social and national
systems” enjoyed at the cost of freedom. Thanks to D.A. Miller (of whom more below),
Foucauldian readings have dominated much of the novel’s criticism and have stressed the
idea of an informal bureaucratic governmentality so pervasive that every citizen-subject
in it counts as such, if only by seemingly “freely” counting itself. For other critics,
Dickens’s formal experiment in narrative structure doubles down on the representation of
social totality in less paradoxical ways than the illusory freedom Miller observes.²³ If the
novel depicts a cross section of the British public, or the reach of public institutions into

²² Quoted in Carolyn Berman, “‘Awful Unknown Quantities’: Addressing the Readers in Hard Times,
²³ An important and recent exception here is Amanda Anderson, who argues in Bleak Liberalism that Bleak
House (through its interleaved first and third-person narratives) represents an abiding tension within
liberalism between its “focus on systemic inequities” on the one hand and its “investment in the
achievements of temperament and character” on the other. Amanda Anderson, Bleak Liberalism (Chicago:
private lives, it complements those depictions with narrative voices speaking from both domestic and public points of view: Buzard and Vanden Bossche’s readings assume, for example, that the cultural or political notion of representation, respectively, is proportional to formal representation in the novel. I take to heart Emily Steinlight’s claim, however, that these accounts miss “the tension between the category of population and the mass that resists incorporation.”

Invoking Rancière in her reading of Bleak House, Steinlight suggests that Dickens anticipates Rancière’s argument that “the demos” of democracy is, in a positive sense, “the count of the uncounted—or the part of those who have no part.” Through her attention to the “ontological uncertainty” of this “uncountable mass,” Steinlight concludes that both “liberal-populist fantasies of ‘common personhood’” and “quantitative parity” miss the complexity of the novel’s representation of the public. Similarly, I’m suggesting that through the shifting sense of place created by the novel’s structure of address Dickens projects his readers onto a broader definition of the public: “A People.” Through the mobility invoked by the continual shifts in address, Dickens provides a heuristic guide for understanding the shifting boundary of literacy—not a shift that designates material upward mobility, but more fundamentally a shift that attenuates the boundary between literate and illiterate publics. That is to say, through address, Dickens situates even individual readers among the abstract, un-incorporate-able mass into which both the literate and illiterate

25 Ibid., 235.
26 In other words, Dickens encourages us to distinguish between the abstract space Mary Poovey discusses around the Victorian “social body” and a more amorphous generality of fellow creatures or humanity: where Poovey’s account centers on the imposition of norms and order on abstract space and involves the creation of the concept of self-governing liberal subjects, in my account of the novel, the indeterminate place of readers undermines the determinative emplacement represented in the novel’s fully orchestrated cross section of the social totality. Poovey, Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995), 31.
constituencies of the British public fall.

II. Traversing *Bleak House*

In what follows, I support this claim by analyzing both the double narrative as a larger structure and several of its most remembered scenes of address. In this section, I consider how the novel’s two narrators ask readers to travel across disparate “senses of place.” Because it is exercised through address, the demand Dickens places on his readers to traverse disparately scaled spaces cannot be extricated from the presence of a larger audience and the even larger public that lay behind it. In this way, this mobility (I suggest in the final section) serves as a guide for how to read the novel’s illiterate characters—particularly the cross-sweep Jo—as embodiments of a wider social aim to dissolve the boundary between literate and illiterate people in the service of imagining an even broader concept of “A People.”

*Bleak House* begins by naming places. Its famous first and single-word sentence is “London,” above which is the chapter title “In Chancery,” above which is, of course, *Bleak House*. The other nine titles Dickens contemplated using, most of which involved reference to the impoverished slum of the novel owned and neglected by Chancery, Tom-all-Alone’s, also emphasized setting—an unhealthily stifled and diseased setting, at that. While it goes without saying that novels solicit readers’ entrance into narrative spaces, *Bleak House* uniquely theorizes this very process of solicitation through its dual narration, which continually shifts the disparately scaled purviews through which we access those spaces. Esther addresses readers from a place of social constriction, though she never rhetorically delimits her audience by (for example) singularizing the reader. By
contrast, while the anonymous narrator invites readers into the often claustrophobic social spaces of the novel—through descriptive excess, into overpopulated and cramped rooms, and so on—he also continually invites them to enjoy the unlimited scope of his vision. He addresses readers as fellow escapees of the systems of social control that organize much of the plot of the novel—Rancière’s “police logic of roles and parts” (Disagreement 37) that organizes “the inegalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible” (42). “London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather” (13): the narrator moves quickly into and out of the Chancery offices, so that the mud and fog he goes on to pursue through greater London analogizes, so critical consensus has decided, the suffocating murkiness of Chancery. “Though the court is affirmed to be situated ‘at the very heart of the fog,’” D.A. Miller claims, “this literally nebulous information only restates the difficulty of locating it substantially, since there is ‘fog everywhere.’ The ultimate unlocalizability of its operations permits them to be in all places at once.”

This view, in turn, grounds Miller’s claim that Bleak House and the Victorian novel more broadly enforces the same kind of “policing” operations on its readers.

Miller’s curious remarks on historical reading practices in his account of the relationship between the novel and the audience help us understand this link between the form of the novel and its effects on its readers. The Victorian “practice of the family reading,” according to Miller, was the “only significant attempt to transcend the individualism projected by the novel” in an “effort to mitigate the possible excesses of the novel written for individuals by changing the locus of reading from the study—or

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worse, the boudoir—to the hearth.”\(^\text{28}\) While it’s true that family reading was often understood to mitigate individualist escapism, family reading was hardly the “only significant attempt to transcend” individualism, and the hearth is far more minute than the largest scale on which reading and readers mattered. Dickens’s own tricky conflation of scales of audience in his paratextual addresses makes this clear. Perhaps not surprisingly then, Miller goes on to clarify that what the novel form really secures is the close \textit{imbrication} of individual and social, domestic and institutional, private and public, leisure and work. A drill in the rhythms of bourgeois industrial culture, the novel generates a nostalgic desire to get home (where the novel can be resumed) in the same degree as it inures its readers to the necessity of periodically renouncing home (for the world where the novel finds its justification and its truth).\(^\text{29}\)

For Miller, the movement from one sphere to another—both in the practice of novel reading and in novelistic form—does not suggest freeing mobility but rather the pervasive degree of its hold on individual readers’ lives and ideas about themselves and their world.

Miller’s account of this “imbrication” does not involve, however, Dickens’s wider audience and the even larger reading public that lay behind it, or public debates about reading and the spread of literacy. This oversight is surprising because Miller is most interested in how the novel’s length necessitates reading beyond one sitting, thus interspersing private reading with public life. This length is a result of serialization, of course, an affordable publication format directly addressed to the needs of a growing mass reading public. When Ivan Kreilkamp locates Dickens in the context of a “new mass reading public,” for example, he notes not only the “quantitative leap” that I am focusing on, but also a “qualitative one”: a development of “a mode of literary

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 82.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 83.
consumption” that Kreilkamp calls “mass reading,” which often occurs in “public spaces rather than interior domestic ones, among other valences of communal activity.”

Precisely because Miller sees reading novels as above all an individualistic activity (the competing “bourgeois” reading practice Kreilkamp sets up as a counterpart to “mass reading”), he misses the growth of a massive reading public that subtended the popularity of the novel in the first place and that generated new reading practices. He thus also misses the way in which novelistic address is shaped by the need to speak simultaneously to an audience of one and many. It’s this version of the imbrication between private and public that I suggest inheres to the address in *Bleak House*, where it undergirds a different form of literary politics more aptly framed by Rancière than Foucault.

Through the narrator’s penchant for indirectly addressing readers as fellow travelers, Dickens affords readers a way of traversing around the space of the novel, a technique that tacitly casts readers as similarly abstract viewers—personalized, to an extent, but not delimitied like the point of view of a “real reader.” (Closer to the man in the air balloon than a member of the crowd standing below). With the narrator’s adaptability to a birds-eye view comes a perspective that implicitly situates readers *outside* of the scope of Chancery and allows them to condemn it: “Never can there come fog too thick, never can there come mud and mire too deep, to assort with the groping and floundering condition which this High Court of Chancery, most pestilent of hoary sinners, holds, this day, in the sight of heaven and earth” (14). The outsider perspective, above the fog, already implicit in the contempt the narrator holds for Chancery, is here

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31 Ibid., 91.
made explicit when the narrator aligns his purview with “the sight of heaven and earth.”
This purview enables the matter-of-fact confidence with which he sentences the fog from an eventually abstract position, outside of both its time and place. Rather than mire readers in the fog like Chancery mires all who fall within in its pale, then, Dickens creates a tension between emplacing readers through descriptive excess and emphasis on place, on the one hand, and the agile, outside perspective with which (or whom) readers travel around and outside of it, on the other.

In the sweeping move the narrator makes between Chancery to “the world of fashion” surrounding Lady Dedlock at Chesney Wold in Lincolnshire, Dickens reinforces the link between omniscience and critique: “It is but a glimpse of the world of fashion that we want on this same miry afternoon. It is not so unlike the Court of Chancery that we may pass from the one scene to the other, as the crow flies” (20). Co-opting their points of view through the magisterial we, the narrator invites readers to share his contempt for not only in the low-hanging fruit the world of fashion provides, but also his unique ability to compass this world with such ease. The “fog everywhere,” the “same miry afternoon,” the similarities between world of fashion and the Court of Chancery: while these descriptions suggest suffocation and blindness, readers move “as the crow flies,” taking on a vantage point above the various levels of mire, figurative and literal, and enjoying the luxury of a “glimpse” rather than an interminable stay.

Certainly the novel’s most impoverished, vulnerable characters, those suffocated by near fatal conditions or boxed in by circumstance, suffer most direly from being stuck in place—stuck at Tom-all-Alone’s, stuck at Krook’s Court, stuck in Jarndyce & Jarndyce. But from the narrator’s widest vantage point, the coterie surrounding the
Dedlocks at Lincolnshire is also cordoned off to its own disadvantage. Again the narrator groups himself with readers, though this time he grants them privileged access into and out of a world that the mass reading public is less likely to recognize as its own. Speaking of “the world of fashion,” he explains:

It is not a large world. Relatively even to this world of ours, which has its limits too (as your Highness shall find when you may have the tour of it, and are come to the brink of the void beyond), it is a very little speck. There is much good in it; there are many good and true people in it; it has its appointed place. But the evil of it is, that it is a world wrapped up in too much jeweller’s cotton and fine wool, and cannot hear the rushing of the larger worlds, and cannot see them as they circle round the sun. It is a deadened world, and its growth is sometimes unhealthy for want of air. (20)

In the contrast between the insularity of the world fashion and “this world of ours,” Dickens suggests that the self-containment of the world of fashion (good people have a place in it, it has its place) underlies its stillness, around which the “larger worlds” rush and circle unseen. Even the “growth” that comes out of “a deadened world” is thus “unhealthy” because of its inattentiveness to the wider world around it. In assuming that he and the audience he addresses both belong to “this world of ours,” the omniscient narrator associates the reading audience not with simple massiveness, then, but with the edge of development that expands thanks to “the people” rather than orders sent down from the centralized seat of traditional social and cultural power. In short, Dickens links the growth of the reading public and the imaginative ability to traverse public space.

Note too how the curious parenthetical address to “your Highness” (a winking reference to the ironically elevated common reader or a gesture to the royalty perhaps

32 For a comprehensive account of the spread of literacy, see David Mitch, The Rise of Popular Literacy in Victorian England (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1992). Mitch shows adds to traditional historical accounts of literacy and education that underestimated the role of private choice and demand of illiterate people, which in fact interacted with public policy to bring Britain to nearly full literacy by the end of the century.
reading Dickens?—that either option makes sense speaks to the scope of Dickens’s public) alludes to Dickens’s interest in finding the outside of limited purviews of the world. Further, the idea that we can’t see those limits until we “have the tour of it” speaks to the raison d’être of Dickens’s omniscient narrator, brought into being not only to scan the horizons of the growing British public, whether measured by enfranchisement or literacy, but also, through moments of address like these ones, to bring readers along for the ride. In other words, the omniscient narrator doesn’t simply paint the fictional world for the reader, but also enjoins readers to envision the scale of the public to which they belong by getting outside of it.

Invited in this way by the narrator’s address to enjoy his vantage point, readers temporarily experience a freedom of access and mobility in sharp contrast to the delimited vision of a first-person point of view. Through the tension between this unbounded vastness and the constriction implied by the fog around Chancery or the jeweller’s wool in the world of fashion, Dickens sets up two countervailing forces in the novel. It’s become a truism of *Bleak House* criticism that what undermines the establishment of a freely observed, freely navigated public space is not the dreary November weather *per se* but the deeply rooted and far-reaching tentacles of state bureaucracy. By approaching this truism from a different angle, I want to stress that the narrator’s address counters rather than re-instantiates this emplacement. Whether the novel is a form that resists literary democracy by “policing” readers or mobilizes literacy democracy by liberating them from a determined sense of place rests on the answer to this question. Tellingly, while Amanda Anderson argues that the omniscient narrator’s “form of narration—impersonal, present tense, almost but not exclusively third-person—
seems to reinforce the sense that there is no escape from the general conditions of power under diagnosis,” the “occasional interruptions” to this reinforcement occur in the form of reader address as “moments of heightened moral condemnation of the system, voiced indignantly and via a suddenly embodied first- or second-person mode.”33 I suggest we broaden the effect of this “occasional” interruption to describe a quality just as constitutive to the form of the omniscient narration as its present tense. Though the depersonalized, delocalized perspective of the anonymous narrator has been cast as an enactment of the diffuse power of a panoptical view, the narrator’s manner of address reveals a different conclusion: that readers can share his limitless perspective. In this way, the fantasy of the omniscient narrator isn’t just that such omniscience could exist, but also that any one at all—any reader, all readers—are equal to its occupation and imagination. *Bleak House*’s critique of formally and informally institutionalized social control thus depends on the way the narrator’s address to readers resists their emplacement within that world.

But if the point of address in *Bleak House* is to generate readerly movement against the grain of the plot’s institutional containment, then why isn’t the anonymous narrator sufficient? Moreover, his counterpart Esther Summerson occupies an embodied, necessarily contained perspective. Esther’s first narrative, the novel’s third chapter, is titled “A Progress,” as if Dickens wants to signal that readers are only just now moving forward in the narrative, out of the suffocating fog of “In Chancery” and “In Fashion.” If the mobility the narrator demonstrates with such flair in those chapters cannot sufficiently generate progress for readers, we may fairly wonder if Esther is up to the task. The answer to this conundrum, I suggest, lies in the larger structural impetus of readerly

mobility, which depends on the difference between her mode of address and that of the anonymous narrator’s. Without re-staging the debate over Esther’s position among Dickens’s female characters, relegated to the private sphere that she embraces with nearly parodic self-sacrifice, recall that undercutting the fantasy of omniscience voiced by the masculine anonymous narrator suggests a need to address readers from differently gendered points of view within the same novel. Thus, while the narrator demonstrates the need to get out from under the “police logic of roles and parts,” Esther evidently addresses readers from the experience of one such role. (Miller’s claim that a “Victorian novel such as Bleak House speaks not merely for the hearth, in its prudent care to avoid materials or levels of explicitness about them unsuitable for family entertainment, but from the hearth as well, implicitly grounding its critical perspective on the world within a domesticity that is more or less protected against mundane contamination”34 most pertinently applies to Esther’s voice). This shift into Esther’s delimited view is suggestive of one the premises of Rancière’s political subjectification, as it stresses (for readers, if not for characters) the provisionality of the sense of space and place they occupy.

Dickens offers readers not simply a fantasy of escapism, but invites them to measure the scope of social boundaries by moving across these disparately scaled spaces.

Consider Esther’s recurring modesty topos, for example: while her self-effacing rhetoric highlights the disparity between her and the narrator’s mode of address, it also burdens readers with the work of understanding this disparity. Esther exacerbates the diminution of her voice in her first moments of addressing readers by promptly doubting herself, turning inward and backward to her personal memories of innocent loneliness. But, curiously, she doesn’t explain why or to whom she is writing—or who she is, even,

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34 Miller, The Novel and the Police, 82.
at the time of writing (Esther Woodcourt, née Summerson):

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. I can remember, when I was a very little girl indeed, I used to say to my doll, when we were alone together, “Now, Dolly, I am not clever, you know very well, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!” (27)

Esther’s address so obliquely imagines an audience that the fact that such a group exists hardly seems relevant at all, only “there” enough to appear implicitly in the acknowledgment that she contributes to “these pages.” Quickly replanting her claim to readers, “I know I am not clever,” to her old address to Dolly, Esther conspicuously substitutes the present, outward turn to an audience with a past scene of address between her and Dolly. Needless to say, a singular audience whose domestic, child-like diminution creates an intimacy almost caricaturized in its smallness, Dolly provides a sharp contrast to the amorphous idea of the vast public to which readers belong. The absurdity of the self-deprecation with which she used to address Dolly only heightens the sense that Esther is more comfortable with recalling her memory of addressing her doll than with addressing a large audience. Reminiscent of the subtitle of Oliver Twist, “A Parish Boy’s Progress,” Dickens seems to designate her first chapter “A Progress” to signify her early Bildungsroman-esque transition out of her years as student and teacher Greenleaf. But the title also suggests an ironic discrepancy between how Esther sees herself and how Dickens wants readers to approach her narrative. The progress for readers that Dickens has in mind paradoxically relies on Esther’s address as a shift into a narrative voice that appeals to readers from a distinctly constricted and timid point of view, thereby magnifying the movement they make across the social spaces of the novel.

While Esther’s oblique addresses leave open that abstract space for the “no one in
“particular” kind of audience to which she herself belongs, then, she also immediately diverts that audience into her hyper-delimited world, a curious blurring of scale conceptually akin to Dickens’s life as public best friend. And particularly in this first address—later chapters written by Esther are titled “Esther’s Narrative”—the unannounced shift into a feminized first person stresses the disorientation that comes along with readers’ introduction to Esther’s voice and their need to navigate this move on their own. It’s hard to imagine a sharper contrast between Esther’s opening address and Franklin Blake’s straightforward confidence in Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), for example: “I address these lines—written in India—to my relatives in England. My object is to explain the motive which has induced me to refuse the right hand of friendship to my cousin, John Herncastle.”35 Within a few paragraphs of the narrative beginning, Gabriel Betteredge explicitly explains (by relating Blake’s instructions) the entire premise of the novel’s multi-narrative arrangement—something that never happens in *Bleak House*—and describes how he “modestly declared myself to be quite unequal to the task imposed upon me,” writing his part of the narrative, while he “privately felt, all the time, that I was quite clever enough to perform it”—another revelation Esther never comes around to making explicitly.36 In *The Woman and White* (1859–1860), Collins also lays bare the case for multiple narratives on the first page: “Thus, the story here presented will be told by more than one pen, as the story of an offence against the law is told in Court by more than one witness.”37 These contrasts highlight how Esther’s more oblique, hesitant address withholds the interpretive key from readers making the transition into her narrative. Further, emphasizing the indeterminacy of readers’ place vis-à-vis their

36 Ibid., 60.
narrators, Dickens’s mode of double narration precludes the instrumentalization of narrative voice in Collins.

As Esther’s modesty topos recurs throughout the novel, creating a series of oblique addresses to readers that often turn into self-addressed reminders, Dickens underscores the link between the diminishment of Esther’s voice and her sense of unimportance in a public forum or for a wider social body like the reading public. “I don’t know how it is, I seem to be always writing about myself,” she confesses:

I mean all the time to write about other people, and I try to think about myself as little as possible, I am sure, when I find myself coming into the story again, I am really vexed and say, “Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature, I wish you wouldn’t!” but it is all of no use. I hope any one who may read what I write, will understand that if these pages contain a great deal about me, I can only suppose it must be because I have really something to do with them, and can’t be kept out. (137)

Eventually conceding that she may “have really something to do with” the pages she writes, Esther tentatively concludes that she may have to take on an active role in the narrative, though she had earlier thought she would “soon fall into the back-ground” (40). More surprising about her “vexed” reminder to herself is its odd timing: she invokes it following her visit to the brick-makers at Tom-All-Alone’s with Mrs. Pardiggle (which concluded the previous chapter) and right before detailing Ada and Richard’s early moments of falling in love: two situations that are not “about” her but are rather in keeping with her intention “to write about other people” (137). Like her address to Dolly, her address to herself—“‘Dear, dear, you tiresome little creature’”—stages an inward-looking turn so that “any one who may read what I write” will not mistake her for a confident public voice. Rather than the notion that she might matter to the plot or the public, the fact that she need address the public and in doing so expand the boundaries
delimiting her world becomes Esther’s motivating concern.

