Because they have pleased so many readers so well for so long a time, Trollope and Dickens can be said to have engaged many readers, but still their novelistic practices mainly fall under the matrix of distancing narration. To hold *Bleak House* (1853) and *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864) up against the models of engaging and distancing techniques is to recognize that Dickens and Trollope for the most part resisted the intimate relation between the narrative “I” and “you,” the implied dynamic of actual readers’ presence, the insistent and earnest “special pleading” that constitute the engaging narrator’s characteristic moves. By inscribing distinctions between their narratees and actual readers, by pointing—subtly and explicitly—to the literary nature of their texts, both Dickens and Trollope participated in the masculine tradition of the distancing narrator. And yet each of them, at certain narrative moments and for reasons of his own, “borrows” the woman’s move, direct address.

Without wishing to psychoanalyze either author (Dickens, at least, has already attracted plenty of attention along those lines), I want to point to signs in their texts that indicate a certain flexibility, a willingness to let their rhetoric be temporarily invaded by a trope that was encoded in their era as a feminine one. If they did not write earnest, engaging realist novels in the tradition of Gaskell and Eliot, it was because for both Dickens and
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Trollope, the novel's status as aesthetic artifact took precedence over its rhetorical function. Their texts evince a preoccupation with the novel as an artifact, a literary construct taking its place among the productions of men of letters. Within the texts, this preoccupation finds expression in a self-consciousness about the process of novel writing.

In Trollope's case, the self-consciousness can be explicit, as in the passages in *Barchester Towers* where the narrator frets aloud over the fatiguing necessity of filling out a triple-decker novel to the end, or where the narrator promises the reader that Elinor Bold will not marry Mr. Slope, justifying the disclosure with a disquisition on the appropriate level of trust that should operate between a "novelist" and his "reader." Or, as we shall see in *Can You Forgive Her?*, Trollope's metaliterary musings can take a more implicit form, expressed in the story's structure through the playing off of one subgenre against another. In both respects, Trollope's expression of concern for literary questions closely resembles George Eliot's in *Adam Bede*; unlike Eliot, however, Trollope does not insist upon offsetting the metafictional features of his text by relying consistently on direct address.

"WE ARE ALWAYS WEAVING NOVELS":
TROLLOPE'S METALEPSES

*Can You Forgive Her?* Is there, in the history of the English novel, a title more engaging—in my technical sense of the word—than this one? Read earnestly, it seems a sincere appeal to the individual reader's sympathy, a challenge that announces, even before one opens the book, a female character whose actions may or may not be forgiven, but whose plight will command "your" attention. This title is a bold stroke, because it insists upon addressing the actual reader, the person whose gaze falls upon the book's cover. Since the title is part of what Genette calls the "paratext," the apparatus that surrounds and defines the parameters of the text proper, its addressee cannot be located within the text. The title in the form of a question enlists "you" immediately as its addressee, casting any casual consumer who happens to see the book (or one of its parts, in the original serial publication) in the role of reader. It draws you in.

And yet, as the text itself unfolds, the earnest applicability of the title seems to dissolve. Is the "her" whom we are to forgive—as the opening
sentence of the first chapter asserts—Alice Vavasor, the young woman who throws over a seemingly ideal fiancé to accept a renewed marriage proposal from her cousin, a former lover whose inappropriateness as a mate is obvious even to Alice from the start? Or is it one, or both, of the women who form the apex of parallel love triangles in the novel’s triple plot, Lady Glencora and/or Mrs. Greenow? If it is a generalized question—that is, can you forgive the female jilt, the flirt?—can the answer be the same for three such diverse women, who act from such completely different motives? Focusing on the acts of forgiveness dramatized in the story can only complicate the matter. Alice, for instance, is continually irritated by her relatives’ gratuitous forgiveness for her refusal to bend to their collective and individual wills; after her worthy fiancé and friends have put Alice’s mistakes behind them, the question seems to turn upon Alice, demanding of her whether she can forgive herself. Who, then, is the “you”; who is the “her”?