As these examples show, the smallness of Esther’s voice should not be misconstrued as intimacy or naïveté. Esther exercises deliberate control over self-disclosure, most notably around her courtship with Allan Woodcourt. This aspect of her diminution not only exacerbates the delimitation of her point of view, but also exaggerates the challenge readers face in exploring its scope without her guidance. (Most confusing in this regard is that she knows about the other narrator—to her, some strange otherworldly visionary on the world she lives in—but refrains from elaborating on their mutual roles in bringing the story to readers?) Nowhere is the coincidence between Esther’s reticence and the resulting challenge in navigating narrative and social space clearer than in the last lines of the novel. Though in the final moments of the novel Esther celebrates her life with Woodcourt, with some wonder exclaiming how the “people even like Me as I go about, and make so much of me that I am quite abashed,” she makes sure to attach her public life to Woodcourt and his profession; “I owe it all to him, my love, my pride!” (988–89). And recalling Woodcourt’s compliment—“you are prettier than ever you were”—Esther demurs: “I did not know that; I am not certain that I know it now.” Finally, she goes on to express cheerful gratitude for the people in her life one by one until drifting off into a dash: “they can very well do without much beauty in me—even supposing—” (989). Concluding Bleak House in Esther’s narrative on her unfinished sentence after opening with the anonymous narrator “In Chancery,” Dickens emphasizes the incompleteness of both narrators’ accounts. But particularly for Esther, whether rooted in coy insincerity or genuine modesty, her apparent refusal to assume untoward confidence in her own public role leaves readers hanging, almost literally off of
the dash that ends the novel. In this way, Dickens uses Esther’s demurring reticence to illuminate not only a thematic problem about knowing one’s place, but also a problem for readers about navigating that sense of place. *Bleak House*’s concluding dash ensures that such a problem remains with readers even as they close the novel.

In juxtaposing Esther and the anonymous narrator’s senses of space and place, Dickens may be reaffirming gendered norms about public and private voices; the critical view of women like Mrs. Pardiggle and Mrs. Jellyby who assert themselves in public and expand their visions of the world to Africa would seem to suggest Dickens supports some version of this norm. And yet Dickens is also using address to ask his readers to migrate back and forth between these disparate senses of place and accompanying scopes of vision. Framed this way, the idea that both Esther and the anonymous narrator are incomplete without each other is less suggestive of a totalizing representation achieved through harmonious balance of gender than it is suggestive of an invitation to readers to maneuver around social spaces and beyond the establishment of a naturalized, functionalized place—or rather, take on an indeterminate sense of place.

III. A People’s Reading Public

This kind of interpretation might (perhaps worrisomely) evoke reader-response criticism’s claims about the implied reader, who goes about doing what critics say he does without respect to the unpredictability of real readers. But the readerly mobility this structure of address demands is rooted both in the novel’s historicizable thematics of social containment and in a historical moment in which the spread of literacy was challenging the tenability of such containment for the reading public. Taking the growth
of the mass reading public into mid-century as the necessary context for reading address in *Bleak House* helps explain why Dickens renders readers navigators of narrative space in the way I’ve described above—or rather, locates reading as the means for exercising this mobility. Whether or not readers do navigate space in this precise way is less our concern, I suggest, than the way the history of reading shapes our understanding of the form of the novel and its representation of the public.

Even as mid-century England glimpsed the inevitability of a mass literate public on the horizon, literacy remained unevenly spread across the populace, and recreational reading occurred on a still smaller scale than basic literacy. A reference point for previous chapters as well, Collins’s “The Unknown Public” (1858) serves in this case as a metric for observing past decades of increasing literacy and looking ahead to future mass reading public increasingly coterminous with the nation. As an index of the present state of a reading nation, his suggestion that the known reading public had gotten complacently familiar with itself only to find out that millions of others read other kinds of “literature” points to the piecemeal expansion of the reading public throughout the first half of the nineteenth century; Collins has nothing to say about the still-illiterate pauper masses who, on his logic, would become the next “unknown public” of readers to be “discovered” down the line. The history of education offers a similar picture of uneven development: while public education wasn’t mandated until the 1870s, that legislation (the Forster Act) largely filled remaining entrenched patches of illiteracy after a period of much growth by other formal and informal provisions.

*Bleak House*’s shifts in address are particularly suited to represent such an uneven picture, as they ask readers to see the positions they occupy in relation to Esther and the
anonymous narrator as provisional and incomplete, as indeterminately located in public
and private spaces, and as simultaneously scaled to individuals and the masses. Turning
now to analyze scenes of address that bring literate and illiterate characters together, I
suggest that the shifts occasioned by the double narrative feed into the novel’s re-
imagination of social boundaries built up around reading in particular. In turn, Dickens
imagines his reading audience as differently constituted—more amorphous and mobile,
less determined by certain social delimitations—than the cross-section of the British
public he depicts on the level of plot.

_Bleak House’s_ self-interested politicians Boodle and Buffy, who we find paying
deference to the world of fashion at Chesney Wold, call this sweepingly vast public “A
People,” an epithet we can assume Coodle and Cuffy, Doodle and Duffy would use as
well. Both on the level of narrative structure and in local instances, Dickens’s address
suggests that readers can recognize their own public within that group and revalue it.38
He summarizes the politicians’ view with biting irony: “A People there are, no doubt—a
certain large number of supernumeraries, who are to be occasionally addressed, and
relied upon for shouts and choruses, as on the theatrical stage; but Boodle and Buffy,

38 The critics who received _Bleak House_ upon its volume publication in 1853 debated whether or not
readers could recognize the world it imagines as a representation of their own. On one side, _The Athenaeum_
was not having it: “Were its opening pages in anywise accepted as representing the world we live in, the
reader might be excused for feeling as though he belonged to some orb where eccentrics, Bedlamites, ill-
directed and disproportioned people were the only inhabitants. Esther Summerson, the narrator, is, in her
surpassingly sweet way, little less like ordinary persons than are Krook and Skimpole.” But the _Examiner_,
claiming that _Bleak House_ “has filled the fancies of its readers with new groups of people as familiar and
real as any that in life they may have known,” curiously qualifies this opposing argument to take on _The
Athenaeum_’s claim by noting that “Mr. Dickens’s characters, as all the world knows, pass their names into
our language, and become types…. We see nobody minutely in real life.” In this way, the perhaps
surprising point of agreement that these reviews come to respecting Dickensian character registers his
ambivalence to documenting interiority. The distinction the _Examiner_ draws between being “familiar” and
being “minutely” known suggests familiarity provides a means of navigating between abstraction and
apparently untenable intimacy. This familiarity also informs the tone in which the anonymous narrator
addresses readers, so that on the one hand he can affect a personable speech, as among friends, and on the
other hand appeal to readers as public citizens, part of the publicity addressed assembly. “Bleak House,”
their followers and families, their heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns, are the born first-actors, managers, and leaders, and no others can appear upon the scene for ever and ever” (191). In *Hard Times*, the novel that followed *Bleak House*, Dickens similarly mocks self-serving politicians like Gradgrind, who, he imagines, think they “owe no duty to an abstraction called a People,”39 a group yet larger than the literate reading public, though the conflation of readers and illiterate or partially literate people in Dickens’s use of the term “Public” invites telling ambiguity. Dickens’s tone in both of these passages suggests some measure of disdain for abstraction, for it seems to allow the “national dustmen” (garbage-collector politicians) to not care about the people they purport to represent. And yet Dickens doesn’t seem to doubt that “a People” is an abstraction to which public speakers owe a “duty”—a public that wants addressing, acknowledging, imagining. In the prefatory addresses to *Sketches* and public readings, Dickens’s way around this problem is to establish a familiar friendship with this abstraction, overcoming a boundary Gradgrind, Boodle, and Buffy do not think to cross.40

In *Bleak House*, the stage metaphor sets up a half-figured scene of address, calling up a contrast between the manner in which Dickens and his narrator address the reading

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40 In “Addressing Readers in *Hard Times*,” Carolyn Berman takes a slightly different approach to understanding the relationship between Dickens’s address and that of parliamentary discourse. “*Hard Times* caricatures a representative government trying to apprehend its subjects,” argues Berman, primarily analyzing government blue books on education as one such method of apprehension. “By implication, it also probes a flourishing print culture trying to apprehend its subjects,” she goes on, though what she means by “probe” never becomes fully clear (563). For example, in a later statement of the claim, Berman suggests that rather “than scorning the political science that influenced him, Dickens satirizes parliamentary discourse about ‘the People’ in a manner that implicates his own address to his readers” (567). From the detailed analysis Berman provides of this science and discourse, one begins to see that she means Dickens is ill at ease with only knowing readers by way of abstraction (just like the politicians he attacks) but cannot articulate a different or positive kind of knowledge in place of such abstraction. At least for *Bleak House*, I’d argue, the Rancièrian understanding of literary politics, distinct from nineteenth-century parliamentary politics, helps us articulate a positive understanding of what kind of relationship Dickens’s address establishes through his address. Carolyn Berman, “‘Awful Unknown Quantities’: Addressing the Readers in *Hard Times*, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37, no. 2 (2009): 561–82.
audience and the way in which Boodle and Buffy address theirs. In the latter, the people remain not just passive but sequestered, never to “appear upon the scene”; even then, are only “occasionally addressed”; and are called not so much to participate as to let loose a one-note babble. If “A People” exist on a distant horizon rather than the “scene” for the self-interested MPs, the narrator suggests a coming inversion of power: their brand of “dandyism” will fall prey to the “very strange appearances [that] may be seen in active motion outside” (191). Dickens’s narrator looks outward and forward, past an outmoded dandyism to a collective envisioned on a larger scale and predicated on its own “active motion.”

Such a vision might espouse progress, as a tenet of liberal democracy achieved in part through the modernization of social arrangements and the productivity of a growing middle class. Two Rancière-inflected readings offer different possible interpretations of democracy here, however. In Steinglight’s analysis, “supernumeraries” mark “that which exceeds categorization, rendering inclusion and exclusion equally impossible.”

Steinlight, “Dickens’s ‘Supernumeraries,’” 234

Supernumeraries, as a concept and a group of people, suggest that Dickens’s democratic vision of the reading public relies not on the numerative principle that everyone counts (another liberal tenet) but on the necessarily indefinite accommodation of a vaguely numbered and structured “A People.” Dickens appears to be mocking Boodle and Buffy’s substitution of “A” for “The”—“The People” confers on them some sort of deference and political power, where “A People” suggests off-hand

Ibid., 230.
carelessness, irrelevance. But it’s precisely the indeterminacy of “A People” that presupposes equality among all of its constituents—including the “uncounted”—and that, despite Boodle and Buffy’s attempts to keep them (it?) off stage, points to a yet greater claim to belong. Indeed, the rather elaborate stage metaphor here accords with Kurnick’s uptake of Rancière on the theatre, where “the predicates of political belonging are appropriable: anyone might claim to possess them by mimicking them,” the difference in *Bleak House* being the kind of theater on offer: members of this audience seem just as likely to pursue “disruptive appropriations” (one thinks of the Turveydrop’s school of deportment) as to expunge dandyism in favor of a different social order (one thinks of the contrast between Turveydrop’s ineffectuality and the industriousness of characters like Woodcourt or Inspector Bucket).

Uncharacterized and only gestured to, Boodle and Buffy’s “A People” loosely aligns with Dickens’s reading audience. In that configuration of the public, Dickens provides readers with an abstract space for free traversal, countering the delimitation and functionalization of “place” that we think of when we think of Chancery, the Poor House, and even—Esther shakes her set of keys to remind herself and readers of her place within that place—of Bleak House. In doing so, Dickens gestures to the open space of literary

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43 Given Steinlight’s invocation of Rancière in her reading of *Bleak House*, I’m exceedingly inclined to find her claims worth rehearsing. I do not follow her to the more cynical conclusion, however, that Dickens presumes Jo and those like him are perhaps better off for not making it to the status of the “counted” (232). This claim appreciates Dickens’s dark view of social and political institutions in the novel, but doesn’t sufficiently appreciate the almost escapist open-endedness the omniscient narrator provides through his innovative form of address, a mobility that he associates with being part of “A People” who make up the “larger world” that rushes around Chesney Wold. Nor does it acknowledge how in turning back again to Esther’s narratives readers are already tasked with re-drawing social boundaries and re-imagining who “counts.”

44 Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, 18. Rancière’s theorization of the theatre, Kurnick notes, “has its roots in his archival work on nineteenth-century French theatrical culture” (18); I note this context because it clarifies the distinction Rancière draws in *The Politics of Literature* between eighteenth-century theatre and the classical order of representation and the novels of Balzac and Flaubert.

45 Ibid.
democracy fit for a broadened reading public, though with an important caveat: the uneven spread of literacy at mid-century reminds us that such a democracy is rooted in part in the material grain of historical development, but in large part manifests rhetorically, imaginatively, even aspirationally in the changing forms address that register this history. The epigraph to this chapter taken from Dickens’s *The Uncommercial Traveller* hinges on this issue of addressing the public in a way that acknowledges the equality of literate and illiterate members of the public in a shared space. Recounting his experience at a Sunday evening sermon, held at a theatre with “full four thousand people present,” Dickens criticizes the minister for “address[ing] such an audience continually as ‘fellow-sinners.’”46 “Is it not enough to be fellow creatures,” he proposes, “born yesterday, suffering and striving to-day, dying to-morrow? By our common humanity, my brothers and sisters, by our common aspiration to reach something better than ourselves, by our common tendency to believe in something good… Surely, it includes the other designation and some touching meanings over and above.”47 Carried away by his own preacherly energy, Dickens enacts the kind of superlatively broad appeal he recommends to Sunday preachers, calling up a commons capacious enough to contain not just “the other designation” but other “touching meanings.” One of the problems Dickens has with emphasizing sinfulness is the opening it provides preachers to denigrate their audience’s desire for recreation. Noting the absence of the poorest class he saw at the theatrical performances the night before, Dickens presumes that Sunday theatre sermons “will work lower and lower down in the social scale” only if “those who preside over them” find respectful ways of addressing their audiences, without insulting “the places in

47 Ibid., 37.
which they speak, or the intelligence of their hearers.” “Some people cannot read, some people will not read,” he notes, enjoining preachers to model their voice on the New Testament, “the most beautiful and affecting history conceivable by man,” as an example for the illiterate unfamiliar with reading or with verse form.48 In short, Dickens’s account of the sermon suggests illiteracy need not disqualify one from belonging to “common humanity.” Unpacking this truism about Dickens, though, reveals a perhaps more significant point: that understanding belonging in those terms constitutes a new vision of the public as a modern concept, the social eventuation of the transcendental “common humanity.”

Accordingly, such an abstract view of the public covers not only the literate masses who read Dickens, but also the illiterate who perhaps had Dickens read to them by literate associates, who Dickens himself probably suspected would read Dickens if they could, and who would perhaps do so within a few decades’ time. As writers began abstracting conventions of address, letting go of singularizing figurations, they could not but begin to compass the illiterate as well, if only rhetorically. In this sense, writing the writing on the wall, Dickens gestures to the inevitability of the future mass literate Britain. In the vision of the public as a giant social corpus, liable to catch the physical and social diseases bred amongst the undifferentiated impoverished masses, such porosity was cause for anxiety. But the spread of reading (sometimes seen as a disease, to be sure, but increasingly seen as an empowering and necessary skill) also fueled a rethinking of how to envision the mass public. The abstraction that that imagination began to rely on, rather than provoke anxiety, fostered a democratic sense of equality.

Thus, in Bleak House, Dickens probes the limit point of literacy while questioning

48 Ibid., 39.
its use as a metric for determining belonging and manipulates address conventions to undermine that line. Dickens figures those who technically live outside the bounds of his addressed reading public, and yet would or rather do belong should the horizon of that public be expanded in characters like Krook, who reads and writes by copying from memory, not for meaning or comprehension; the illiterate brick-makers of Tom-all-Alone’s, who are fed children’s books rather than bread by misguided charity; and the illiterate cross-sweep Jo, whose ignorance of his last name and the “Our Father” prevents him from testifying to Chancery. These characters embody the frontier of the spread of literacy across Britain. In what follows, I focus on Esther’s interactions with the brick-makers and the narrator’s representation of Jo. The distorted mirror image Krook makes of the Lord Chancellor, however, provides an apt image for the premise of my claims about a perforated, provisional line between literacy and illiteracy. The dark and destitute lodging over which Krook presides, known as Krook’s Court, as well as his nickname “Lord Chancellor” suggest the impossibility of escaping from Chancery’s grasp. (Indeed, the illiterate Krook’s collection of papers and tenants Miss Flite and Nemo are bound up with Jarndyce and Jarndyce). Krook’s writing-by-copying underscores this notion of a distorted mirror image. At the same time, it aligns the perforated line between literacy and illiteracy with the perforated line between the elevated and debased “Courts” to suggest that the future of “who counts” as a member of the public depends on the dissolution of this line.

Hence, though the title of reading historian Jonathon Rose’s polemical essay, “How historians study reader response: or, what did Jo think of Bleak House?” is a bit misleading, it nonetheless signals a broader sense of provisionality that came to
characterize illiteracy and the development of the reading public around mid-century. Jo may have thoughts about novels (doubtful, in my mind), but certainly not thoughts based on reading them. Technically, he belongs not to the working-class readers under focus in Rose’s study, but to a pauper class. While the examples Rose gives of prisoners reading and then responding to Dickens’s representation of their own conditions provide insight into how a Dickensian character might respond to his novels, Jo can only be a hypothetical—and a seriously aspirational—case. “Thanks to Charles Dickens,” Rose concludes on this proleptic note, “Jo was not only thinking: he was beginning to write” (210). In fact Rose happens to echo a Rancièrian principle here. Rather than pin Jo to a rigid identity as one of the pauper class, the literate Jo Rose alludes to in his title speaks to the contingent, mobile sense of one’s “place” that is fundamental to literary democracy. Indeed, as a fiction, Rose’s literate Jo testifies to the central role of creative figurations in understanding historical reading from which Rose typically distances himself.

Pam Morris pointedly casts the pauper class, represented both by Jo and the brick-makers and allusions to undifferentiated urban masses as cases of the “unclassifiable otherness” that defines the public. Having around mid-century incorporated the working class, the public, in Morris’s reading, needs to find its edge again for the sake of inclusive coherence.49 Of course, Jo (and Krook and presumably many at Tom All Alone’s) all die before experiencing the mobility that I suggest counters this view. While emphasizing the

49 Pam Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society in 19th-Century Novels: The Code of Sincerity in the Public Sphere* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2004), 124. In her discussion of Jo’s “total social illiteracy,” for example, Morris takes the fact that a temporary shift into an imagined first-person point of view of Jo is rendered in “educated discourse” to “implicitly [confess] … the inability to make this radical shift of perspective across a great gulf” (124). I instead suggest that the narrator’s attempt to cross this gulf and bring readers along with him is less an implicit failure than a signal to redraw the boundaries around class-delimited points of view.
link between illiteracy and destitution and exclusion, Dickens in fact makes a more radical point: that before the likes of Jo and the brick-makers “make it” to the reading public, readers imagine the boundary around their polity as mobile—even across the line separating working and pauper classes—and thus imagine a democratized people.

In Esther’s visit to the brick-makers with Ada and Mrs. Pardiggle, Dickens theorizes the relationship between his literate reading audience and the broader concept of “A People” through a complicated series of addresses and Esther’s reflection on them. In the context of this scene, we might read Esther’s general refusal to own a public voice as an over-correction not of her own prominent role in the story but rather of Mrs. Pardiggle’s disastrously confident and self-congratulatory address to the brick-makers at Tom-All-Alone’s (discussed below) and, by extension, an assumption that her voice matters to a larger public. Annoyed at Mrs. Pardiggle’s declaration about how “fond of hard work” and “true to her word she is” (a declaration made in what Esther describes as “much too business-like and systematic” a voice), one of the brick-makers goes to “make it easy for her” (131–32):

“Is my daughter a washin? Yes, she is a washin. Look at the water. Smell it! That’s wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin, instead! An’t my place dirty? Yes, it is dirty — it’s nat’rally dirty, and it’s naturally unwholesome; and we’ve had five dirty and on-wholesome children, as is all dead infants, and so much the better for them, and for us besides. Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an’t read the little book wot you left. There an’t nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there wos, it wouldn’t be suitable to me. It’s a book fit for a babby, and I’m not a babby. If you was to leave me a doll, I shouldn’t nuss it.” (132)

The question of the brick-makers’ inclusion among those who are “counted” in Morris’s “collective sociability” or Buzard’s British culture or Poovey’s social body rests on more than just literacy. The rest of the brick-makers’ address defiantly avows his three

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days’ drunk and his violence against his wife Jenny, who wears a black eye; presumably these details make the possibility of the brick-makers’ inclusion into even an abstracted social body more challenging than, for example, the pathos-inducing Jo. Nevertheless, the book, reading, and address permeate the exchange at Tom-All-Alone’s in telling ways. Above, the brick-maker makes clear that his illiteracy doesn’t prevent him from recognizing Mrs. Pardiggle’s condescension to his intelligence. Indeed, while he speaks in a classed dialect—which emphasizes speech phonetics, in contrast to Mrs. Pardiggle’s or Mrs. Jellyby’s English, ready to be transcribed for a conduct book or business letter—his speech also easily sizes up Mrs. Pardiggle’s system with a rhetorical sophistication akin to that of the anonymous narrator. As he does with Jo and Krook, Dickens qualifies the brick-maker’s illiteracy, such that it appears, if permanent, not infantilizing: not grounds for disqualifying someone from belonging to a collective of “fellow creatures.” In this sense the domestic violence within Tom-all-Alone’s serves as a reminder of what “fellow creatures” would perhaps most uncomfortably encompass. A commonplace phrase for signifying concerns about the outward reach of sympathy in the nineteenth century, the notion of fellow creatures has also been invoked in philosophical discussions about “creaturely life” in ways that resonate in the conflict between the brick-maker and Mrs. Pardiggle—including in the leveling effect of his address.51 Dickens thus stages a

51 See Eric L. Santner, *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2006). Also see Diane Davis, “Creaturely Rhetorics,” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 88–94. Santner’s task is to understand creaturely life through twentieth-century writers and philosophers, contending that Benjamin in particular helps us understand W.G. Sebald’s career as “singularly obsessed with developing the means to engage with the ‘neighbor’ in creaturely expressivity” (xii), a spatial relation that Santner uses to move from ethical relations to sweeping nominal adjectives such as the human. Davis explicitly connects what she calls the “Darwinian revelation” to the “species-leveling” definition of rhetoric, rhetoric as “an underivable obligation to respond that issues from an irreducible relationality” (89). For Davis, too, corporeality (which presumes a bodily spatial relation) is central to her definition of rhetoric. I parlay the discomfort of the face-to-face scenes of address between Mrs. Pardiggle and the brick-makers into the attenuated relations of a public impossible to face. This decorporalization, in my view, is a result of Esther’s address to her readers, in which she torques away from her role as witness to her role as narrator.
confrontation between those who were understood to live in animalistic squalor and their would-be humanizing philanthropists only to undermine assumptions about the organizing principle such a dividing line provides to representations of the British public.

Highlighting this point is Mrs. Pardiggle’s use of the book (and the hierarchy she attaches to it) as a defensive gate-keeping tool, for it’s clear that Mrs. Pardiggle provides a negative example of how to use literacy. While the brick-maker makes his case, Esther recounts, Mrs. Pardiggle “pulled out a good book, as if it were a constable’s staff, and took the whole family into custody. I mean into religious custody, of course; but she really did it, as if she were an inexorable moral Policeman carrying them all off to a station house” (132). Esther’s uncharacteristically damning figurative language renders Tom-All-Alone’s the site of a pervasive overreach of social power exercised by Mrs. Pardiggle, used not to better the brick-makers’ lives, but to let them know their place and confine them there. By using the book to shield the brick-maker’s family from her definition of who belongs, Mrs. Pardiggle uses literacy to both define and police social boundaries of her view of the public.

Moreover, Esther suggests that Mrs. Pardiggle’s manner of address bolsters these boundaries: “Ada and I were very uncomfortable. We both felt intrusive and out of place; and we both thought that Mrs. Pardiggle would have got on infinitely better, if she had not such a mechanical way of taking possession of people,” she says, returning to the image of a moral policeman who takes her criminals into custody:

We both felt painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend. By whom, or how, it could be removed, we did not know; but we knew that. Even what she read and said, seemed to us to be so ill chosen for such auditors, if it had been imparted ever so modestly and with ever so much tact. As to the little book to which the man on the floor had referred, we acquired a knowledge of it afterwards; and Mr.
Jarndyce said he doubted if Robinson Crusoe could have read it, though he had no other on his desolate island. (132–33)

While Esther stops short of surmising that some other kind of address or speaker might remove the “iron barrier” that she feels separates “us and these people”—indeed she rather emphasizes her ignorance of how such a barrier could be removed at all—she does connect its intractability to Mrs. Pardiggle’s “ill chosen” address, both as spoken and read to the brick-makers. Dickens himself supplied the positive answer to Esther’s implicit question about the “iron barrier” in other writings, such as *The Uncommercial Traveler*. Esther’s voice is as far from its mode of preacherly public address as one can imagine. But the space left open by her negative account of Mrs. Pardiggle and her own tentative, sympathetic address is equally important in leaving room for the possibility of her reading audience and the likes of the brick-makers to both belong to the same British public. Responding to the embrace between Jenny and her friend following the death of Jenny’s baby, she says: “I think the best side of such people is almost hidden from us. What the poor are to the poor is little known, excepting to themselves and GOD” (134–35). Too shy to assert a public address on the scale of the anonymous narrator or the Sunday preacher, and too wary of abusing public command like Mrs. Pardiggle, Esther appeals to readers neither as public citizens nor as intimates, but as unknown figures of an indeterminate position that she can’t begin to surmise beyond the assumption of their belonging to a generally better-off “us.” On the one hand, through the “close” scene with the brick-makers at Tom-All-Alone’s—the family, the dog, the Pardiggles, Esther and Ada all cram into the stuffy room—Dickens illustrates a cross-class scene of encounter between literacy and illiteracy. On the other hand, Esther imagines an alternative reality only in negative terms: Esther’s gesture to the need for a space in which the literate and
illiterate, middle class and pauper class can coexist without the iron barrier between them doesn’t so much conjure up such a space as register the desire for a manner of address that could countenance it.

It’s this inclusive vision of the public that Dickens appeals to in his own moment of preacherly address following the death of Jo. I conclude this chapter with an extended reading of Jo’s experiences because the readerly mobility Dickens invokes through address strategies writ large in the structure of the novel come into play in more minute ways in scenes with Jo, and because he represents one of the “uncounted” in such clear and often heart-wrenching ways. The pathos of Jo’s death scene is thus rooted in the way Dickens asks readers to wonder, only after it’s too late for Jo, whether he could belong, or should belong, or indeed does belong to “A People.” To do so, Dickens enlists address to make visible disparate experiences of the world that characterized the uneven spread of literacy across the nation. First, he invites readers to vicariously experience the narrow world of Jo, which is placed in exaggerated contrast to the hyper-articulate, expansive vision of the world the narrator uses his death to proclaim. Dickens provides a verbal map of social space that, while it doesn’t quite overlay onto the tangible existence of cordoned off social spheres that keep Jo apart from the public, does ironically evoke the placelessness of Jo, who is famously directed to move on though he has no place to go (indeed, he has no place at all).

As Jo is dying, the benevolent Alan Woodcourt finds prayer unknown to him (“‘We never knowd nothink. I never knowd what it wos all about,’” Jo says), and so enjoins Jo to repeat lines of the Our Father. Their private exchange creates a faulty echo chamber in which each line of the prayer is repeated with variations:
“Jo, can you say what I say?”
“I’ll say anythink as you say, sir, for I knows it’s good.”
“Our Father.”
“Our Father!—yes, that’s wery good, sir.”
“Which Art in Heaven.”
“Art in Heaven—is the light a comin, sir?”
“It is close at hand. Hallowed be thy name!”
“Hallowed be—thy—” (734)

Besides adding to the pathos of the scene, Jo’s commentary on the prayer disturbs its rote quality and brings it, as a unique and unlearned set of words, into his own, small world. He announces his faith in the man Woodcourt (who he calls Woodcot) in front of him, not a far-off, unseeable God; he exclaims “Our Father!” as if in surprise, pausing the prayer at its most obvious moment, its first line and the name it goes by, before he adds his approval; and he drops the “which” because the subordinated clause means nothing to him, or because his voice is beginning to falter. Seemingly without his knowing, Jo’s query after the “light” follows from the word he’s just articulated, “Heaven.” In answering his question, Woodcourt’s lines are also finally altered, bringing the experience of the prayer as “close at hand” as the light.

Jo’s newness to the “Our Father” is only one of his many cultural illiteracies, which include reading and writing, and which are perhaps most remembered for disqualifying him (as the investigating coroner has it) from offering testimony in court about Nemo’s death. In this context, Jo’s inability to say the final word of the prayer (“name”) reflects back to his confession of ignorance of his surname and of religion to the coroner. Prayer, of course, is often a private event or commune, but like an official testimony for the court about Nemo’s death, the other kind of codified address he would have given should the coroner have allowed it, the rote Our Father belongs to a community to which Jo has not gained entrance. So, while prayer is far older than
literacy—one need not be literate to recite a prayer—Jo’s ignorance of the Our Father ties his cultural illiteracy to his extraneousness from the many institutions in the novel that happen to be teeming with paper and writing. Even the Our Father, Dickens seems to say, marking the distance between Jo and the precarious literacy he might have obtained from a fledgling public education system or charity school. And yet, at the moment of his death Jo comes into contact with the possibility of sharing in this social and cultural ritual, as his enthusiasm for learning from Woodcourt makes painfully clear.

Similarly, we find out that Jo does have his own sort of pre-literate sense of what “reading” means. Shortly before his dying prayer with Woodcourt, Jo asks his other benevolent friend Mr. Snagsby (who he calls Mr. Sangsby—these mispronunciations, like his dialect, accentuate his inability to write or read) if he can write “‘wery large,’” for him “‘[u]ncommon precious large.’” Delighted with an affirmative answer, he requests that Snagsby “‘write out, wery large so that any one could see it anywheres, as that I wos wery truly hearty sorry that I done it’”—that he had given his smallpox to Esther while she cared for him. “‘I never went fur to do it,’” he explains, “‘and that though I didn’t know nothink at all, I knowd as Mr. Woodcot once cried over it and wos allus grieved over it, and that I hoped as he’d be able to forgiv me in his mind. If the writin could be made to say it wery large, he might’” (731). Jo’s hope for a very largely written sign of his repentance reminds us not just of his illiteracy, but also shows us what the experience of illiteracy is like for him and how it shapes his interactions with others. We see writing when we read it; Jo sees writing rather than reads it, such that large writing signifies just as much as the words written. Putting out a sign that “any one could see it anywheres” is his version of entering public discourse through print, and he expects the sign to be both
more visible and more permanent than his own life. As these exchanges with Snagsby and Woodcourt suggest, Jo’s illiteracy limits his vision of the world and the world’s vision of him. Accordingly, Jo has been taken to be his literal and cultural illiteracy, like other Dickensian characters exhausted by their most pronounced trait, though sadder.

With both Jo’s would-be sign and his unique prayer, though, Dickens paradoxically requires readers engage in a version of social mobility that allows them to experience the very faintly perforated confines Jo’s illiteracy sets for him, a move that in turn highlights the contingency of those confines. Where the narrator momentarily recedes into the background to let the close, quiet scene of Jo’s prayer stand out—dropping reported speech tags like “he said,” as well—his account of Jo’s death culminates in an effusive address to a group of people virtually coterminous with his purview: anyone “anywheres.” This quick shift of scales from the privacy of Jo’s death scene to the virtually unlimited and unfocalizeable scope of novel readers exacerbates the tension between the disparate scales of experience presented in Jo’s meek voice and in the narrator’s omniscient purview.

So concludes the scene and the chapter in which Jo’s death takes place:

The light is come upon the dark benighted way. Dead! Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day. (734)

Indeed, the narrator makes an effectively large-lettered sign for Jo, which is rendered more permanent and more prominent than Jo. Putting the case in castigating terms, Chris Vanden Bossche argues that the narrator “must voice the critique that Jo cannot articulate, transforming his illiteracy… into a condemnation of a nation that fails to
recognize him as one of its citizens.”\textsuperscript{52} In light of this assessment, we can see the narrator’s invitation to readers to experience Jo’s last vision of the world alongside him as an attempt to right this failure. Similarly, the narrator’s itemization of his addressees gives each their place in a chain from “Your majesty” to “men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts,” in a sequence that builds towards the most common order of men and women. Dickens’s lament for Jo’s premature departure from this order suggests that it’s not the nation that hasn’t yet given Jo literacy that we should condemn, but the nation that hasn’t yet acknowledged that the illiterate, whether provisionally or irrevocably so, belong to it as well. Magnifying this point, the narrator pluralizes Jo without naming him in the final sentence (or rather sentence fragment):

“And dying thus around us, every day.” The elision of the named subject here obliquely gestures to an abstract plurality of Jos, conjured up in his absence, and nearly their own, there but not there enough to fill the subject position of a complete sentence. \textit{Bleak House} is noted for its high “body count,” but no other death in the novel brings out this kind of emphatically public address, perhaps because they are not so clearly situated at the very edge of inclusion within “A People” and thus so readily adaptable to stage a confrontation between different spaces and scales of experience.\textsuperscript{53}

To fold Jo’s unnamed set (Steinlight’s “null set”) into public space would require abstracting that space, but such is the point. For this reason, my reading here is at odds with Buzard’s account of the address following Jo’s death, which he takes, like one of

\textsuperscript{52} Vanden Bossche, “Class Discourse,” 26.

\textsuperscript{53} The closest postmortem address in tone to this one, not coincidentally, follows Nemo’s burial, another death—a death of “no one”—that escapes the compassion of the civic officials and would escape the notice of respectable London.
Jameson’s “strategies of containment,”\textsuperscript{54} to “[intimate] that each one of those men and women is addressed or ‘covered’ by those institutions, just as each is held accountable in the matter of Jo.” According to this logic, the narrator’s address does the same kind of work as institutions like the “Throne, Parliament, Church, readers.”\textsuperscript{55} I suggest it’s more accurate to say that the narrator’s address speaks to this tension between being emplaced—or being covered—and the possibility of provisionally, temporarily occupying different kinds of social spaces. The drastic change in scales from Jo’s experience to the narrator’s address further highlights this tension, and Dickens, as I discuss above, writes this kind of provisionality into the structure of the novel. That is to say, the narrator’s address articulates a model of democratic subjectification distinct from the institutional forces that would instrumentalize readers in the same way Chancery instrumentalizes everyone who comes into its fold. “Any subjectification is a disidentification,” according to Rancière: a “removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part” (\textit{Disagreement} 36). The itemization of addressees issued to an amorphous reading audience above hints at how, despite the narrator’s confident designation of each place, those subject positions are each at least imaginatively provisional; readers occupy each of them in turn.

Thus, the imaginative exercise of provisionality occasions the action of a passage in which the narrator asks readers to temporarily experience Jo’s illiteracy:

\textsuperscript{54} This concept is key to the whole novel for Buzard, as he claims: “No novel performs what Fredric Jameson has called the ‘strategies of containment’ whereby [novels] are able to project the illusion that their readings [of their own cultures] are somehow complete and self-sufficient” more studiously and self-reflexively than \textit{Bleak House}.” Buzard, \textit{Disorienting Fictions}, 108.

\textsuperscript{55} Buzard, \textit{Disorienting Fictions}, 123.
It must be a strange state to be like Jo! To shuffle through the streets, unfamiliar with the shapes, and utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols, so abundant over the shops, and at the corners of the streets, and on the doors, and in the windows! To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb! (257–58)

Here the attempt to imagine Jo’s experience is cast as a rather intimate experience. But not unlike the elided subject space around the unnamed collective of Jos “dying thus around us every day,” the repetitive use of infinitive phrases—“To shuffle,” “To see,” “to be”—abstracts Jo as a particular subject and in doing so pluralizes his experience.

Further, the infinitive tense enjoins the ambiguously numbered audience to vicariously experience his illiteracy. Anderson compellingly claims that this passage “forces the reader to break out of the comfort of being moved by represented scenes of sympathy between characters in the novel and instead to contemplate the effects of reading about the lives of those who are profoundly socially marginalized.”56 This distinction between plot and address is echoed in the logic of my overarching argument here. I would only add to this claim that just as Dickens has “the lives of those” implicate a wider social class in this “contemplation,” he draws “the reader” into a plurality as well. To understand the stakes of this contemplation, that is, we must also understand that Dickens renders the relationship between the local reader and the public (literate and illiterate) indeterminate. In encounters with illiterate characters, Dickens brings readers to reimagine the edges of their own collective as a steadily melting “iron barrier,” to borrow Esther’s phrase—and thus links them to a yet wider, abstractly defined social body.

While the sense of place within that collective is in part determined by literacy, Dickens also positions reading as the key to ranging among various subject positions across the

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novel. Rather than simply place readers on a node in what Caroline Levine calls *Bleak House*’s “narratively networked sublime,” then, Dickens asks them to compass it: to imagine its “sublime” reach beyond Jo, the brickmakers, beyond the audience.

These versions of plurality—plural through the elision of any numbered subject—provide for a space “where those of no account are counted,” “where anyone can be counted,” and thus where Jo’s permanent exclusion from the social body on the level of plot is revalued as a site for abstract inclusivity. In this way, Dickens turns the injunction repeatedly given to Jo to “move on” back on to his own readers. Titling the chapter featuring this injunction “Moving On,” Dickens enjoins readers to set an example of such mobility, the very thing Dickens accuses parliament of failing to do for Jo. “Do you hear, Jo?” the narrator asks in an odd turn of his address that rhetorically aligns him with readers: “It is nothing to you or to any one else, that the great lights of the parliamentary sky have failed for some few years, in this business, to set you the example of moving on” (308). The narrator here points literally to the unendingness of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, a symptom of Chancery’s regular dysfunction. But the constable’s literal meaning is for Jo to get out of town, which carries the larger message that he does not belong. Jo’s response tells us what we already know, that he has nowhere else to belong, either: “‘O my eye! Where can I move to!’” he asks. “‘My instructions are, that you are to move on. I have told you so five hundred times,’” the constable responds. Jo again protests: “‘But where?’” (308). His inability to think of a place to go isn’t an assertion that he belongs where he’s been, Tom-all-Alone’s, so much as an unwitting revelation that he has nowhere, that anywhere is nowhere to him, that all places might as well be

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Tom-all-Alone’s, that his identity is in all places “uncounted.” In no place does he have “a part.” Meanwhile, the constable’s declaration points to the blind institutionalism behind Jo’s exclusion: a bureaucratic middle man, he repeats his instructions coming from some anonymous source like a machine, five hundred times. All of this is to say that when the narrator repurposes the term “moving on” to accuse Chancery of hypocrisy, Dickens invites us to intertwine various versions of “moving on”: Chancery’s stagnation entails Jo’s exclusion, while making real social progress would entail recognizing Jo as part of the public, just as encouraged by the narrator’s address to “you”—you meaning Jo and readers.