As one reaches the novel’s conclusion, with its happy-ending resolution of the marriage plot it had exploded in its opening chapters, the title’s question takes on even more complicated resonances. The narrative has so conscientiously depicted Alice’s frustrated rage over being allowed to “do nothing” in politics, and has detailed with such precision the likelihood that as John Grey’s wife, Alice can have little hope of exerting direct action on her own, that the question seems to stand upon its head: can you forgive Alice for marrying John Grey, which seemed at first to be the right thing, but which must in the end only exacerbate her frustration? (As is typical of Trollope, the proliferation of events and attitudes in the novel makes arrival at a definitive interpretation difficult if not impossible. John Grey’s election to Parliament gives Alice the opportunity for the indirect political involvement she had hoped to gain, but had lost, through her cousin; still, John’s dismissal of Alice’s original anguish as symptoms of “illness” does not bode particularly well for her autonomous existence after she has become his wife.) The titular question is much less direct, and more ironic and perplexed, than at first it appeared to be.

So, too, is the relation that Trollope establishes between the narrator’s “readers” and the actual reader. The title invites us to expect a recurring pattern of direct address; indeed, the title itself returns, refrain-like, in two passages where the narrator enlists his “reader’s” sympathy for Alice. The second of these—“Oh! reader, can you forgive her in that she had sinned against the softness of her feminine nature?”—begins as an engaging ap-
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peal, but gets deflected into a passive construction that lets "you" off the
hook: "I think that she may be forgiven, in that she had never brought
herself to think lightly of her own fault" (730). The other repetition of the
title phrase occurs in a frankly self-reflexive passage that points relentlessly
to the fictional frame, even while pleading Alice's case before the potentially
hard-hearted narratee:

But can you forgive her, delicate reader? Or am I asking the
question too early in my story? For myself, I have forgiven her.
The story of her struggle has been present to my mind for many
years,—and I have learned to think that even this offence
against womanhood may, with deep repentance, be forgiven.
And you also must forgive her before we close the book, or else
my story will have been told amiss. (398)

Despite its direct-address structure, the intervention is distancing in two
ways: first, by evoking a "delicate reader" who is prejudiced, quick to
judge, and reluctant to sympathize (and then by professing his own convic­
tion that such an attitude is not merited by Alice's "offence") the narrator
creates a narratee with whom he implies the actual reader should not wish to
identify; second, his references to the "story" (repeated three times in the
passage), the "book," and his own responsibility for telling the reader about
Alice all enforce a self-consciousness about the narrative's textual, fictional
nature. These two interventions that repeat the title are not more straight­
forward instances of engaging direct address than the title itself, but models
for the distancing moves Trollope's narrator typically makes.

As we have seen, a hallmark of the distancing narrator is to refer
obliquely in the third-person to "the reader" or "my reader" rather than to
"you," as though the figure being named were not present at the moment of
the narrative transaction. Trollope's narrator refers so often to "the reader"
in this novel that he seems to have been talking to himself while he
composed, wondering aloud about what the future audience's reaction
would be. In Can You Forgive Her? there are at least twenty-one such
references to the reader. As he introdces his characters, for instance, the
narrator seems to be making mental notes to himself: "Such had been Mr.
Vavasor's pursuits and pleasures in life up to the time at which my story
commences. But I must not allow the reader to suppose that he was a
man without good qualities" (42), or "for Alice Vavasor when she will be
introduced to the reader had already passed her twenty-fourth birthday" (43). This mode, quite distinct in its stance from conversational address, persists throughout the text, as in "the attentive reader will remember" (403), "It is hardly necessary to tell the reader that" (443), or "The reader is not to suppose . . . it need hardly be explained to the reader" (632). Granted, third-person references to "the reader" are a firmly entrenched convention of nineteenth-century prose style, but we need only contrast the preponderance of these references in Trollope's novel with their scarcity in Adam Bede (which refers to "the reader" only twice) to recognize a significant difference in stance.

Trollope—who claims in his Autobiography not to have planned his novels in advance, but to have composed rapidly and revised very little—falls into certain formulas in his prose style, as several critics in his time and ours have noted. His notes to himself about "the reader" may be one such tic; another is an interesting pattern by which his narrator constructs passive sentences in order to avoid speaking directly to "you." I have already mentioned a few of these passive constructions, for example, "I think that she may be forgiven" (730) and "It need hardly be explained to the reader" (632). Translated into the engaging mode of Gaskell or Eliot, these passages might read "I think you may forgive her" and "I hardly need to explain to you." Trollope goes to some stylistic length to avoid this kind of direct address, however. He writes the reader out of many remarks by inscribing the figure within passive constructions, as in these examples: "Poor Alice! I hope that she may be forgiven" (177); "It will be remembered" (600, 602); "it must be owned" (537); "I beg that it may be also remembered" (490). Despite the title's insistence upon evoking a present "you" before the text begins, the novel suppresses "you" within the text; Can You Forgive Her? contains approximately seventeen passages that describe the reader's potential actions and reactions in this passive mode.