The political implications of the relationship between these complicated scenes of address and the spatial imagination of the novel, particularly as it compasses an emerging mass public, inspire the epigraph to this chapter taken from Rancière: “Politics is not made up of power relationships,” he claims, “it is made up of relationships between worlds,” that is, “between the order of inegalitarian distribution of social bodies … and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general.”58 Both the anonymous narrator and Esther inscribe the conflict between these two orders in their narratives, as they survey and attempt to turn away from the injustices and stratifications they present to readers. And both imply that readers are the ones who may experience the fundamental equality of the second “order” by tacitly positioning them in a non-place, where the containment associated with the “police logic of roles and parts”59 of the first order evaporates. But, further, through the novel’s structure of alternating address, Dickens shows that reading isn’t simply an exercise in escapism or a sympathetic thought

58 Rancière, *Disagreement*, 42.
59 Ibid., 37.
experiment. Rather, by instigating readers’ movement between two disparately scaled points of view, the structure of address more specifically asks readers to navigate the line between social confinement and the radical equality of a democratic reading public—that is, a public in which any one at all, no one in particular can address anyone at all, no one in particular. The perforation of this line helps us make sense of the charged scenes of address around the novel’s illiterate characters.

Dickens thus ultimately uses address to situate readers in a less delimited, more indeterminately organized third world of the novel, one that shadows what critics have sometimes called “the two worlds of Bleak House” in reference to Esther’s realm of privacy and domesticity and the anonymous narrator’s vision of a broader British public. In this context, the placeless cross-sweep Jo, who redefines the limits of these worlds, in part by appearing relatively more often in both narratives and sitting at the center of several crucial moments of address, represents not just an illiterate pauper but the need to open the British public. Dickens creates that public for his readers through democratizing address, even before it exists in actuality: a third world beyond Bleak House in which readers witness and deconstruct the social constraints the novel documents both from within and above.

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60 See, for instance, Ellen Serlen, “The Two Worlds of Bleak House,” ELH 43, no. 4 (1976): 551–66. Also see Dona Budd, “Language Couples in Bleak House,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 49, no. 2 (1994): 196–97 for a helpful compilation of many early claims (from the 1950s to 70s) made about the dual-narrative structure. Budd summarizes the “critical debate about the double narrative” as a focus on “its supposed failure or success was a narrative and structural device” (196); more recent analysis of the double structure, like Buzard’s, is much more conceptually driven and nuanced than this reflection suggests.
CHAPTER FOUR

Un-framing Address in Three Gothic Frame Narratives

Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other.

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

One can only assume what would happen if Jedediah Cleishbotham discovered that, unlike the paratextual frame of Scott’s novel in which he resides, a different kind of framing device could give him access to the audience he so craves: tangible addressees invested in his material existence. He’d abandon his role as Scott’s loquacious editor and take up residence in a gothic novel—perhaps *Frankenstein*, published the same year as Scott’s *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* (1818). The nineteenth-century gothic frame tale is predicated on populating the field of address with a cast of embodied interlocutors. The fantastical gesture to “face-to-face” speaker-addressee relationships of the realist novel becomes the concrete organizing principle of the narrative structure in the three novels I examine here: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). If *Bleak House* experiments with narrative structure as a formal technique for addressing readers as contingent subjects
within an amorphous *people*, these novels borrow the paradigmatic form of gothic storytelling—frame narratives—to draw readers into relationships with otherness that test the limit points of this abstraction.

I propose that we take the growth of the reading public as the necessary context for understanding not just the kinds of outward-looking address discussed in the previous chapters, but also the dramatization of interlocutor relationships in the frame narrative. In animating relationships of address and response around the exchange of narrative, Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad implicitly address their own readers as interlocutors embedded, like their characters, in a larger field of address. Following Andrew Miller’s premise that “the description and display of responsiveness can elicit greater alertness on the part of the reader,”¹ I suggest that Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad “elicit greater alertness” in readers about their position relative to an expanding reading public. In this sense, such responsiveness not only magnetizes ethical relations (Miller’s focus) but political ones. If literary democracy hinges on writing that addresses “any one at all, no one in particular,”² then what does embodied address look like within the space in which any one at all, no one particular coexist? And what does the representation of address in this space suggest about the parameters of social inclusivity?

This chapter answers these questions by examining how Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad use address to stage crises of delimitation both on a structural level and in local scenes of address and response. That is, they imagine how the expansion of the reading public destabilizes the space of individual interlocutors, above all by eroding the social boundaries around speakers and addressees. Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad invite readers to

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see themselves as part of a new kind of socially inclusive—but necessarily virtual—reading public. Where the preceding chapters accounted for the establishment of a democratic principle of address for a growing reading public, here I argue that address in the gothic frame narrative advances literary democracy by providing a site for un-framing its interlocutors and thereby gesturing to the larger public to which they belong. In what follows I preview how this formal effect works on structural and local scales; how it is related to the gothic genre’s role within the history of nineteenth-century reading; and how its political implications for literary democracy depend on pointedly virtual inclusiveness.

First, in local scenes of address across each of the novels below, eavesdroppers, ghosts, mis-directions, misattributions, and other complications to face-to-face modes of address fracture and multiply the loci of address and response. This tendency suggests that the shadow of the reading public and the presence of otherness—as a sense of a sublime expansiveness lurking behind localized interlocutors—undermines the pretense to individuated, clearly delimited address and response. Note too that the distinction between the extratextual addressees in previous chapters and the “embodied” addressees of this chapter involves the relative characterization and individuation of those populating the gothic frame tale. Of course, one can embody an abstraction or a principle or a historical phenomena, as, for example, *Frankenstein’s* Mrs. Saville serves as a surrogate for the reading audience, or as the Creature serves to represent any number of things, from the novel to the proletariat to the reading public. It’s the tension between the delimitation of a singular character and these larger scales of representation that renders these interlocutors such fruitful means for responding to the reading public.
On a structural level, the frame narrative multiplies speakers and listeners and embeds interlocutors in a larger field of address. Readers proceed through a series of frames into the depths of the innermost tale, the least accessible to them—as the commonly invoked phrase would suggest, into the heart of the novel’s darkness. That is, the spatial topography of the frame narrative tracks readers along a path towards greater proximity to figures of otherness, figures who not only bespeak the growth of the reading public but are themselves associated with multiplicity and expansiveness. At the center of *Frankenstein* sits the Creature; at the center of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff; at the center of *Heart of Darkness*, the native Africans of the Congo. Or, more specifically, not these figures alone but their relationship with another interlocutor organizes the innermost embedded narrative, an arrangement that, like their central position, emphasizes an inescapable relationality to otherness over its exclusion. These are intensely—gothically—close relationships, relationships in which two subjects all but merge together. Frankenstein, author of his own monster and undoing and now also the widely misapplied name for the Creature has become his creation; Catherine famously makes a claim for complete intersubjectivity in her declaration *I am Heathcliff*; Kurtz has been absorbed into Africa, as the vulgar phrase “gone native” often used to describe him suggests. To put it schematically, stories-within-stories culminate in subjects-within-subjects.

In their intense, gothic closeness, these relationships reflect attenuated social boundaries that the spread of reading promoted by bringing literacy to lower classes. In this way, the form of these gothic novels highlights the visibility of new readers that the historical phenomena of the gothic as a genre facilitated. From its surge to popularity in
the eighteenth century, the gothic was associated with the spread of reading outside educational contexts and the literary elite to new constituencies of readers to whom it was often aimed, particularly working class, women, and young readers. Whether or not new reading constituencies were registered as other in the sense that literary critics now mean by that term, their incorporation in a growing reading public provoked debate about how to organize its internal and external principles of delimitation (who belongs where, who belongs at all). The gothic, in other words, is uniquely suited to thematize the other and the multitude at the same time. Racial otherness in particular runs through my examples, most explicitly in *Heart of Darkness*, but also implicitly for Heathcliff as well as the Creature, whose physical differences include ambiguously racialized skin. In all of these novels, racial difference amplifies the visibility of problems around delimiting native Britishness for reading audiences; indeed, the shift towards explicit racial otherness follows the spread of literacy across the nation, so that the limiting edge at the end of the century is drawn outside of Britain. Throughout the century, the expansion of reading provoked a set of analogous problems around social and cultural delimitation, if in less visible ways. Thus, given the incorporation of reading audiences by way of the frame narrative, I take these figures of otherness to signify, even beyond race, the expanded limits of inclusivity in the era of a growing reading public.

Historical debates about the moral benefits or deprivations of women, children, servants and other laboring classes reading fiction, and gothic fiction in particular, show how contentious the issue of defining the organizing principles of the reading public was for writers and critics. Recall that even while promising the interest of *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* to a universal audience, for instance, William Chambers still
confidently denigrated the “ordinary trash about Italian castles, and daggers, and ghosts in the blue chamber, and similar nonsense” he saw targeting young female readers.\(^3\) Scott indexes a general concern with how the taste for the supernatural both amassed the broadest numbers of the reading public and compelled commentators to differentiate among those numbers. He suggests in rather oblique language that “It was not when society, however differing in degree and station, was leveled and confounded by one dark cloud of ignorance, involving the noble as well as the mean, that it need be scrupulously considered to what class of persons the author addressed himself, or with what species of decoration he ornamented his story.”\(^4\) Casting ignorance as a great social equalizer, Scott proposes that a more widely literate public demands modes of address that slice up the reading public into various classes: if the appetite for the supernatural is universal, taste must be refined by form. Scott is referring, of course, to the general demeanor authors adopt in speaking to their audiences, not the specific conventions of address that I focus on here. Yet it is through convention that the formal structure of the gothic frame tale animates Scott’s concern, as it forces readers, along with their characterized proxies, to be addressed unscrupulously—by all sorts, by representatives of the mass.

Thus, though pitched at a higher aesthetic tone compared to salacious newspaper fiction, novels like *Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness* respond through their form to the social implications of the gothic’s vast readership. Hence the figures of otherness embodied within them represent multiplicity and expansiveness in their own right, literally or figuratively: the creature in his collection of others’ bodies;


Heathcliff in his representation of expanded British horizons *viz.* the slave trade internationally and the Yorkshire moors domestically; the nameless subjects of the Congo in their conflation with the vastness of the continent that Marlow and Kurtz survey. Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad thus cast the challenge that readers face in positioning themselves as addressees as a challenge of negotiating the scale of their reading experience with the scale of the public to which the novel continually reminds them they belong.

The gothic novel is fertile ground for exploring such tensions in scale because, in addition to multiplying speakers and addressees, enlivening the other and the multitude, it accentuates the strangeness of de-localizing individual points of view through its characteristic atmospherics: horror, perversion, confusion, haunting, and so on. Certainly the various interlocutors in *Frankenstein, Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness* are cast as a “species of intimates,” to borrow Garrett Stewart’s term. Stewart’s claim that the frame tale and extradiegetic reader address *both* extrapolate the reading act in the narrative demonstrates why we should take the broad range of conventions of address in nineteenth-century fiction together. In my reading, however, Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad, not part of what he calls “the whole realist program,”5 rather turn to account the unique formulation of address and response in the gothic novel, emphasizing gothicized eeriness in the hint that these interlocutor relationships are not in fact fully contained, or bounded, or local, that even the material, embodied spaces that *would* contain them do not provide sufficient frames.

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5 Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 268). Citing all the authors in this study in relation to this issue, Stewart says: “Less a specialized epistemological apparatus imported from the discursive brackets of eighteenth-century fiction and willed first to Mary Shelley and Walter Scott, then to Emily Brontë, and on through the late Victorian gothic revival to Conrad’s early modernism, the frame tale appears instead as the bared device of the whole Victorian fictional compact,” that is, the “conscription of the audience as a species of intimates” (268–69).
It is in light of this problem that I have taken the epigraph to this chapter—“Let’s face it. We’re undone by each other”—from Judith Butler’s reflections on otherness in a different context, post-9/11 political crisis in the United States. Butler happens to offer a strikingly apt description of the formal effects of the expansion of the reading public on the gothic novel:

I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very “I” who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very “I” is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations.6

The clear causality in Butler’s argument—relations with otherness destabilizes first-person speech—accords with the gothic novel’s response to the new scale of social inclusivity fueled by the spread of reading and literacy. Butler proposes that coming into contact with the other prompts the storyteller to question his delimiting edges and “expose, somewhere along the way” their artificiality; even classes of persons delimited by social and political identities, she goes on to say, experience this undoing.7

*Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Heart of Darkness* lend structure to this description by bringing readers sequentially closer to figures of otherness, routing them through a series of “normal” addressees who in turn address the reader from a first-person point of view. Stories are “stopped in the midst of the telling” only to be taken up by others. As a matter of structural principle, speakers become addressees: they become the *you* whom they once addressed. In this sense, the interlocutors in the gothic frame tale instantiate the leveled interchangeability of address and response on which literary

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7 Ibid., 25.
democracy depends.

Critics who have examined the frame narratives of these novels have stressed, with echoes of their gothic qualities, that the potent forces brewing in the center of the novel spill out and over into other frames. For example, writing on *Heart of Darkness*, Jeffrey Williams maintains that the “box within a box” structure wrongly implies a “spatial model of enclosure” that in turn implies “subordination” and symmetry. For similar reasons, Barthes appears ambivalent about the term “nested” in his reading of Balzac’s *Sarrasine*: “The two parts of the text are not detached from one another according to the so-called principle of ‘nested narratives,’” he says, though he goes on to use that term. Barthes wants to show that castration is not just the subject of the embedded tale of Balzac’s story, but runs through the exchange of narrative into the outer frame. Citing Barthes, Peter Brooks wants to show the same thing for *Frankenstein’s* “monsterism,” which he says ramifies across the narratives, from the monster through the outer frames to readers. All of this talk of merger, dissolution, massiveness, and otherness understandably evokes anxiety. The history of reading in the nineteenth century

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10 Peter Brooks, “‘Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts’: Language, Nature, and Monstrosity,” in *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley’s Novel*, ed. George Levine and U. C. Knoepflmacher (Berkeley: U of California P, 1979), 220. Brooks’s claims about Maupassant’s “A Ruse” and many Balzac novels reiterates a similar logic: of the latter he asks, “Does not reading—having read—put him, like it or not, on the side of fallen knowledge?” (218). The word he repeatedly uses for this forced complicity, “contamination,” describes not only the content of the story but also “the passing-on of the virus of narrative, the creation of the fevered need to retell” (221). Contamination is often an appropriate word to describe the kinds of encounters many of the frame narrators describe below have with figures of otherness like the Creature, Heathcliff, and the native Africans. But in relation to readers and reading the word seems to signify too material or bodily a relation for the ultimate mode of abstraction I want to emphasize in this chapter. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992).
and the gothic as a genre are often understood to be about cultural and political anxieties in a nearly indivisible way. One hears their reverberation in Patrick Brantlinger’s reading of *Frankenstein*, in which the Creature, as a “disfigured figure of monstrous articulation and literacy,”\(^{11}\) stands for “both the novel and the reading Monster”—which is to say “ourselves as readers (members of Burke’s ‘swinish multitude,’ whether we like it or not).”\(^{12}\) Brantlinger’s claim that “text and Monster imaginatively fuse” through this double-duty metaphorical capacity, thereby “threatening the boundaries of civil society” echoes the highest pitch of nineteenth-century anxiety about new constituencies of readers.\(^{13}\) More fundamentally, the gothic monster (in Judith Halberstam’s words) “can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative,” and so “functions…when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body.”\(^{14}\)

Without disputing the historical connections between gothic fiction, new readers, and cultural anxiety, I suggest critics and theorists have already richly elucidated such links and that we can turn, by degrees, away from anxiety. If we’re not “undone” by each other, Butler notes, “we’re missing something”; there is an inevitability about the “disposition of ourselves outside ourselves” that is both more fundamental than the reactionary response to gothic fiction and part of the historicizable context of an emergent mass reading public poised for future growth.\(^{15}\) In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Sedgwick suggests that “stories-within/etc.” conduces to the trope of

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\(^{12}\) Ibid., 68.

\(^{13}\) Ibid.


unspeakability by indicating “the difficulty the story has in getting itself told.” My reading takes the multiplication of speakers and their addressees as conducive to something more like unlocateability, as these novels condense key gothic conventions, merger and multiplicity, “the other” and others. In combination these conventions undermine clearly delimited fields of address not by telegraphing readerly merger into an all-absorbing undifferentiated mass, but by gesturing to multiple and specifically virtual relationships to otherness within an abstractly drawn space that accommodates a British public stretched by the spread of literacy and reading.

Put differently, the concrete map of Britain across which literacy spreads requires readers to imagine the space that they virtually co-occupy in increasingly un-framed, abstract terms. The trajectory towards the abstract forms this imagination takes will by now be familiar: over the course of the three novels under focus here, I trace a narrative that moves in this case towards the gothicized abstraction of address. In *Frankenstein*, while Shelley destabilizes the field of address, readers are nevertheless oriented towards embodied figures who all share an elevated language and some sense of a defined speech community; in *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë’s cacophony of embodied interlocutors cannot sustain this kind of commonality, notwithstanding the emphasis on the Yorkshire moors; in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad’s penchant for ambiguity erodes the meager gestures to embodiment that would delimit his storytellers on board the *Nellie*. Three novels don’t provide the same evidentiary storyline as the three careers, as in the second chapter, of

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16 Eve Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (New York: Routledge, 1986), 13. Also see William Nelles, who notes that the conventionality of this structure is not exclusively found in the gothic. Nelles engages with a host of narratologists, most notably Genette and Mieke Bal. He most extensively discusses *The Thousand and One Nights*, though many other examples crop up (none of them gothic) to support of his opening claim that the “device of the ‘story within the story,’ variously labeled ‘frame,’ ‘Chinese box,’ ‘Russian doll,’ or ‘embedded’ narrative, is so widespread among the narrative literature of all cultures and periods as to approach universality” (79). “Stories within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 25 (1992): 79–96.
course, but this trajectory is nevertheless further suggestive of the way in which democratic address, in un-framing the audience, projects its figuration onto an inclusive, limitless public.

This relationship between democracy and abstraction helps explain a paradox that arises in all three of these novels: why multiply speakers and addressees only to shrink the cast of interlocutors? Frankenstein, Catherine, and Kurtz’s deaths suggest that relationships veering on mergers with otherness are not sustainable. (Again, Butler resonates strikingly literally in this context: “passion and grief and rage,” she says, “tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not are own, irreversibly, if not fatally.”17) These novels tell stories that culminate in over-close relationships—and to this extent, their discursive structures reinforce those stories. But that same structure means these deaths aren’t disappearances: it allows their narratives to live on, sustained by the series of speakers and addressees surrounding them who transmit them to readers as text. Taking plot as the basis for an allegory of the reading public, one would think that death indicates diminishment—not the case for a reading public that grew continuously throughout the century. Taking the spatial topography of address (both on structural and local levels) as the basis for an allegory about the reading public, however, one sees that these deaths matter primarily and paradoxically in the way they do not matter. That is, they matter because they highlight the fact that literary democracy renders individual engagement subsumable to a broader phenomenon that necessarily exceeds the scale of local, fixed interlocutors. Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad thus put plot and discourse in tension with one another to figure an analogous tension within the emerging mass reading public: localized, delimited

interlocutors, collectively constituting a socially inclusive space that reaches far beyond
them, find themselves written into the fabric of a democratic public that transcends the
material space of their relations.

I. “I, Frankenstein”: Monstrous Eloquence and the Emerging Mass Reading Public

In Mary Shelley’s now famous account of the genesis of Frankenstein, she offered an embryonic version of the tale, first formulated in a dream, to a ghost story exchange struck up with fellow travelers, including her husband Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, and others in their circle. Percy Shelley recreates the scene in the preface to the 1818 edition of the novel, where he writes in the position of its anonymous author: “The season was cold and rainy, and in the evenings we crowded around a blazing wood fire, and occasionally amused ourselves with some German stories of ghosts,” which, he explains, “excited in us a playful desire of imitation.”18 Literary historians have compared Mary Shelley’s later account with her husband’s 1818 preface and with the accounts of her fellow travelers to determine just who was there, who said what, who responded how. But this endeavor at historicity based on the anecdotal details of Shelley’s interlocutors—really an intellectual coterie—becomes untenable at the larger scale of her reading audience. The novel goes on to participate in the more abstract process of textual circulation between anonymous author and anonymous readers, the very historical phenomenon thought to threaten the continued existence of the storytelling compact between known, embodied interlocutors. Even while the 1818 preface elaborates an intimate storytelling scene, the anonymous publication of the novel that allows Percy

Shelley to occupy the author’s voice undermines the assumption that, thanks to such closeness, we know who is speaking.

On the strength of Mary Shelley’s later reference to the novel as her own “hideous progeny,” critics have taken Frankenstein and the Creature in particular to be a reflection on this literary history.19 According to Halberstam, for example, the disfigured but powerful Creature composed of dead bodies is “an allegory of the history of the novel.”20 Through its formal structure of address, Frankenstein reflects not just on literary history but also on the history of reading. After a decades-long rise that peaked in the 1790s, an era in which the French Revolution intensified the association between the gothic and the masses, both the gothic and the most virulent critiques against it had begun to feel outmoded by the time Napoleon was defeated at Waterloo in 1815.21 With Frankenstein, the second generation of gothic fiction had entered its twilight. What remained was a reading public greater in size and more visible than ever before. Although the gothic in its hyper-conventionalized form was on the wane, the genre had incited a feverish conversation about new readers, novel reading, and the notion of a reading public that was still escalating. This was the moment, recall, that Samuel Taylor Coleridge entered the fray with his observations on “odd burs and kecksies,” including “the misgrowth of our luxuriant activity,” the reading public.22

Shelley writes these cruxes over delimiting the field of address—address issued

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20 Halberstam, Skin Shows, 23. Also see Daniel Cottom, “Frankenstein and the Monster of Representation,” SubStance 9, no. 3 (1980): 60.
22 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Statesman’s Manual; or, The Bible, the best guide to political skill and foresight: a lay sermon, addressed to the higher classes of society with an appendix, containing comments and essays connected with the study of the inspired writings (London: Gale and Fenner, 1816), 45.
first to a set of embodied interlocutors and then to an emerging anonymous mass reading public—into the narrative logic of her novel. While *Frankenstein* of course addresses its reading audience, its structure hinges on a series of embodied interlocutor relationships: an English sea-captain traveling in the Arctic, Walton writes to his sister at home in England, Mrs. Saville; he encloses the transcription of the story that Frankenstein has narrated to him on board the ship; embedded in Frankenstein’s tale is the story of his Creature, who gives an account of himself to his creator on the side of Montanvert; this account further includes the relation of Safie’s tale to the de Lacey family from whom he (secretly, until his disastrous revelation of himself) learns language. Shelley explains in her preface to the 1831 edition of the novel that the original ghost story began with the published version’s fourth chapter, where Frankenstein announces, “It was a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils,” his Creature. That the process of flanking this narrative with a chain of storytellers and addressees occurred alongside that of amplifying the germ story into a novel suggests that the multiplication of its addressees is meant to highlight the incorporation of the novel’s readers into its orbit of interlocutors. But incorporated as what? As individuals, like their closest proxy, Mrs. Saville? Or as an anonymous reading audience of unspecified size and scope? Shelley’s answer—both—involves showing how individual interlocutors cannot but be embedded within a larger field of address. Indeed, the addition of a cast of interlocutors in the development of the story into a novel points more generally to Shelley’s interest in the question of how to redraw the limits of her audience, both textually and extratextually. Through both the structure of the novel and the tendency to destabilize

scenes of address, she casts the delocalization of embodied speakers and addressees as an inevitability of an expanding reading public. Like Scott’s fiction, the early role *Frankenstein* plays in the trajectory that this chapter traces alongside that expansion involves glimpsing the future of a literary democracy by emphasizing embodiment only to ironically undermine it. In short, Shelley enlists gothic convention to highlight how this delocalizing phenomenon, the rise of a mass reading public, “overwrites” the embodied field of address.

Given the protagonistic weight Frankenstein and his Creature eventually carry, they belatedly emerge from the series of frames buffering their narratives. This effect builds momentum towards their dramatic confrontations while situating otherness as a deeply embedded relational position. The outer frames are significant on their own, however, because in anticipating the most intensely gothic merger at the center of the novel, they show readers how even their more conventional surrogates undermine the pretense to speak to delimited audiences. First, Percy Shelley’s preface written in the position of anonymous author allows him to inhabit Mary Shelley’s voice, forecasting the way in which the novel’s main speakers, Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature, seem to speak not just to each other but also through each other. Second, Mary Shelley positions these relationships in relation to a figurative proxy for the reading public, Walton’s sister, Mrs. Saville. As an epistolary addressee, Mrs. Saville provides a pretense for the delivery of the tale in textual form. The novel begins on this note:

To Mrs. Saville, England
St. Petersburgh, Dec. 11\textsuperscript{th}, 17—
You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings. I arrived here yesterday, and my first task is to assure my dear sister of my welfare and increasing confidence in the success of my undertaking. (5)
Even if we take her to stand for women readers in particular, the allusions to specificity around Mrs. Saville are in tension with the vastness of the public that she is asked to represent. Like most of Shelley’s English reading audience, Mrs. Saville is neither on a naval expedition in the Arctic like her brother, nor on an ill-fated Promethean adventure spanning all Europe like Victor Frankenstein. As much as they connect Walton and Frankenstein, these gendered plot lines separate Mrs. Saville from the action of the narrative. Along with the European tour that briefly takes Frankenstein and his friend Clerval to Britain, Mrs. Saville brings England into the geographical orbit of the novel, and casts it specifically as the place of its readership: rather than play a role within it, Mrs. Saville stands for the consumption of gothic fiction.

When Walton directly addresses his sister, then, he indirectly but forwardly solicits the reading audience’s attention as well: “I feel a cold northern breeze play upon my cheeks, which braces my nerves, and fills me with delight,” he tells Mrs. Saville in his first letter: “Do you understand this feeling?” (5). We really may wonder if we understand his feeling; Mrs. Saville cannot. Given her status as a textual marker rather than a real addressee, Stewart casts Mrs. Saville as “mere narratee in contrast to your role as reader,” such that “you therefore intercept the letters… in her place.”24 Stewart suggests this interception catalyzes an engaged, active reading. Shelley also enjoins readers to consider this very notion of Mrs. Saville as “mere narratee.” To intercept Walton’s letters in her place is a complicated endeavor if readers are both “outside” the narrative with her, and yet asked to step beyond her to actively engage with the other interlocutors. Moreover, readers face a scalar problem: how to size a larger reading

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audience up against a singular, faintly embodied representative. In this way, Walton’s opening letter invites us to compare the conventional way address points to problems of delimitation that the novel later elaborates as a gothicized merger. Through Mrs. Saville, Shelley invites readers into a relationship with the other speakers in the novel and to consider their own relationships to an inclusive social collective, beyond even the bounds of species. At the same time, Mrs. Saville is a problem of delimitation, a singular representative of a larger mass. Shelley thus uses the epistolary address of the novel to begin with a rather conventionalized version of delimiting address, akin to the gendered, singularized “dear reader” or “gentle reader.” That is to say, she pulls the series of embodied addressees that Walton’s narrative opens up into a different kind of literary scene, one dominated by textual address.

Shelley reveals the shadow of a silent, anonymous reading public in scenes of embodied address as well. Like with Mrs. Saville, Shelley ropes readers into scenes otherwise “contained by” the narrative of *Frankenstein*. Frankenstein moralizes to Walton, for example, about a “human being in perfection”:

> If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Caesar would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed. (37–38)

This address to Walton, who earlier confesses to yearning for a teacherly friend to “regulate” his mind (9), is also clearly meant to teach readers. Even while Frankenstein’s singular “you” refers to Walton, the premise of his speech, an ideal of how a “human being in perfection ought” to be, knowingly winks at a wider audience. Indeed,
generalizing language takes over from the singular address almost immediately, as Frankenstein moves from “if the study to which you apply yourself” to “if no man.” This kind of moralization is found all over eighteenth-century gothic fiction. In echoing that convention in this passage, Shelley both addresses her specific readers and casts them among a wider readership of the gothic genre. Just as the reader shadows Walton as an addressee, then, a wider reading public shadows the implicitly addressed reader. With Frankenstein’s address hovering between two different addressees, textual and extratextual, Shelley illustrates the difficulty of delimiting the reading audience: Frankenstein sounds both like a novelistic convention and a teacherly friend. This difficulty points to a central feature of democratic address: because it cannot choose its addressee, it necessarily escapes any singularized target.

Accentuating this ambiguation of the field of address, Walton proves an ironic target for Frankenstein’s message about the implications of unchecked ambition, especially as exemplified on a global scale. His expedition to the Arctic violates Frankenstein’s lesson about the value of contentedness with one’s “domestic affections,” whether domestic refers to home or home country. Shelley invites readers to see this irony not only by echoing a novelistic address convention but also by emphasizing that Walton cannot himself see it. “But I forget that I am moralizing in the most interesting part of my tale; and your looks remind me to proceed,” Frankenstein says after delivering his message (38). Walton is evidently less able to pursue a didactic friendship, his original aim, than a sympathetic one. The connection Frankenstein’s moral explicitly draws between his and Walton’s ambition is a milder version of the connection between Frankenstein and the Creature, whose feats beyond thinkable human capacity make them
both partly inhuman. And in foreshadowing that more intense rendition of the dangers of ambition, Frankenstein’s moralizing address is fated to fail. The address is lost on Walton, the actual addressee, and while Frankenstein purports to have learned this lesson, he later relapses into “unchecked ambition” to chastise Walton’s crew for turning back on their expedition. In effect, the speaker and addressee of this moralizing address are interchangeable.

Walton therefore also anticipates the gothic version of this slippage, through which readers virtually come into contact with the mass figured not as audience but as other. First, in occupying the position of letter-writer and oral addressee, Walton blurs the line between oral and textual exchange. Second, prioritizing emotional proximity over the intellectual distance that would facilitate lesson giving and taking, Walton undermines the line between speaker and addressee. He resolves “to record, as nearly as possible in his own words, what [Frankenstein] has related during the day” (18). Walton pursues his dedication to an authentic translation by adopting and inhabiting Frankenstein’s first-person point of view, as if he could be both speaker and addressee in the same breath.25 Besides a superimposed break marking “Chapter I,” this move into another first-person perspective begins unannounced: “I am by birth a Genevese; and my family is one of the most distinguished of that republic,” the next narrative begins (18). The form of Walton’s re-narration thus suggests his absorption into the most explicitly gothic relationship at the novel’s center, even as his stated expectation for his future reading self’s “interest and sympathy” (18) reveals his obliviousness to the strangeness of his own choice to occupy

25 For Jeanne Britton, this first-person absorption and its contrast to the quotation marks that “distance” the creature’s speech is one instance of Shelley bringing Adam Smith’s theory of sympathetic spectatorship “firmly into the genre of the novel.” “Sympathy determines the novel’s frame structure,” Britton argues, in part because when sympathy falters, “textual production approximates, preserves, and replaces the visual and auditory engagement that sympathy would otherwise allow.” Britton, “Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein,” Studies in Romanticism 48, no. 1 (2009): 5–6.
Frankenstein’s first-person point of view. That is, if Walton finds the first-person transcription of Frankenstein’s narrative the best way to recreate the conditions for sympathetic response in his later reading, it also draws him beyond sympathy into a vicarious experience of Frankenstein’s ventures. In this position he experiences what Frankenstein has already experienced: while his creation commits murder, he too is guilty: “I, not in deed, but in effect, was the true murderer,” Frankenstein says (72).

Walton’s choice to occupy Frankenstein’s first-person point of view sets in motion the deterioration of delimiting boundaries around the novel’s central speakers and addressees, contributing to the challenge of distinguishing who is speaking when and where.

As the novel’s series of interlocutors bring us towards the overly close, inextricable relationship between him and his Creator, the uniformly rhetorical voices of the novel’s main speakers reinforces this closeness: Walton, Frankenstein, and the Creature slip into one another in what Beth Newman refers to as a “a sameness of voice that blurs the distinctions between tellers instead of heightening them.”26 This “sameness of voice” levels the speakers and addressees across the frame narrative, gesturing to a literary democracy predicated on the possibility of any one at all addressing any one at all. In its own time, the novel was perceived as radical because of the materialist animation the Creature. This reading revolves around the Creature’s perverse figuration of otherness and multiplicity, the same features that interest me here, though I ultimately

26 Beth Newman, “Narratives of Seduction and the Seductions of Narrative: The Frame Structure of Frankenstein,” *ELH* 53, no. 1 (1986): 147. Newman argues that this sameness lends Frankenstein’s narrative the kind of “autonomy” texts have; if voices are associated with unique and localized speaking positions, texts are de-personalized and transportable. Though she notes that Mrs. Saville and the novel’s readers remain separated from what she characterizes as the “seductive” power of voice despite their interest in the gothic “power” at the center of the text, Newman doesn’t see this tension as a reflection on the expansion of the reading public so much as an inevitable outcome of their outsideness.
locate their implications in the inevitability of delocalized address in the context of a
growing, diversifying mass reading public rather than scientific and theological debates.
In this sense, the political register of the gothic in *Frankenstein* is “radical” not simply
because of scientific theory or political philosophy, but because of the way address in the
novel forecasts literary democracy by staging crises of delimitation among its
interlocutors.

Even more explicitly than the moments in which Shelley destabilizes the field of
address in the outermost frame, the effect of speaking in one style and in one shared first-
person pronoun overwrites the individuation of specific interlocutors. Shelley
consistently links the Creature’s otherness with massiveness and multiplicity, even when
he appears in singular acts or as a singular figure. Frankenstein’s beloved Elizabeth, for
example, recounts her life before and after the Creature murdered young William
Frankenstein: “‘Before, I looked upon the accounts of vice and injustice, that I read in
books or heard from others, as tales of ancient days, or imaginary evils; at least they were
remote… but now misery has come home, and men appear to me as monsters thirsting for
each other’s blood’” (71). Framing Elizabeth’s new experience of the world as a contrast
to the storytelling tradition most familiar to her, with echoes of gothic fiction in
-particular, Shelley indirectly speaks to the audience of her gothic novel. The spatializing
language Elizabeth uses to describe the misery that fiction once kept “remote” but that
has now “come home” aptly describes the proximity to otherness Shelley’s frame
-narrative creates for the audience. In another reproduction of the line between merger and
multiplicity, Elizabeth goes on to rephrase this feeling in terms of the mass: “‘I feel as if I
were walking on the edge of a precipice, towards which thousands are crowding, and
endeavoring to plunge me into the abyss’” (71–72). Highlighting the virtuality of this experience, Elizabeth describes a proximity to otherness—men as “monsters”—despite never having seen the monster whose singular actions have provoked this feeling, and links this otherness to the mass of “thousands.” Thousands of what—monsters or men—is tellingly left undefined, like the limits of the abyss.

This link between mass and monstrous otherness informs some of the most significant readings of the Creature. Franco Moretti reads him as a representation of the proletariat, similarly “denied a name and an individuality” and joined to Frankenstein in a dialectical relationship analogous to the one that “connects capital with wage labor.”

For Anne Mellor he is “an embodiment of the revolutionary French nation, a gigantic body politic.” And Brantlinger’s reading of the Creature as an embodiment of the mass reading public is rooted in a parallel to “the working-class autodidacts whose autobiographies serve as a rich source of evidence in E.P. Thompson’s Making of the English Working Classes.”

And yet it’s not the Creature’s “articulation and literacy” that is monstrous (to anyone besides Frankenstein himself), but his actions. His monstrous appearance, too, is pointedly in tension with his eloquence. Thus, if the plot elaborates Frankenstein’s struggle to kill off his progeny, the novel’s discourse—including the Creature’s eloquent addresses—reveals how futile his efforts are. Weighing the Creature’s murderous appetite for destroying the world of his creator, one might read the novel as an allegory of the upheaval of the literate elite or the fatal ends of autodidacticism en masse. But taking the structure of address and response through which Shelley incorporates her reading audience into the frame narrative, one might instead see

28 Anne Mellor, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (New York: Methuen, 1988), 82.
29 Brantlinger, The Reading Lesson, 60.
the formal delocalization of address and addressee to represent a gothicized version of indiscriminate address. Even though the numbers of the novel’s “society” fall at the hands of the Creature, Shelley stresses the multiplication of interlocutors and, further, the shared speech that ensures the protracted life of their voices, if not their bodies.

Remarkably, then, though in the midst of destroying all that’s dear to Frankenstein, the Creature defines address—the availability to be addressed, the power to address another—as the fundamental basis of community. Frankenstein reinforces this definition when his creature approaches him on Montanvert: “Begone! I will not hear you. There can be no community between you and me; we are enemies. Begone, or let us try our strength in a fight.” Not only does Frankenstein imply that community rests on communication, he compulsively lowers his speech, as if to break the effect of his and the Creature’s shared elevated rhetoric. Only moments before, Frankenstein apostrophized the “wandering spirits” of the Alps to transport him away from his cares, to fill him, as they once did, “with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul” (76). In other words, the brute, uncharacteristically elementary force of “Begone!” both explicitly and implicitly attempts to disavow the speech community, as Frankenstein avoids acknowledging the leveling effect of the Creature’s discomfiting, humanizing eloquence that challenges the delimitation of the literate, reading community.

In contrast to Frankenstein’s “Begone!” the monster puts forward one of the most complex, rhetorically sophisticated addresses in the novel. “‘How can I move thee?’” he asks:

“Let your compassion be moved, and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge what I deserve. The guilty are allowed by human laws, bloody as they may be, to speak in their own defense before they are condemned. Listen to me, Frankenstein. You
accuse me of murder; and yet you would, with a satisfied conscience, destroy your own creature. Oh, praise the eternal justice of man! Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me, and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands.” (78)

Whether or not the Creature is a disingenuous sophist (as Frankenstein will later claim), his telling use of “moved” here combines the storyteller’s two powers over his addressee: to transport him into his tale and to provoke a sympathetic reaction. For Walton and his storyteller Frankenstein, these effects are, if not givens, not unlikely scenarios. Because this arrangement is no longer assured, the Creature is at pains to assert his right to tell his tale. He stops short, though, of exemplifying the unique “Gothic arrangement”30 of perlocutionary discourse Stanley Cavell mentions in a curious passing moment in his discussion of perlocution, or speech that aims to prompt some kind of active or mental response in its addressee. If “to say ‘I alarm you’ (or chastise, or, outrage, or discombobulate you),” Cavell explains, “were (eo ipso) to chastise, or outrage, or discombobulate you, I would be exercising some hypnotic or other ray-like power over you, you would have lost your freedom in responding to my speech.”31 The Creature’s provision for Frankenstein’s “freedom in responding” suggests a deeper recognition of how his presence redefines the literate, eloquent speech community. Indeed, it suggests a hyperawareness of how this community, especially when writ large as a social collective that cannot escape otherness—that has produced otherness—is predicated on the open-endedness of perlocutionary discourse. The Creature brings out the social and political implications of address: not just moving one’s hearer or reader, but also moving the boundaries of community. The story he encloses in his own tale of the De Lacy family’s

31 Stanley Cavell, Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 172.
sympathetic acceptance of Safie, an Arab Christian, illustrates a version of this expansion. Pitting the need to be listened to against the possibility of his future destruction, the Creature emphasizes that address is indispensable to the foundation of community, and that a democratized collective more specifically hinges on the capacity for any one at all—including a grotesque, artificially created monster—to speak to and among his peers.

The thematics of the novel bear out these political implications through the new species embodied in the Creature. Guaranteeing the power to act on his assumption that he belongs to Frankenstein’s community, the Creature makes clear that he can find and overwhelm Frankenstein at any time and in any place. In a few bounds, he can collapse the literal distance between him and his creator, while the geographical scale of the novel, spanning all Europe as well as the Arctic, highlights the extent of the Creature’s power to be everywhere and anywhere his creator may be. Shelley renders both Frankenstein’s and readers’ relationships to otherness an inevitability of his existence. She ensures not only that single readers or single sets of interlocutors are never in fact single, but also that they see the wider community to which they belong as a changed kind of community, constituted by new constituencies imagined as new species. Certainly the monstrosity of Shelley’s representation of the reading public undergirds the kind of anxiety Brantlinger emphasizes in his reading of the Creature and that Elizabeth gives voice to in her fear of the crowding mass. But one might also see Frankenstein’s refusal to accept the Creature’s future progeny—he goes on to request a female companion to alleviate his abjection—as the key to his own downfall. Indeed, the rhetorical sophistication of the Creature exemplified in the passage above suggests that he already belongs, that Frankenstein
fights a losing battle in attempting to quell the speech of his Creation. Ironically, the eloquence he shares with Frankenstein undermines the provision for Frankenstein’s “freedom in responding,” not so much to particular speech acts but in a more fundamental sense to draw a line between normalcy and otherness.