By contrast, I have been able to find only five passages (in addition to the title and its two refrains) that directly accost "you." In one case, the narrator narrows the reference of "you" by endowing the narratee with a gender: "Ah, my male friend and reader, who earnest thy bread, perhaps, as a country vicar . . . hast thou never confessed . . . that Fate has been unkind to thee in denying thee the one thing that thou has wanted?" (479). That "one thing" is a seat in Parliament, a thing denied categorically to women and specifically—it seems—to Trollope himself (of which I will say
more later in this chapter). Like the "delicate reader" whose exaggerated concern for offences "against womanhood" suggests that she is probably female, the "male reader" can stand in for only part of the actual audience, a part that is further circumscribed by the subsequent relative phrases, "who earnest thy bread . . . as a country vicar," "or sittest . . . at some weary desk in Somerset House," "or . . . rulest the yard behind the Cheapside counter." Only a few actual readers could answer this invocation.

The remaining four addresses to "you" are not limited in this way; by virtue of their general applicability and their scarcity within the text, their engaging impact is, I would argue, exceptionally strong. At the end of chapter 1, for example, as the narrator concludes his description of Alice, he seems to forget the aloof position he has adopted vis-à-vis his narratee, as though suddenly seized by the urgency of communicating his affection for his heroine: "I beg you, in taking her for all in all, to admit that she was a fine, handsome, high-spirited young woman" (45). The plea suggests an unusually antagonistic relation between the "you" and the "I" (since we are entirely dependent on the narrator for any opinion we can have of Alice at this point, why would we be unwilling to "admit" that she is what he describes her to be?). Still, for the moment, the "you" flashes onto the scene, and the narrator's concern that the actual reader should admire his heroine evokes the actual reader's presence as the story gets underway.

Appropriately enough, the first appearance of "you" within the text is on the first page, where the narrator refers directly to "your" role in the title: "Whether or no, she, whom you are to forgive, if you can, did or did not belong to the Upper Ten Thousand . . . I am not prepared to say. . . . Alice Vavasor, whose offence against the world I am to tell you, and if possible to excuse, was the daughter of [a] younger son" (39). Like the title, this opening sentence ushers "you" into the narrative. A definitive, if probably unintentional, symmetry contributes to the novel's closure, as the engaged "you" who enters the text departs in the distanced form of "my readers": "Probably my readers may agree with Alice. . . . But as [her friends] have all forgiven her . . . I hope that they who have followed her story to its close will not be less generous" (830).

In the juxtaposition of the first and final paragraphs of the novel, then, the opposition of distancing and engaging narrative breaks down. "My readers," they who "have followed [Alice's] story," are figures outside the narrative conversation, more distant from its contents than the initially
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(and thereafter occasionally) present "you." And yet, the final paragraph suggests, they occupy the same plane of existence as Alice's friends: their activity in forgiving Alice is exactly parallel to the characters' activity. The novel ends on a moment of metalepsis, in which the narrator is suggesting either that the "readers" are as fictional as the characters, or that the characters are as real as are the "readers," who, despite all the distancing strategies in the novel, have been established as figures for the rarely but pointedly present "you." By Trollope's own report, his characters were as real to him as his readers were. For him, the rhetorical issue of involving a real audience in the comings and goings of a fictional world was complicated by his passionate involvement in the imaginary world of his novels.

According to his Autobiography, Trollope "lived with [his] characters" (233). He asserts that the successful novelist "desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creations of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures" (232):

This he can never do unless he know those fictitious personages himself, and he can never know them well unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. (232–233).

For evidence that he took this attitude toward his own creations, Trollope cites his practice of returning to the same cast of characters over the course of many years of writing. "So much of my inner life was passed in their company," he says, that he could not resist being "allured back to [his] old friends" (319). Even after they had died in their fictional worlds, they lived on in his imagination; witness Trollope's legendary assertion that "I have never dissevered myself from Mrs. Proudie, and still live much in company with her ghost" (276).