The endurance of the name Frankenstein, along with its common misattribution to the Creature, is a residue of this irony. Despite Frankenstein’s attempts to exclude and execute him, we popularly misname the Creature “Frankenstein,” and have to recall that it’s Dr. Frankenstein, that is, recall a differentiating title that separates creator from creature. In this light, we can read Frankenstein’s death as a sacrifice made to the expansion of the reading public, which requires the textual transmission of his narrative but which is not concerned with the survival of his person. The survival of the narrative as writing via Walton’s transcription gestures to a democratic address that undermines the monstrous appearance of the Creature and survives the deaths he causes and his own disappearance. His death, then, is the ultimate testament to the inevitability of the expansion of the reading public beyond the confines of individual interlocutors. In inviting readers into a relationship with the Creature, Shelley doesn’t so much exacerbate anxiety about whether they will meet the same fate as Frankenstein as show them a different answer to the crises of delimitation that the Creature poses to Frankenstein and readers alike: best to move rather than be removed all together. In the new era of an expanding reading public, local delimitations around address and addressee no longer

32 For Peter Brooks, it’s not the remarkable tonal likeness between the Creature and Frankenstein that explains the misattribution of the name Frankenstein, but rather the fact that the “afterlife of the novel in the popular imagination has been intensely focused on that monstrous body, to the extent that the name ‘Frankenstein’ tends to evoke not the unfortunate overreaching young scientist Victor Frankenst...
hold. In reflecting this fact, Shelley’s gothicized address engenders literary democracy through the unstable relationship between words and bodies.

II. Reading Unmoored in *Wuthering Heights*

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar were among the first major critics to point out that *Wuthering Heights* and *Frankenstein* have much in common, including their narrative structures. Gilbert and Gubar connect both these “‘popular’” novels’ narrative structures to their enigmatic “metaphysical intentions,” with apt scare quotes around “popular.”

Routinely taken to be a classic Victorian gothic text in a literary sense, *Wuthering Heights* has not often been read in relation to a widening reading public. Brontë’s contemporary G.W.M. Reynolds set the standard for populist gothic fiction; he adapted the gothic mode for urban crime fiction in his penny-priced installments, selling tens of thousands of copies to working-class readers. His gothic novel *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* appeared in a serial run in his popular magazine *Reynolds’s Miscellany* in 1847, the same year *Wuthering Heights* came out in two volumes (accompanied by a third, Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*). Because Brontë did not aim explicitly at garnering a vast readership like the likes of Reynolds, critics often focus on her role in the literary history of the gothic, not the history of reading. Gilbert and Gubar, for example, do not take up the development of the reading public with the same interest in which they pursue Shelley and Brontë’s own writing and reading.

As I have been arguing, however, we can read the form of the gothic frame

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34 Ibid.
narrative as a response to the expansion of the reading public that documents the effect of
this expansion on the field of address. In Brontë’s novel, even the face-to-face
interactions of present storytellers and their listeners are marked by their attenuation.

*Wuthering Heights* inverts the logic of the indistinguishable speech community of
*Frankenstein* in bringing together a cacophonous group of interlocutors whose dissonance
exaggerates the gulfs across which a socially inclusive public spreads. These gaps, in
turn, remind readers that this inclusivity is imagined—that is, that such a public
transcends the ties that bind us to our neighbors, figuring a vast but abstract space for
relations with others and indeed otherness. The tenuous, virtual proximity to otherness
into which *Wuthering Heights* draws readers challenges them to understand the
perpetually, perhaps inevitably, misunderstood Heathcliff. The narrators and addressees
who relate us to him face the same problem: Lockwood mistakenly thinks himself like
Heathcliff; Catherine seeks to understand herself in relation to her suitors, Linton versus
(or with) Heathcliff; and Isabella Linton fails to appreciate the certainty of her misery in
attaching herself to Heathcliff.

The common denominator here suggests that it’s specifically the presence of
otherness that destabilizes the field of address. First, Lockwood can only relate to
Heathcliff from the distance of a reader—which wouldn’t be so odd, except that he is
Heathcliff’s tenant and that his “reading” skills leave so much to be desired. Second, a
man of few words, with no real narrative account of himself within the series of
embedded stories making up the novel, Heathcliff nevertheless seems to infiltrate other
scenes of address, causing interlocutors to literally and figuratively speak past each other.
Finally, the most dramatic, gothic relationships the novel presents to readers prove fatal:
Catherine (née Earnshaw) and Isabella Linton survive only in textual form. Brontë thus invites readers into a gothicized picture of an inclusive England, only to show them how that inclusivity forces the image of the wider reading public to bend towards abstraction.

The Yorkshire moors provide the concrete setting of this picture and the starting point of this argument. Contemporaneous criticism attributed the novel’s darkness to this setting. One reviewer commented, for example, “Our novel reading experience does not enable us to refer to anything to be compared with the personages we are introduced to at this desolate spot—a perfect misanthropist’s heaven.” An Athenaeum review suggested that the “prison” that is Wuthering Heights “might be pictured from life,” provided that life is where “human beings, like the trees, grow gnarled and dwarfed and distorted by the inclement climate.” The tendency in the novel’s reception to account for the darkness of Wuthering Heights by way of its setting reveals a critical desire to stress the gulf standing between them and what Charlotte Brontë calls “things like Heathcliff” in her preface to the 1850 edition of the novel.

In other words, this tendency demonstrates a resistance to Brontë’s picture of Britain that covers not only a region “foreign” to cosmopolitan critics writing from Edinburgh or London, but also the effects of Britain’s global reach. As the vengeful protagonist of imprecise origins and later of mysterious fortune, Heathcliff most fully embodies the layers of darkness in the novel that have transfixed readers since its publication: atmospheric gloom, vengeful violence, secrecy, and, presumably, racial difference. An outsider brought in (it’s since been construed) from the slave trade through

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Liverpool, then given a name resonant with the moors that he makes into his dominion, Heathcliff is a multiply determined figure of otherness to Brontë’s critics and cosmopolitan readers. For Ivan Kreilkamp, to even assign Heathcliff a “‘racial status’” is to underestimate his alienation from “human categories of being and belonging.”

Recall, here, Frankenstein’s Creature’s definition of the fundamental premises of belonging to a human community: addressability. Whatever Heathcliff’s racial status (or the status of that racial status), to include him within the novel’s field of address is to imagine his belonging. Further, while there is no critical history of taking Heathcliff, like Frankenstein’s Creature, as a representative of the mass reading public, there is a sense of expansiveness and multiplicity linked to his otherness through which he appears to shadow the other relationships of address and response in the novel and defy the kind of contained otherness the novel’s initial critics sought to impose. As much as Brontë’s critics stress the distance between readers and Heathcliff, then, the spatial topography of the frame narrative has us move towards him, an inescapable, centripetal force.

Along with this counterintuitive combination of distance and proximity, the dissonance of the interlocutors that bring readers towards Heathcliff is responsible for the novel’s reputation as an epistemological challenge: no one voice makes sense of the narrative, even ironically, like Frankenstein’s moralizations to Walton. Most notably, J. Hillis Miller claims that the only possible interpretation of the novel is an apprehension of its defiance of interpretation. Situating the novel not just in the context of reading as

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39 J. Hillis Miller, “Wuthering Heights: Repetition and the ‘Uncanny’” in *Fiction and Repetition: Seven
critical interpretation, but also of the scalar problem of the reading public, I suggest we revise this claim to take the novel as a challenge not of interpreting meaning but of imagining collectivity. That is, the gaps between Brontë’s temperamentally, socially, and stylistically distinct interlocutors make it difficult to imagine how to delimit the kind of public to which they all belong. In this way, Brontë broadens the field of address even among local, embodied interlocutors and suggests that the ultimate effect of bringing readers into virtual contact with an other figure like Heathcliff is an awareness of the larger abstraction that they together instantiate. This turn towards abstraction is perhaps the key departure of *Wuthering Heights* from *Frankenstein*. For Shelley, the shared literacy of speakers and addressees defines a common language, if not a common ground, explicitly for her interlocutors and implicitly for readers. For Brontë, interlocutors struggle to live in common with one another despite their inextricable association in the multiply embedded frame tales. Through the many ways her interlocutors speak past each other, then, Brontë invokes an abstract space for her readers, beyond the Yorkshire moors that both compels and repulses them.

Before examining this formal effect on a structural level, I turn to its operation in scenes of address in the outer frames, the perimeter that pulls readers into *Wuthering Heights* by providing them with Lockwood as a surrogate addressee. Lockwood’s opening address, obliquely issued to the novel’s readers, gestures to an abstract sense of audience by leaving his addressee(s) unspecified:

1801.—I have just returned from a visit to my landlord—the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with. This is certainly a beautiful country! In all England, I do not believe that I could have fixed on a situation so completely removed from the stir of society. A perfect misanthropist’s heaven: and Mr. Heathcliff and I are

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such a suitable pair to divide the desolation between us. Lockwood’s diary provides the pretense for the transcription of the narrative: in withholding a Mrs. Saville-like figuration of the reading audience, Brontë places readers further off stage, in the position of overhearing the tale rather than being addressed by its narrator. In doing so, she both diminishes the solicitation of readerly response and evades the related problem of scaling down a wide audience into a single figurative representative. In positive terms, she broadens her field of address. The chronological gap between the novel’s setting and its publication further emphasizes the implicit inaccessibility of the audience of *Wuthering Heights*, which necessarily belongs to a different moment, one that Lockwood cannot materially imagine. From the very first address of the novel, then, Lockwood speaks to but also past the reading audience, a pointedly vague invocation of its presence.

As their closest proxy, Lockwood himself—a cosmopolitan, southern outsider through whom we hear the bulk of the narrative—becomes the reading audience’s model addressee. And yet Lockwood’s bungling nature shows how such an audience cannot in fact be so contained by a singular proxy. He famously overstates an immediate closeness with his landlord, for example: “I know, by instinct, his reserve springs from an

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41 For readings of Lockwood’s (as well as Nelly’s) inertness as addressees, see Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature*, 138, and Emily Rena Dozier, “Gothic Criticisms: *Wuthering Heights* and Nineteenth-Century Literary History,” *ELH* 77, no. 3 (2010): 757–58. Macovski argues that failures of audition, in which addressees prove to be disappointingly ambivalent or obtuse responders, render address above all a means of “self-decipherment.” Interlocutors are “vital” not because they respond to address, but because they give speakers an outlet for an ongoing process of self-definition. Rena-Dozier also finds something productive about how poorly the novel’s addressees do their job; she identifies the gothic “proliferation of narrative frames and voices” (occasioned by what she calls “narrative failures”) as the source of a generic critique of the domestic novel. Both critics locate the implications of their argument outside of the addressees who contribute to those implications. In my reading, Lockwood’s obtuseness as an addressee says something about addressees, in other words, to readers as readers.
aversion to showy displays of feeling—to manifestations of mutual kindliness…. No, I’m running on too fast—I bestow my own attributes over-liberally on him” (5–6). The check Lockwood places on his “instinct” primes readers to be wary of assuming identification with the novel’s protagonist, an effect only heightened by the coupling of Lockwood’s close physical proximity to and vast figurative distance from Heathcliff. As Carol Jacobs has argued, the “literal incursions [Lockwood] makes into the house of Wuthering Heights” with which the novel begins “function no less as attempts to penetrate *Wuthering Heights*-as-text.”42 The analogy Jacobs describes in spatialized language between Lockwood’s literal entrance into Wuthering Heights the setting and the attempt to enter the text itself indicates just how difficult it is for outsiders to actually inhabit a proximate position to Heathcliff. Even for Lockwood, it turns out, the only hope for such “proximity” is virtual, like a reader’s. Not coincidentally, Cavell’s conjectures on perlocutionary discourse are more relevant to Shelley’s interlocutors than to Brontë’s (or Conrad’s), who comparatively take “freedom in responding”43 for granted in part because they struggle to make real contact with each other and in part because they so often misdirect their address in the first place.

The closest Lockwood comes to really inhabiting Heathcliff’s world is therefore when he’s least conscious, in his dreams. In a well-remembered early scene, perhaps the highlight of Lockwood’s role as a surrogate reader, he reads Catherine’s diary before falling asleep, descends into a disturbing dream, and wakes to her ghost outside the window. In this sense Lockwood’s most “gothic” experience begins with reading, as if to illustrate the intense pull Catherine and Heathcliff’s world might exert on the novel’s

42 Carol Jacobs, “*Wuthering Heights*: At the Threshold of Interpretation” *boundary 2* 7, no. 3 (1979): 50.
43 Cavell, *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow*, 172.
readers. (Like Lockwood to Catherine’s diary, we are his journal’s unlooked-for readers).

“Terror made me cruel,” Lockwood says of the change that overcomes him upon seeing Catherine’s ghost: “finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes” (25). Partly through reading, this temporary, unrecognizably violent Lockwood has absorbed the gothic energy of the Heights, an experience gothic both in its ghastliness and in the momentary dissolution of his character into that of his surroundings. In the graphic corporalization of this push-and-pull in the scene at the window, the incoherence of Lockwood’s aggression towards Catherine dramatizes the violence with which the gothic raises questions about delimiting inside from outside without answering them. And yet, as Jacobs notes, in “suppressing all further mention” of his “series of nightmares,” Lockwood soon forecloses the possibility of becoming that kind of dangerously absorbed reader.44 Though there may be a place in which Lockwood experiences Heathcliff and Catherine’s world—the dream, the window, the ghost all provide literal and figurative versions of thresholds to support his temporary suspension between two worlds—Brontë suggests such a situation is not sustainable. Thus, reading may provoke Lockwood’s nightmare-like entrance into the gothic world, but as a conscious addressee he proves much less mobile. In this way, the instability he brings to his role as a surrogate reader allows Brontë to stage a crisis of delimitation around the position of the reading audience not only because she asks a singular figure to represent a wider collective but also because Lockwood both takes us into and pulls us out of Wuthering Heights.

In fact Lockwood’s much-remarked upon “unreliability” as a narrator stems from

44 Ibid., 50.
his ineptitude as an addressee; if Lockwood “penetrates” Wuthering Heights the place and *Wuthering Heights* the novel for readers, Brontë enjoins readers to co-occupy Lockwood’s role only to the extent that they realize the limitations of doing so, obliquely asking them to recognize the breadth of the public he is incapable of embodying.

Articulating a classic view of Lockwood’s unreliability, U.C. Knoepflmacher spends a paragraph describing the eventual divergence of “the modern reader” from Lockwood, whose “initial experience is our own.” Knoepflmacher argues that this modern reader, “more attuned to incongruity, gradually accepts the challenge” to analyze rather than “flee” with Lockwood from the “mystification” with which the book opens. Strangely, Knoepflmacher assumes that Victorian readers, by contrast, “took [Lockwood’s] way out.”45 Elsewhere, however, he claims the opposite, suggesting that “mid-Victorian readers … reject Lockwood as their agent.”46 Both of these assumptions are telling on their own: one, Victorian readers can’t but identify with their most obvious proxy, or two, Brontë paints Lockwood as an entirely unsympathetic character. Taken together these dueling assumptions are even more telling, for they result from the very crux Brontë presents to her readers in Lockwood. Readers find themselves unmoored, so to speak, from the addressee who serves as their link to the rest of the interlocutors in the novel because he himself struggles to maintain a full, embodied relationship with them. At the same time, the unreliability of our model addressee testifies to the inevitable difficulty of representing a wider reading audience in an indiscriminate, democratic reading public. In other words, Brontë challenges readers to imagine how the reading public might be made visible to itself. Through Lockwood, Brontë issues this challenge by inviting readers into

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a precariously occupied field of address and response within the novel, linked both metaphorically and metonymically to the reading public.

Lockwood’s storytelling situation reinforces this link. While Lockwood listens to Nelly’s narrative in person—first in the kitchen, then on a sickbed while convalescing, places of domestic containment that evoke the face-to-face exchange of a supposedly bygone era or signify the sequestration of private reading—he also begins to confl ate her with a novel.47 Stewart notes that the “rhythms of the tale’s consumption at the Grange serve to replicate the patterns of ordinary domestic reading”; “so literary are both the conditions of reception and the mode of delivery,” he argues, that Nelly “all but admits that her own language of description … may well be colored by certain literary archetypes that leap to her mind.”48 This literariness allows Brontë to blur the line between face-to-face and textual address and response, thus registering the effect of a democratic regime of writing on embodied address. After Nelly makes to close her tale for the night, for example, Lockwood enjoins her to go on, as if her time for telling the story was synonymous with his time for consuming it:

“No, no, I’ll allow nothing of the sort! Are you acquainted with the mood of mind in which, if you were seated alone, and the cat licking its kitten on the rug before you, you would watch the operation so intently that puss’s neglect of one ear would put you seriously out of temper?”

47 Given the readerly aspect to this framing apparatus and its relationship to the growth of the reading public, it’s not surprising that so many film adaptations of the novel forgo it, along with the depiction of the second generation of Earnshaws, Lintons, and Heathcliffs (whose social life is partly based on reading, as I discuss below). Andrea Arnold’s recent adaption not only excises both opening and closing frames, but also shows how the result of doing so entails long stretches of silence (save for the sound of the wind on the moors) and minimal dialogue. No longer a storyteller, Nelly’s presence as a servant is muted. It seems that Arnold wants the audience to feel drawn in by the moors, to be on the moors with Catherine and Heathcliff. Indeed, much of the film is focalized through Heathcliff’s perspective, whose mode of seeing the world we struggle to gain access to in the novel’s frame narratives. In the last moment of the film, we watch Heathcliff disappear into the fog; Arnold glimpses no future beyond him. By contrast, in the novel, Lockwood’s outsidersness and Nelly’s role as a storyteller add complexity to our “entrance” into the world of Wuthering Heights, for they take us both into and out of proximity with Heathcliff. See Wuthering Heights, directed by Andrea Arnold, Curzon Artificial Eye, 2011.

48 Stewart, Dear Reader, 239.
“A terribly lazy mood, I should say.”
“On the contrary, a tiresomely active one. It is mine, at present, and, therefore, continue minutely.” (62)

Conjuring up an image that figures him alone, doing not much of anything, but with a “tiresomely active” mind, Lockwood demonstrates an odd mixture of interest in his storyteller’s tale and indifference about her person. Such a figure would hardly compel an industrious housekeeper (even one who enjoys a good gossip), and so is illustrative of the way in which Brontë’s interlocutors speak partly to and partly past each other. On the one hand, then, Brontë invites readers to inhabit Lockwood’s position, the very “literary” or readerly position of an addressee that nearly overtakes the face-to-face oral exchange on the sickbed. On the other hand, Lockwood’s self-involved inertness as an addressee disinvites readerly identification. Paradoxically, it’s the very suggestion of Lockwood (like a reader) taking Nelly for a novel that leads to this dis-invitation: Brontë links the textualization of the storyteller-addressee relationship to the abstraction of the reader’s “place” within the narrative’s chain of interlocutor relationships.