According to Trollope, the process of conceiving narratives in fiction and the process of keeping track of the actual details of life were for him practically the same activity. On the subject of whether it would be more difficult to work simultaneously on two separate novels (as he once did) than to keep in mind the separate life stories of one's country friends and one's city friends, Trollope observes: "In our lives we are always weaving novels,
and we manage to keep the different tales distinct" (155). From his perspective, the world of lived experience was in some respects as fictional as his novels, and the novels were nearly as real as his life. If we are to take his assertions about his own writing seriously, we must deduce that in his mind the line between the two worlds was deliberately and frankly blurred.

Small wonder, then, that his text blurs the lines as well. At different narrative moments, Trollope's narrator is equally capable of treating his characters and events as "real" and of reminding his "reader" that the same characters and events are fictional. (In this respect his practice resembles that of Thackeray, the contemporary novelist Trollope avowedly revered most highly.) Trollope's most persistently engaging strategy—that is, the technique his narrator most often uses to suggest the authenticity of his story—is a pretense that the narrator's information is imperfect. As in Mary Barton, the pose is not at all consistent: the narrator chooses seemingly arbitrary moments to suspend his omniscience and to claim that he does not have all the details. Frequently he repeats the phrases "I cannot say" or "I am not in a position to determine" (as on pages 46, 48, 52, 139, 140, 158), and he disavows knowledge of events, as well as of characters' motives. On the subject of what characters are thinking, he often raises questions rather than providing definitive information, characteristically introducing the questions with "I wonder" (pages 40, 73, 281, 604, 681, 685). These open-ended musings tend to militate against the closure of the text by suggesting that the narrator did not have complete access to all the "facts," and hence, that he did not invent the information he does report.

Similarly, the narrator opens out the text to invite the "reader's" participation in judging the characters' actions. Having detailed the awkwardness of Alice's decision to tour Switzerland, while still affianced to John Grey, with his rival, her cousin, the narrator turns to a narratee at the end of the paragraph to inquire, "Under these circumstances was not Lady Macleod right in saying that George Vavasor should not have been accepted as a companion for the Swiss tour?" (66). Much later in the novel, after examining Alice's assumptions about the gaming tables that have lured Lady Glencora, the narrator remarks, "Of course, she did not sift her suspicions. Who does at such moments?" (713). In the same vein, after narrating Kate's attempts to get the old Squire to listen to Bible chapters in the evening, the narrator appends a comment: "There may have been good produced by the small quantity to which he listened, as there is good from
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the physic which children take with wry faces, most unwillingly. Who can say?" (564). Who, indeed? When Trollope's narrator abdicates his claim to complete, definitive knowledge he takes a most engaging stance: he is not simply asking rhetorical questions, but genuine questions that enlist the actual reader's participation in filling out the narrative commentary.

And yet, despite his pretense of periodically allowing his characters to shield private thoughts from him, and despite his willingness to cede final judgments to the narratee, Trollope's narrator is far from consistently engaging in his stance toward the text itself. He continually alternates his claims for the narrative's reality with reminders of its fictive nature. When the Swiss tour takes place, for instance, the narrator suddenly foregrounds Trollope's authorial role:

I am not going to describe the Vavasors' Swiss tour. It would not be fair on my readers... and I should consider myself to be dishonest if I attempt to palm off such matter on the public in the pages of a novel. It is true that I have just returned from Switzerland, and should find such a course of writing very convenient. But I dismiss the temptation, strong as it is. Retro age, Satan. (78)

Although this intervention somewhat audaciously focuses the narrative for the moment upon the way it is being written, it does not suggest that the narrator has invented the story. Other interventions are even more candid, however. One comes in the form of a footnote acknowledging that a character has been "borrowed" from a novel of Thackeray's (192). Another comes in the passage I have already cited, where the narrator wonders aloud about the possibility of adequately analyzing Alice's mind, in order to prompt his readers to forgiveness by telling the "story" well (397–398). Resembling the famous interventions in Barchester Towers, these spotlights on the narrator-as-creator recall the distancing effects of Thackeray's and Kingsley's metafictional meditations.

PLAYING OFF THREE GENRES: THE METAFICTIONAL STORY

In Can You Forgive Her? Trollope's metafictional inclinations come across in the story, as well as in the discourse. As I have mentioned, the novel's pages are divided among three distinct plots, each one involving a
woman with two rival suitors. The two secondary plots are linked to the main plot by friendships among the characters: Alice Vavasor becomes intimate with Lady Glencora, the heroine of one subplot, and Alice's cousin Kate (who is closely involved in Alice's own story) spends much of her time with her aunt, Mrs. Greenow, the center of the second subplot. In addition to helping to vary the action and fill out the volumes of the novel, the two subplots operate as mirror images of the main plot. The mirrors reflect distortions of the main story, however; each of the three belongs to a separate subgenre of fiction, though all three find their comic/realistic resolutions in the end. By playing three kinds of story off against each other, and by privileging Alice's story as the focal point, the novelist implicitly raises the question: What kind of a novel will this be?