Like Lockwood at the window frame, Nelly’s relationship with the main figures of her tale has a way of both pulling readers closer to Catherine and Heathcliff and marking a distance from them. Her ambivalence heightens the dissonant quality of the frames, widening the gulf between interlocutors even while asking readers to traverse it. According to the narrative logic of the novel in which speakers eventually take their turns as addressees, Nelly is not just a storyteller but also a confessor. But, while she has deeper encounters with Catherine and Heathcliff and therefore with what one critic calls Brontë’s depiction of “near-mad emotionalism,” Nelly, like Lockwood, remains

impervious to the force of the intersubjective merger at the center of *Wuthering Heights*. The most profound description of this merger is Catherine’s declaration, “‘Nelly, I am Heathcliff. He’s always, always in my mind: not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being’” (82). Catherine’s claim has fascinated readers, but it puts Nelly out. While she’s a willing listener when Catherine seeks advice about her engagement to Linton, she resists Catherine’s turn to disclose her secret about Heathcliff by way of a “‘queer dream’”: “‘Oh! don’t, Miss Catherine! … We’re dismal enough without conjuring up ghosts, and visions to perplex us’” (81). Her refusal ignores Catherine’s desperation—she “‘must let it out,’” she says. The contrast between Nelly’s response to the Linton confession and to the Heathcliff confession suggests that it’s specifically the *gothic* aspects of Catherine’s account that repel Nelly: the queer dream, the desperation of letting “‘it out,’” the extremity of her relationship with a figure like Heathcliff, and the threat of being engulfed within that relationship. She thus jerks away, “‘out of patience with her folly!’” and again refuses her role as confessor: “‘trouble me with no more secrets. I’ll not promise to keep them’” (83). Facing Catherine’s persistence, Nelly distances herself by diminishing her claim, which becomes a mere “‘folly,’” and a secret like any other. In affecting a Frankenstein-like refusal to listen, as if doing so would bring her into the fold of Catherine and Heathcliff’s uniquely intense relationship, Nelly attempts to use address to reinstate the kind of figurative, virtual distance from Heathcliff that Lockwood cannot but experience.

In suggesting that the proximity to the otherness Catherine inhabits through Heathcliff might be managed through address, Brontë enjoins readers, along with Nelly, to position themselves in relation to Catherine and Heathcliff’s overly close relationship.
Indeed, Catherine’s claim “‘Nelly, I am Heathcliff’” distills the entire narrative structure of the novel—and this question of readerly proximity to its center—into a single sentence. Lockwood is here silently transcribing Nelly’s story that is then indirectly addressed to readers; Nelly (whose name is reinserted for added emphasis) is Catherine’s addressee; she and Heathcliff are living out their intensely responsive relationship at the center of these embedded narratives. Even when he is not speaking, then, Heathcliff’s presence cannot but ramify outwards to other interlocutors. But the stress Brontë places on Lockwood and Nelly’s figurative distance from Heathcliff reminds us that relationships like Catherine and Heathcliff’s are from inevitable, unlike the at-least virtual relationships to otherness within a broad public. The very intensity of Catherine’s claim to intersubjectivity seems to disqualify others, including readers, from an equivalent claim. Heathcliff and Catherine’s merger forces other interlocutors to grapple with relative positions that are neither fully inside nor fully outside of it. Similarly, the many interlocutors in Catherine’s claim “‘Nelly, I am Heathcliff’” are both there—in the implicit gesture to the addressees beyond Catherine and Nelly’s conversation—and not there—literally and figuratively excluded by the “near-mad emotionalism” it describes. If coming to virtually face Heathcliff and Catherine shows readers that “we’re undone by each other” (borrowing Butler’s phrase), then Brontë raises not just ethical questions about responsiveness but political questions about the kind of space we collectively inhabit. Addressing this query to readers through the frame narrative, Brontë documents the trajectory of the reading public as a virtual social body, stretched across space and time to the point of conceptual abstraction.

Even the more concrete spatial arrangement of the scene, in which Heathcliff
partially overhears Catherine (who does not see him) and Nelly (who does see him) bears on these questions. (More generally the gothic trope of eavesdroppers and hidden onlookers might signify something about the breakup of the storytelling scene in the face of otherness). Heathcliff is the subject of Catherine’s address to Nelly but not its addressee, and so, ironically, while Catherine makes a claim for their unique closeness, he’s absent before she makes that claim, and it’s Nelly, not Catherine, who’s aware of his presence. As many readers will remember, he leaves after Catherine avows it would “degrade her” to marry him and before she declares their intense intersubjectivity. Brontë thus asks readers to hear Catherine’s address from both Nelly’s direct and Heathcliff’s indirect position at the same time, dividing their point of reference between two different addressees, one ambivalent about her claim, the other determined by it.

While this scene may be the most remembered moment of address in the novel, Brontë repeatedly fractures the loci of address and response, a pattern that points to a destabilized, un-framed field of address as a new normal rather than a discrete event. For example, leading to a similar ambiguity about the point of address—its purpose and its target—Heathcliff makes a vow kindred in spirit to Catherine’s. Upon hearing of Catherine’s death from Nelly, he begins to speak of Catherine to Nelly, eventually turning to apostrophize Catherine’s ghost. Where Lockwood and Nelly figuratively speak past each other, Heathcliff literally speaks past the addressee in his presence, as if he could address Catherine in another world: “Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! … I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” Nelly then watches him bloody his forehead by smashing it against a tree trunk. “It hardly moved my compassion—it appalled me,” she reports (169). Like Catherine’s desperation,
Heathcliff’s raw intensity throws her. It’s as if his turn to address Catherine in an apostrophe releases Nelly, the original and still only present addressee, from the responsibility to actively respond. In these complexly staged scenes of address and response, then, Brontë dramatizes the challenge of locating oneself within a field of address organized around the presence of social otherness. Underlining the association between Heathcliff’s otherness and his geographical expansiveness, Brontë in this way links the spatial topography of the novel to that of expanding, newly inclusive reading public, which defies the delimitation implied by the face-to-face address on which the narrative is precariously based.

As an absent, otherworldly addressee, Catherine’s ghost highlights this precariousness and shows how the gothic novel is particularly primed to abstract embodied relationships of address. (One must “speak past,” into emptiness to speak to a ghost). Like Frankenstein’s, her death suggests that overly close relationships with a figure like Heathcliff are not sustainable. However, as a ghost haunting the moors, she survives as a gothic trope. And in the discursive space of the novel, she survives as a textual presence, along with the others of his generation whom Heathcliff outlives: Hindley and his wife, Edgar Linton, and Isabella—all but storyteller-nearly-turned-novel Nelly. While we cannot so easily attribute this death toll to Heathcliff, as with Frankenstein’s Creature, the same tension between plot and discourse appears in *Wuthering Heights*. A surfeit of speakers and addresses—even more than single scenes of address and response can “fit”—runs alongside a gradually growing body count. This imbalance between bodies and words points to the disembodiment of embodied interlocutors, whose lives are emptied out into text for transmission to readers. In this
way, Brontë’s refusal to delimit the space for her audience within the chain of interlocutors is tied to a broader move to un-frame the delimited field of address.

Brontë combines these two effects in Isabella Linton’s ill-advised attraction to Heathcliff. As another (albeit minor) surrogate reader, she represents bourgeois normalcy in confrontation with social otherness. Heathcliff himself comments on genre and reading when he links Isabella’s delusions to her misguidedly seeing romance in reality, telling Nelly that she “‘abandoned [her family] under a delusion… picturing in me a hero of romance, and expecting unlimited indulgences from my chivalrous devotion. I can hardly regard her in the light of a rational creature, so obstinately has she persisted in forming a fabulous notion of my character, and acting on the false impressions she cherished’” (149). Isabella’s situation is uncommon, to be sure. But in hinting at her likeness to the image of a bad female reader, Brontë connects her to a convention that the reading audience is to recognize as part of the discourse around their own position as the novel’s addressees. We draw closer to Heathcliff thanks to Isabella only to find another unstable, unsustainable proximate position. As she tells the servant Joseph, with an oddly Heathcliff-like mixture of condescending sarcasm and intensity: “‘You’ve a nice house, Joseph, and pleasant inmates; and I think the concentrated essence of all the madness in the world took up its abode in my brain the day I linked my fate with theirs!’” (142). Her brother, Catherine, and Heathcliff himself borrow this language of madness to describe Isabella’s decision to marry Heathcliff (or marry into his madness, as it were). Her own phrase, “the concentrated essence of all the madness in the world,” gestures to the connection between Heathcliff’s otherness and expansiveness, the limits of which we cannot in fact name. Indeed, it’s Heathcliff’s trip to gain his fortune in some undefined
place that piques Isabella’s interest in him upon his return. Brontë’s withholding of even a nominal reference to this place contributes to the heightened sense of an abstractly drawn space of the public.

Isabella also takes on a minor role in the series of addresses constructing the frame narrative; we glimpse her early days of married life at the Heights when she encloses a long letter to Nelly describing it. For Brontë, the letter provides brief access to a crucial point in the novel unavailable to Nelly. For Isabella, the letter serves as a way to reattach herself to the life she had left and to re-assert her difference from the one in which she finds herself:

I want to ask you two questions: the first is, How did you contrive to preserve the common sympathies of human nature when you resided here? I cannot recognise any sentiment which those around share with me. The second question, I have great interest in; it is this—Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not, is he a devil? … I beseech you to explain, if you can, what I have married. (136)

Isabella enumerates her questions with a presence of mind that the rest of the letter shows often escapes her at the Heights. On one level, her disparagement of her new family is classist, deriving from the affront to her refined sensibilities that to her were synonymous with “human nature.” This reading rings true for her approach to the Heights in general. On another level, as her second question regarding Heathcliff specifically goes on to suggest, there is something particularly foreboding—gothic, monstrous—about the state to which Heathcliff has brought the Heights. This gothic extremity heightens class (and racial) disparity by rendering it a question of fundamental species-like difference, placing Heathcliff in a lineage following Frankenstein’s Creature. But if readers are invited to occupy one side of this binary through their “likeness” to Isabella, then Brontë ultimately
leaves them somewhere in the blank space between Isabella and Heathcliff: not at
Thrushcross Grange, from which she’s been disowned; not at Wuthering Heights, where
she cannot “recognize any sentiment which those around share”; not on the wild moors
between them, which belong to Catherine and her ghost. In short, through Isabella’s role
as speaker in the frame narrative we enter Wuthering Heights after Heathcliff’s return,
only to be promptly pushed out of it.

Put differently, Brontë narrates a space for the cohabitation of someone like
Isabella and Heathcliff, or Lockwood and Heathcliff, only to show how that cohabitation
points to the need to imagine an abstracted space for the public to which they all belong,
readers with them. In this sense, the expansive otherness Heathcliff embodies isn’t so
much about individuals like Isabella being swallowed up and spit out, though there are
many compelling readings of the gothic’s invasion of domestic spaces and subjectivities
in Wuthering Heights. Rather, Brontë directs her audience towards a new vision of the
reading public: one that necessarily exceeds poor containers like Lockwood and Isabella
on a path towards greater social inclusivity. For those who remain on the moors, Brontë
offers a more concrete vision of an embryonic reading public: at the end of the novel, the
miniature social economy of the second generation of Lintons and Earnshaws is based on
literacy. Young Catherine bribes the groundskeeper of the Grange with easy books to let
her escape to the Heights to read and teach reading to Hareton; she doesn’t perceive, like
her mother, “social degradation” to be the outcome of attaching herself to Hareton, raised
by Heathcliff at the Heights to be a coarse youth. Perhaps not coincidentally, the

50 See Alexandra Warwick for an analysis of blurred spaces, “Victorian Gothic,” in The Routledge
Companion to Gothic Fiction, ed. Catherine Spooner and Emma McEvoy (New York: Routledge, 2007),
30–31; for an analysis of subjective positions, see Steven Vine, “The Wuther of the Other in Wuthering
historical moment the plot has reached, the turn of the nineteenth century, corresponds to an increase in rural literacy.

Invoking a sense of inevitability and passivity about mid-century readers’ relationships to the social otherness of Heathcliff, Charlotte Brontë’s preface to the 1850 edition of the novel looks ahead to a more abstract version of this future in the novel’s only conventionally direct address to the audience. Like the novels’ critics, Brontë (writing as Currer Bell) situates the novel in relation to the moors. But unlike the reviewers, she casts Heathcliff, at least, as the product of a creative process that demands obeisance from the artist, as opposed to a choice her sister made to violate “true taste” in a time when “we English could so ill afford to dispense with sunshine,” as one reviewer had it. "Whether it is right or advisable to create things like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is,” she says, before requesting that readers think outside of this “right and advisable” metric:

[T]he writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that at times strangely wills and works for itself…. Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. As for you—the nominal artist—your share in it has been to work passively under the dictates you neither delivered nor could question—that would not be uttered at your prayer, nor suppressed nor changed at your caprice. If the result be attractive, the World will praise you, who little deserve praise; if it be repulsive, the same World will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame.  

Brontë’s curious slide into a second-person address to “you” who “have little choice left but quiescent adoption,” “you, the nominal artist,” asks readers to think not just from the writer’s perspective, but more specifically from the writer’s position of accountability to those who mete out praise and blame: both critics and themselves—that is, readers. She

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51 "Our Library Table," 1325.
thus encourages readers to imaginatively occupy several positions at once, one of an outsider’s judgment and one in which Heathcliff lives within them, impervious to any attempts to distance themselves from him. Brontë seems to say that we will inevitably find ourselves embedded in a narrative that will bring us, if only virtually, “face to face” with Heathcliff. One such narrative, the growth of the reading public, forces us outside of ourselves, or “beside” our normally delimited sense of self. Skeptical that a faithful or even predictable response to this phenomenon could be located in proxy readers, Brontë leaves the space of response open to her audience, stretching it towards the indefinite limits of the wider public to which it belongs.

IV. The Disembodied Speech of *Heart of Darkness*

One of the enduring mysteries of *Wuthering Heights* is where Heathcliff goes to gain the fortune with which he returns to the Yorkshire moors, which, like the place of his origins, Brontë never names. Consider, as a point of contrast, the precision with which Shelley, drawing on travelogue writing, maps the geographical bounds of *Frankenstein*’s plot. Consider too that despite Joseph Conrad’s particular knowledge of the Congo and his readers’ familiarity with the historical events to which *Heart of Darkness* refers, he withholding the name of the Congo. These differences locate representative moments in the trajectory I have been tracing in this chapter and in “Broadly Speaking”: a path away from already attenuated particularization and containment, towards abstraction and indeterminacy. Like *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*, *Heart of Darkness* explores the edges of inclusivity through a series of interlocutor relationships that intensify as they approach the others most deeply embedded in the frame narrative. The nominal
anonymity of the Congo notwithstanding, Conrad definitively locates those boundaries outside of Britain. An imperialistic England was also, of course, an England well on its way to mass literacy, achieved around the moment of the 1899 publication of *Heart of Darkness*, serialized in three parts in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. Placing *Heart of Darkness* in a lineage of gothic frame tales, concerned as they are with how to address readers as subjects embedded in a larger public, allows us to see imperialism and the mass reading public as a synthetic context for *Heart of Darkness*. Together these phenomena mean Conrad places otherness outside of national borders, not as an issue of internal regional difference; not suggestively racialized like the Creature and Heathcliff, but definitively so; and not only in figures of multiplicity like the Creature and Heathcliff (and Kurtz), but also in the real presence of uncounted others in Africa. Yet as the eerily rendered disembodiment of embodied voice in the novel suggests, the question of how to delimit the edge around speaker and audience remained a live one precisely because of what the expanding edge of literacy and reading implies: that the scale on which readers are to envision the public to which they belong could asymptotically approach limitlessness.

I show that Conrad mediates this question for his readers through the odd conjunction of his embodied speakers and addressees and his emphasis on the disembodiment of their voices into an indefinite, ambiguous atmosphere. Theorists and critics have sought to make sense of this odd conjunction in stylistic and generic terms. The “representational fiction of a storytelling situation organized around Marlow,” according to Jameson, “marks the vain attempt to conjure back the older unity of the literary institution, to return to that older concrete social situation of which narrative
transmission was but a part, and of which public and bard or storyteller are intrinsic…

components.”¹ From another angle, though, the “concrete social situation” of Marlow’s

storytelling looks backward for a conventional literary device only to capture the moment

at the turn of the century of a re-imagined modern public, shaped by both empire and

mass literacy. As I have been arguing, the frame narrative lent itself to staging crises of
delimitation, a propensity as timely in the imperial context of the end of the century as it

was throughout the rise of mass literacy. Brantlinger’s critique of Jameson’s claim, “that

the will-to-style in Conrad’s text is also a will to appropriate and remake Gothic romance

customs into high art,”² begins to take stock of this moment, but assumes an

oppositional tension between impressionistic ambiguity and the idea of mass readership.

Bracketing Brantlinger’s assumption that the taste of the masses accords with what he

refers to as “embarrassingly clear content,”³ I suggest that the real interest of the

synthesis of gothic convention and high art in Heart of Darkness lies in its provocation to

readers as members of a mass reading public: the gothicized indeterminacy that

undermines ostensibly localized relationships of address and response in the novel

reflects back onto the abstract nature of the public to which they inescapably belong.

The gothicized address of Heart of Darkness and the democratic address I have

described throughout “Broadly Speaking” both rely on the indeterminacy of these

relationships. To say that the evolution of literary democracy predicated on such address

culminates in Heart of Darkness, however, risks underestimating the extent to which

Conrad silences the natives of the Congo. Rather, Heart of Darkness represents a

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³ Ibid., 265.
dilemma for literary democracy: it enshrouds readers in the boundlessness of the modern public, but does so by universalizing Conrad’s language, or the European speech of Marlow and Kurtz. Conrad both articulates the provisions of literary democracy in the form of his address to a largely British public, then, and demonstrates the collision between the reaches of this democratic principle and the limits of its material instantiation for an imperial public. In focusing on this tension, I am following out a suggestion of Edward Said’s “Two Visions of *Heart of Darkness*.” In the first vision, “there is no use looking for other, non-imperialist alternatives” because “the system has eliminated them and made them unthinkable.” When a second “less imperialistically assertive possibility” emerges by way of the reappearance of “the heart of darkness” in England: “outside the group of Marlow’s listeners lies an undefined and unclear world.” The frame narrative structure, Said points out, is central to this forward-looking vision: Conrad’s “self-consciously circular narrative forms draw attention to themselves as artificial constructions, encouraging us to sense the potential of a reality that seemed inaccessible to imperialism, just beyond its control.” In the terms I’m using here, the disembodied voices of embodied speakers that the frame narrative animates evoke an “empty” space akin to Said’s second vision, a space that one cannot quite circumscribe through the consolidating aesthetics or ideology of empire but that is unmistakably oriented around difference.

As in Shelley and Brontë, Conrad’s address works both on local and structural

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7 Ibid., 24.
levels to invoke this “undefined and unclear world” for readers by staging crises of
delimitation around its diegetic interlocutors. Structurally, an anonymous narrator
addresses the reading public to relate the story he hears from Marlow; Marlow relates the
story of another narrator, Kurtz, partially through a retelling of an anonymous Russian’s
encounter with Kurtz, and partially through his own; just before the first anonymous
narrator steps in to close the outer frame, Marlow relates the story of his encounter with
Kurtz’s fiancée, the Intended. From this brief outline, one can see that Marlow begins to
take over the other speaking roles embedded in the novel, a departure from Frankenstein
and Wuthering Heights that Michael Macovski refers to as a “narrowing of the narrative
field,” and as such, an anticipation of modernist stream of consciousness.\(^8\) Even Kurtz’s
powerful eloquence is more often described by than quoted by Marlow, who renders
much of it in indirect discourse. In fact what looks to Macovski like a “narrowing,”
however, entails an amalgamation of multiple voices. And by continually emphasizing
the eerie disembodiment of speaking voices throughout the novel and the oblique or
silent responses with which they are met,\(^9\) Conrad reiterates the larger narrative
structure’s amalgamation of multiple voices in Marlow’s tale, which reaches peak
intensity in Kurtz’s apparent dissolution into otherness. “We’re undone by each other,”
Butler says, because we cannot speak from fully delimited, circumscribed subject
positions. Catalyzing the realization of this impossibility, according to Butler and the

\(^8\) Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature, Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of

\(^9\) As Macovski describes it, “[w]hile eloquent addresses literally constitute the novel, each fails to elicit a
commensurate reaction, so that narration itself rings hollow” (*Dialogue and Literature* 157). Thus he
emphasizes the silence of the “succession of bogus auditors—interlocutors who remain ignorant, bourgeois,
and painfully ‘normal’” (156). These are strong descriptions of addressees who give few clues into their
response, but even if bourgeois normalcy necessarily entails ignorance, the silence that suggests such
ignorance reflects readers in two ways: their responses cannot be recorded (are silent) and they are not in
large numbers imperial seamen (are “normal”).
gothic novels in this chapter, is an encounter with otherness. But Kurtz’s dissolution is only the most emphatic instance of this phenomenon in *Heart of Darkness*; Butler’s wider sense of the “we” in “we’re undone by each other” reminds us that the un-framing of address and addressee in the outer frames in the novel is tied to the same phenomenon.