The subplots present two alternative fictional modes that contrast with the main plot, even as their action parallels its own. Trollope sets up the matrix for the plots in the titles for two of the chapters that deal with Alice's story, "John Grey, the Worthy Man" and "George Vavasor, the Wild Man." The terms are not applied in the text to the other two pairs of rivals, but their applicability is evident: Plantagenet Palliser is obviously the worthy man and Burgo Fitzgerald the wild man; Mr. Cheeseacre, ludicrous though he may be, earns the title of "worthy man" by being a substantial householder, while the freeloading Captain Bellfield aspires (through his shameless flirting and notorious irresponsibility) to the tittle of wild man. The resolution of each of the three stories depends upon the story's genre. In Glencora's story the worthy man wins the woman, but in Mrs. Greenow's, the wild man prevails. Both subplots are resolved far enough in advance of the novel's end to promote some suspense about which one Alice's story will imitate, or whether Alice might be the heroine to end up with no man at all.

Lady Glencora is at the center of a potentially tragic "silver spoon" novel, a story of romance among people with money and position, a situation whose potential consequences could affect many characters beyond the principals involved—indeed, could (and does) change the course of the (fictionalized) British Parliament. If Glencora were to abandon Plantagenet for Burgo, thus staining her husband's reputation, breaking his heart, and altering the course of his career, his prospects would be ruined, and he would never rise to become the prime minister. As it happens, Plantagenet's decision to accompany his wife to Europe has serious consequences, in that
it postpones his promotion to chancellor of the exchequer. When Glencora wavers from her commitment to the “worthy man,” she positions herself for a serious fall from her social position as well as her virtue, and threatens to join the ranks of tragic, sensational heroines along the lines of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley.

If Mrs. Greenow is not exactly low enough to be the heroine of a Newgate novel, she is enough lower than Glencora, socially speaking, to provide a sharply contrasting setting for the parallel plot. Mrs. Greenow’s financial self-sufficiency and bourgeois self-satisfaction render her invulnerable to anything like a tragic fall. Her crocodile tears for her “dear departed Greenow” and her repeated assertion that the passionate part of her life is over, are—as the narrator likes to remind us—partly sincere. She has come too far in her life to be able to make any choices now that would have tragic consequences, even on a small scale. The subplot she dominates is a comic parody of the tragic plot concerning Glencora: Mrs. Greenow’s story inverts the terms of Lady Glencora’s, so that the “right” decision for her is to marry the attractive Captain Bellfield, the wild man, and to reject Mr. Cheeseacre, the ostensibly worthy man. The contrasts and similarities between these two plots provide a fertile ground for interpretation of Trollope’s message, but that is not my present concern. What interests me here is the way the potentially tragic high-life plot and the relentlessly comic low-life plot point to the plot in between them, thus focusing attention on the nature of that main story.

Obviously, Alice is the heroine of a “realistic” novel, but her story plays with the conventional shape of such novels. Like Jane Austen’s Persuasion, the novel begins at a moment somewhat later than the moment where realist novels typically end: with the heroine’s engagement. Like Anne Elliott, Alice breaks off her commitment to her lover, but unlike Anne, Alice goes through the agonizing process of decision under the reader’s eye, in the narrative present. As the story progresses and Alice experiences increasing panic at the thought of honoring her subsequent engagement to George, the novel turns its genre inside-out: whereas the conventional comic-realist novel (on the Evelina-model, for instance) traces the efforts of a heroine to get married, Alice’s story follows her increasingly frustrating and painful attempts not to get married, first to John, then to George, then again to John (because she cannot forgive herself for having left him the first time). When, in the end, she consents to marry John, her plot aligns itself
with the happy-ending closure of the other two—this is, after all, a comic novel. But in the contours of its story/ies, it is a novel that refuses to follow comfortably the shape that convention prescribes for its genre. In so doing, it draws attention to the question of genre itself, and becomes—on the level of its structure—a novel about novels, a work of subtly self-reflexive metafiction. Trollope's concern for literary questions—questions about what kind of novel to write and how best to write it—shows itself, then, in his novel's structure, as well as in the worries his narrator periodically expresses in interventions.