Conrad thus allows the imprecision around the narrator’s early addresses to the reading public to reverberate across the novel. *Heart of Darkness* sets off without the pretense of a Mrs. Saville or a journal. Instead, its opening sentences are well remembered for the measured detail with which it sets this scene: “The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.”

Nearly all setting and nearly no character, the sentence has *not* been remarkable because of the anonymous first-person narrator who utters it. Entirely absent from the first sentence, he faintly appears in the hint of focalization given by the second. While the narrator eventually emerges from behind this mask of an omniscient third-person point of view to introduce Marlow, his temporary obscuration is telling, particularly for the first sentence of a frame narrative. Though in a unique position as a seaman onboard the *Nellie*, his obscuration in these first lines and more generally his anonymity and lack of characterization heighten the imprecision around the locus of address and response at the last line of separation between the narrative and the reading audience. This blurred edge works like porous gauze, through which the voices within the novel seem to seep out into the extratextual

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world, anticipating the implication that it must be large enough to encompass all of Europe (“All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz,” Marlow says) and all of Africa (the Congo is never specifically named as a delimited setting).

If there is a self-reflexive, meta-fictional preface incorporated into the opening pages of the novel, it’s the much-discussed figure through which the anonymous narrator describes Marlow’s storytelling sensibility. “The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut,” the narrator says, setting up the contrast between these typical seamen and Marlow: “to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine” (105). Conrad implies two different relationships between the storyteller and his audience. The “kernel” model suggests a straightforward relationship, in which the storyteller discloses a hidden meaning to his addressees. Typically, the haze metaphor has been read as a sign of Conrad’s transition into an impressionistic literary modernism that defies readerly expectations for meaning external to the aesthetic object. Given the implicit self-consciousness about readers and reading suggested by Conrad’s use of frame narratives, I propose inviting the reading audience back into our interpretation of these metaphors for storytelling. In conferring such importance to the outer perimeter in the “enveloping” or

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11 In addition to Brantlinger, who describes *Heart of Darkness* as “moving in one direction toward the misty halos of a style that seeks to be its own meaning, apart from any kernel or embarrassingly clear content” (*Rule of Darkness* 265), see J. Hillis Miller, who describes the narrator’s contrast between the kernel and misty halo as a distinction between a “realistic, mimetic, referential tale with an obvious point and moral” and a tale in which “the visible, representational elements… are there not for their own sakes” but rather “have as their function to make something else visible, what the manuscript calls the ‘unseen,’ perhaps even the unseeable.” J. Hillis Miller, “Should we Read ‘Heart of Darkness?’” in *Conrad in Africa: New Essays on ‘Heart of Darkness,’* ed. Attie de Lange, Gail Fincham, and Wieslaw Krajka (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 2002), 31.
“haze” model, Conrad implicates the reading audience in the hazy meaning made visible, though not necessarily legible, by the inset tales. In this connection, the image of imprecision that this haziness conjures points not just to Conrad’s well-known penchant for ambiguous meaning, but also to the sense of an uncountable, ambiguously defined public to which he offers it. Thus, Conrad doesn’t just withhold a singular and safe-at-home figure like Mrs. Saville and a negative, bungling model in the manner of Lockwood; more specifically, he reminds readers that the public to which they belong appears indistinct, its internal relationships indeterminate, when viewed as the mass it had become by the end of the century. By issuing this reminder through such an oblique address, Conrad works in the grain of democratic address that Rancière identifies with Flaubert. And by associating Marlow’s speech with this kind of non-delimiting address, he suggests this democracy can even overwrite, so to speak, embodied utterances like Marlow’s. Signifying not simply a literal promulgation of the written word or commodified print but rather a particular kind of leveled, “indifferent” relationship of words to addressees, the “reign of writing” holds sway even over the present storyteller.\(^{12}\)

As in *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*, the most intensely responsive interlocutor relationship in the novel takes time to emerge. *Heart of Darkness* is distinct, however, in the immediacy of the confusion over where one subject begins and ends. Marlow’s remark that “‘this also… has been one of the dark places of the earth,’” the narrator tells us at the beginning of the novel, “did not seem at all surprising. It was accepted in silence. No one took the trouble to grunt even” (105). As this silence comes to characterize the auditors on board the *Nellie*, and as darkness sets in, the locus of response becomes more indiscernible. Later, the narrator records one of the only

responses among the shipmates in the book that is not his own: “‘Try to be civil, Marlow,’ growled a voice, and I knew there was at least one listener awake besides myself’” (137). Perhaps no one else is even listening; whoever did speak cannot or need not be identified: Conrad writes response at its barest. The attribution to “a voice” rather than a person (growled the lawyer, for example) is only a passing instance of disembodied voices in the novel, however. At one point Marlow himself narrates one of his addressee’s responses, though in keeping with the anonymity of this growling “voice,” he doesn’t know which. Describing the “extravagance of emotion” he feels upon the possibility of not reaching Kurtz following the bloody death of his captain, he asks, “‘Why do you sigh in this beastly way, somebody?’” (152). Here the odd vocative address to “somebody” measures the darkness into which the group onboard the Nellie has fallen and reads as a direct address to readers. Linking “somebody” and “voice” metonymically to the wider reading audience, Conrad registers the presence of a vast, anonymous reading public shadowing the addressees on the Nellie. Even more explicitly than in Frankenstein and Wuthering Heights, Conrad’s (or rather Marlow’s) anonymous interlocutors are primed—as disembodied voices—to be absorbed by the wider public to which they belong.

The delimiting line around the reading public would shift, then, to separate the undifferentiated masses of Africa (as the “Congo” is never named) from the European narrators and addressees occupying speaking positions within the frame narrative.

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13 Marlow has just insulted his listeners: “‘I felt often its mysterious stillness watching me at my monkey tricks, just as it watches you fellows performing on your respective tight-ropes for—what is it? half-a-crown a tumble----’” (137). One hears in the reprimand this insult meets, “‘Try to be civil,’” an ironic allusion to Marlow’s lacking “civilization,” though it’s hard to know what to make of the insult itself: perhaps the creeping feeling of being watched at tricks by an anonymous “mysterious stillness” disabuses Marlow (and for his listeners, he assumes) of the illusion of a kind of self-determined integrity associated with European liberal subjecthood over and against the picture of the dissolution of uncivilized masses Marlow makes of Africa.
Marlow suggests as much in figuratively emplacing the addressees onboard the *Nellie* and the British reading audience: “Here you all are, each moored with two good addresses, like a hulk with two anchors, a butcher round one corner, a policeman round another” (152), he upbraids them for the offending sigh that seemed to suggest he was being absurd. Pages later, these examples crop up again: “You can’t understand. How could you?—with solid pavement under your feet, surrounded by kind neighbors ready to cheer you or to fall on you, stepping delicately between the butcher and the policeman’” (154). Gesturing vaguely, “Here you all are,” Marlow collapses his seamen-auditors (on water) with the novel’s reading audience (on land). The deictic “here” refers both to readers, virtually, and Marlow’s actual addressees, while the ambiguously numbered “you” is capacious enough to accommodate both. That said, this gesture isn’t *so* capacious: presenting butchers and policemen as intractable, inalienable facts of European culture, Marlow locates this group as far as possible from Kurtz and Africa, which they “can’t understand” precisely because they’re on “solid pavement.” One can’t resist a punning reference to Jameson’s “concrete social situation” of an older storytelling paradigm, which turns out to be just as tenuous for Conrad in this example as Jameson supposes it is for the proto-modernist period more generally. For neither Marlow nor his addressees are actually on pavement; they’re not “like a hulk with two anchors,” but actually an anchored hulk. The simile “like a hulk” ironically suits the actual situation, and along with the eerily disembodied sigh of “somebody” dislocated from its source, undermines the pretense to groundedness that Marlow is at pains to locate in his delineation of a certain corner, with “two good addresses.” Thus, even while Marlow means to delimit Kurtz’s world and his sea-mates (and by extension, that of novel
readers) through this kind of emplacement, the boundary he places between them is a porous, perforated one. While Marlow contrasts the groundedness of his addressees to the “utter solitude without a policeman” and “utter silence” through which Kurtz made his way to his “seat amongst the devils of the land” (154), by another light, these oddly particular references to butchers and policemen appear as versions of the bureaucratic, legalized, exploitative carnage in which Kurtz participates in Africa.

In this way, Conrad’s address (address as in directed speech) undermines Marlow’s interest in these “two good addresses” (address as in specific, material locations). For not only do the ambiguously responsive men onboard the Nellie set up an almost blank canvas of undefined addressees, Marlow and Kurtz’s voices echo each other in their disembodiment. That is, Marlow’s disembodied voice reflects Kurtz’s, as if the catalyst for this phenomenon of floating voice is Kurtz’s own crisis of delimitation in Africa. Compare the narrator on Marlow—

It had become so pitch dark that we listeners could hardly see one another. For a long time already he, sitting apart, had been no more to us than a voice. There was not a word from anybody. … I listened, I listened on the watch for the sentence, for the word, that would give me the clue to the faint uneasiness inspired by this narrative that seemed to shape itself without human lips in the heavy night-air of the river. (130, italics mine)

—to Marlow on Kurtz:

“A voice. He was very little more than a voice. And I heard—him—it—this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices—and the memory of that time itself lingers around me, impalpable, like a dying vibration of one immense jabber, silly, atrocious, sordid, savage, or simply mean, without any kind of sense.” (153)

The narrator’s “faint uneasiness” whose source he wants captured in a word or sentence is a more indirect version of what for Marlow is an “impalpable” memory of Kurtz, “like a dying vibration.” In part, the way voices detach from the bodies that issue them allows
them to impress unease years later; the scene of their enunciation cannot contain them. Ivan Kreilkamp observes that this phenomenon facilitates a sort of textualization of voice when he argues that “Heart of Darkness travels away from an idealized scene of storytelling towards the disembodied voice of a circulating textuality.”\(^\text{14}\) Indeed, my analysis here shares much with Kreilkamp’s account of the novel: “As Marlow retraces his own journey toward the voice of Kurtz, he gradually disembodies his own narrating voice, denying the reassurance of a ground of corporeal identity or a community of listeners.”\(^\text{15}\) In my view, however, this “community” continues to exist without such groundedness, as it comes to represent the alignment of the community of readers as an audience at the end of the century with the abstraction representing it, the mass reading public.

At stake in this alignment is the new, limitless capaciousness of this public—and the political implications that attach to that limitlessness. Marlow’s memory of Kurtz’s voice reflects these stakes: “this voice—other voices—all of them were so little more than voices” coming together in “one immense jabber.” Conrad asks his individual readers to see how easily singular voices are absorbed into a plurality, a process that Marlow seems to view as inevitable, as he glides across a simple dash between “this voice—other voices.” A disembodied voice is a voice primed to converge with the voices of otherness, defying the line between singular subject and mass, literacy and illiteracy, colonizer and colonized. Just as Marlow has come to resemble Kurtz through the shared characteristic of disembodied voices, so too does Kurtz’s voice come to be enmeshed with the voices of the African subjects in the Congo. “His was an impenetrable

\(^\text{14}\) Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, 204. Italics mine.  
\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 197.
darkness,” Marlow says of Kurtz, comparing him to his own description of the African continent (177). We hear almost none of his alleged eloquence: Marlow rarely quotes Kurtz’s actual speech, despite the immense importance attributed to his voice; instead, he subsumes Kurtz’s (presumed) eloquence into his own narrative. Indeed, Kurtz’s most memorable quoted lines are remarkable for their succinct brutality, not eloquence. The only quoted line from what Marlow describes as “a moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment,” the report for the “future guidance” of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs, is Kurtz’s marginal note. It reads: “Exterminate all the brutes!” (155). His famous last words are, of course, “The horror! The horror!” (178).

With the elision of much of Kurtz’s speech, Conrad highlights his suffusion into Marlow’s voice and his merger with the Congo natives surrounding him; the disembodied voice of Kurtz becomes jumbled with other voices in the Congo. In representing Kurtz’s unraveling through the atmospheric osmosis of voices no longer attached to delimited points of view, Conrad sets up a parallel between the intermixing of colonizer and colonized and the lack of differentiation among readers exacerbated by the mass reading public. This is the most radical articulation of democratic address—its limit case—forgoing as it does the categorizations provided by both race and literacy to imagine the sameness of an “unlettered race” and the British reading public within the context of Said’s “undefined and unclear world,” or what Jameson calls “the unrepresentable totality” in “Modernism and Imperialism.”

At the same time, of course, even the idea of Kurtz’s elevated speech sets him apart from the racist representation of native Africans in the novel. As Chinua Achebe has most famously pointed out, the “withholding” of language from the Africans is part

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of this racism.\textsuperscript{17} Only two short lines, one referencing cannibalism and the other pronouncing Kurtz’s death—“Mistah Kurtz—he dead” (178)—emerge from what Marlow paints as “a violent babble of uncouth sounds” (120). One might add that not only do the Congolese speak only twice, they are rarely addressed, much less positioned as an addressee within the series of frame narratives. In proposing that Conrad represents Kurtz’s subjective merger with the Africans partially through his disembodied, abstracted voice, I do not mean to therefore suggest he is the object of an equally racist, dehumanizing depiction. Rather, in comparing Kurtz’s crisis of delimitation with that of the novel’s textual and extratextual addressees, I suggest that Kurtz’s unraveling in turn highlights how the field of address at the end of the century is necessarily destabilized by the presence of otherness. Africa becomes the geographical context for disembodied voice and a resultant crisis of delimitation, but in Marlow’s address to Englishmen on the Thames in England, and in his own address to the English audience of \textit{Blackwood’s Magazine}, Conrad reveals to readers the scale of the public to which they belong, its direction towards encompassing otherness, and its fraying edge.

The climactic scene of address in the novel between Marlow and the late Kurtz’s fiancé, who is called the Intended, draws these themes together, in part by specifically involving women as proxy readers or addressees. For much of the novel, Marlow insists on the exclusion of women from his narrative. The first time he introduces the Intended, for example, he seems surprised at himself: “‘Girl! What? Did I mention a girl? Oh, she is out of it—completely. They—the women I mean—are out of it—should be out of it. We must help them to stay in that beautiful world of their own, lest ours get worse’” (153). Here he echoes his thoughts on his aunt, whose jingoistic view of a “benevolent”

rather than exploitative imperialism prompts Marlow to say: “It’s queer how out of touch
with truth women are. They live in a world of their own, and there had never been
anything like it, and never can be. It’s too beautiful altogether” (113). Particularly his
aunt, who is taken in by imperialist propaganda, suggests a gendered assumption about
indefinite female reading, especially in the context of reading on matters of public concern.
By way of Marlow’s generalization, the Intended too is wrapped up in this image. Here is
another delimitating line, then, that would boldly mark the border around the “too
beautiful” world of women.

In the scene of address between Marlow and the Intended, however, the ostensible
protection of women from “the truth” breaks down, at least for the novel’s readers—
would-be outsiders along with the Intended. First, Kurtz’s last words haunt the scene. To
properly quote them, one would need a wild-looking citation, almost equal part quotation
marks and words: “‘The horror! The horror!’” (178). We quote Conrad; Conrad’s
anonymous narrator quotes Marlow; Marlow quotes Kurtz. The multiple quotation marks
signify how deeply embedded Kurtz’s last words are in the series of frames on which
Heart of Darkness is structured. But Conrad also suggests those same words are
uncontainable, gothic not only in what they designate but also in how they reverberate
across space and time. Thus, Marlow wonders that the Intended can’t hear them: “‘The
dusk was repeating them in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to
swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind’” (186). Conrad heightens the
tension between the insuppressible bleeding out of “the horror” and the attempt to contain
it that Marlow makes for the Intended. Marlow cannot contain Kurtz’s address, as his
voice can speak from anywhere, and Marlow and Kurtz cannot cordon off their
addressees—the Intended, the *Nellie*, the reading audience. Fearing that “such a life should be sacrificed to nothing” (186), the Intended wants desperately to be the person who can do something with Kurtz’s narrative, if only by preserving his last words. Marlow lies, telling her that Kurtz used his last breath to pronounce “‘your name.’” He then mocks her response with a tone of bitter resignation: “‘I knew it—I was sure!’”: “She knew. She was sure” (186). The Intended is wrong, of course, but not just on this specific point of what was said; she is wrong in her certainty about Kurtz, her displaced but desired interlocutor, whom she feels she knows like no one else can. This kind of certainty about what exactly someone has said is precisely what Conrad denies the other interlocutors in the novel. If it is difficult to determine relations of address even among the intimate group onboard the *Nellie*, it is futile for the Intended to attempt, vicariously, to create such a relationship.

Heightening this indeterminacy is the link Conrad makes between the vastness of empire and the unknowability of the late-century reading public. Rendered as “your name” in Marlow’s lie, the Intended’s anonymity enables Conrad to not only implicitly address the novel’s readers in the second person, but also to suggest they substitute “your name” for what Kurtz really referred to, the “horror” of the imperial project. That is, Conrad forces readers’ complicity in signing their name to that horror. Notice, too, the ambiguity of the epithet “the Intended” allows it to work as both a singular and non-count noun. In this connection, even the more specific epithet “the Intended” comes to stand for justifications of empire, that is, all the good intended to be done. In a final expansion of the field of address, then, the horrors of empire become synonymous with a woman’s name. Readers male and female are implicated in the lie concluding Marlow’s narrative
and remain haunted by their experience of Kurtz at its climax, on his deathbed. Indeed, the life Kurtz’s words take on after his death testifies to the circulation of textualized voice beyond the living voices that drive the novel’s plot forward. The gothicized emphasis Conrad places on the reverberation of “The horror! The horror!” in the atmosphere amplifies the unlocateability of individual voices, circulating among a vast public that encompasses the Intended’s sitting room in Brussels, the African continent, and wherever Conrad’s readers happen to be.

Though Kurtz’s climactic death and the reliving of his last words with the Intended culminate Marlow’s long journey, Conrad makes explicit in his title what emerges only slowly in *Frankenstein* and *Wuthering Heights*: that the trajectory of the narrative brings readers close to otherness. Indeed, one might trace increasingly sublime, expansive orientations towards otherness across these titles. *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, of course, refers to a singular figure. One learns later, especially from our persistent confusion over the name Frankenstein, that the novel poses a crisis of delimitation from deep within its frame narratives. *Wuthering Heights*, of course, designates a place that we come to identify with Heathcliff, whose expansiveness reaches even beyond the Heights. If the title orients us to the place right away, then, only slowly through the unfolding of the frames do readers begin to get “close” to Heathcliff, and even then it remains clear that the bareness of the title *Wuthering Heights* echoes Brontë’s hesitations about sustaining such proximity. Finally, while *Heart of Darkness* points us to a place of otherness immediately, it also abstracts that space more immediately. Shelley answers whom, and Brontë answers where; both provide some relatively concrete figuration for readers to latch onto that Conrad goes on to undermine.
Originally serialized under the title *The Heart of Darkness*, the later excision of the definite article—a grammatical un-framing—tightens this connection between abstraction and otherness.

In short, these titles index a trajectory towards de-individuation and de-localization that the interlocutor relationships animating the novels carry on in the unfolding of their narratives. Tracking these changes alongside the establishment of a democratic reign of writing over the course of the century, I have argued that even the local, embodied address of the gothic frame tale undergoes the pressure of democratization, such that Shelley, Brontë, and Conrad write the presence of any one at all, no one in particular into embodied fields of address. The proclivity the gothic has for un-framing the delimitations that are often both taken for granted and theorized as the organizing principle of a modern public shows readers that being “undone” even by temporary, virtual relationships with otherness has its own political purchase: the recognition of the largest, necessarily abstract scale of the public, a scale that would accommodate Frankenstein’s Monster and Mrs. Saville, Lockwood and Heathcliff, the Intended and the anonymous African who tells us “Mistah Kurtz—he dead.”
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