As I have argued, this self-conscious concern for the novel's literariness is a sign of masculinity in a narrator's stance (even, or should I say especially, when it surfaces in George Eliot's novels). In Trollope's case I think it signals his narrator's (as well as his own) identification with the tradition of male novelists, especially his beloved Thackeray. Alongside his predominantly distancing attitudes toward his fiction, however, a strain of engaging approaches—the few, potent examples of direct address and the implications that his characters are "real," which I have outlined above—persists. Other critics have argued that Trollope's "androgyny" surfaces in his treatment of women characters. Looking to the realm of discourse rather than story, I see the rare but pointed engaging interventions as signs of "femininity" that enter Trollope's text; furthermore, I see parallel signs of feminine identification in Trollope's own account of his novel-writing activity in his *Autobiography*.

"IMPREGNATED WITH MY OWN CREATIONS":
THE FEMININE TROLLOPE

First, let us look more closely at the terms in which Trollope frames his confession that he lived with his characters and thought of them as real. Describing the process by which he produced what he considered to be his best work, he says he would isolate himself from the responsibilities of his post-office job and his "household duties," in "some quiet spot among the mountains." "At such times I have been able to imbue myself thoroughly with the characters I have had in mind. I have wandered alone among the rocks and woods, crying at their grief, laughing at their absurdities, and thoroughly enjoying their joy. I have been impregnated with my own creations" (176). To be "impregnated with [his] own creations" is to take a
decidedly feminine position in regard to their creation. Trollope's passionate emotional involvement with his characters, who moved him even to the point of "crying," also carries powerfully feminine connotations for a Victorian man.

For Trollope, creation itself, the process of bringing people—even fictional people—to life, is a female activity. The metaphor he uses clashes strikingly with Gilbert and Gubar's beautifully illustrated contention that the pen, for male writers, has usually been "a metaphorical penis" (3). The stance toward characters that Gilbert and Gubar describe as typically masculine applies to the distancing narrator: "Precisely because a writer 'fathers' his text, his literary creations . . . are his possession, his property. Having defined them in language and thus generated them, he owns them, controls them, and encloses them on the printed page" (12). Trollope, who (according to his own metaphor) saw himself as mothering his own text, is surely an exception to Gilbert and Gubar's rule. His engaging narrative attitude toward his characters' existence, which is not at all consistent, but nevertheless present in his text, acknowledges his feminine concept of the novelist's activity. Trollope departs the company of masculine artists who conceive of writing as a virile act.

I argue at length in Chapter 7 that a motivating force behind the engaging narrator's presence in female texts was the ban on women's public speech in the nineteenth century. I would not want to conclude this discussion of Trollope without noting that men, too, could feel publicly silenced, and could experience the urgency of expressing "real" sentiments through fictional texts. Trollope's narrator, addressing the male narratee of Can You Forgive Her? in a passage I mentioned above, refers to membership in Parliament as "the one thing that thou hast wanted" which Fate has denied. The Autobiography is very explicit about the novelist's own desire to sit in Parliament and his disappointment at finding he could not prove wrong the uncle who had taunted him for his boyhood ambition to be elected to the House of Commons. Trollope attributes his failure partly to his weakness as a public speaker: "I had no special gifts that way, and had not studied the art early enough in life to overcome natural difficulties" (296).

Whether or not his lack of success in his brief political campaign was entirely due to his difficulties with speaking, Trollope felt himself effectively silenced by his defeat. Twice in his Autobiography he asserts that his novels became the channel by which he made public statements about his
private convictions: "As I was debarred from expressing my opinions in the House of Commons, I took this method of declaring myself" (that is, writing *Phineas Finn*) (317). Of Plantagenet and Lady Glencora, he writes,

By no amount of description or asseveration could I succeed in making any reader understand how much these characters with their belongings have been to me in my latter life; or how frequently I have used them for the expression of my political and social convictions. They have been as real to me as free trade was to Mr. Cobden, or the dominion of a party to Mr. Disraeli; and as I have not been able to speak from the benches of the House of Commons, or to thunder from platforms, or to be efficacious as a lecturer, they have served me as safety-valves by which to deliver my soul. (180)

Evidently Trollope felt himself to be specifically barred from the locations of public expression—the M. P.'s bench, the lecturer's platform—that were theoretically available to men but generally forbidden to women. Unlike his female contemporaries, he focuses in his account of his frustration upon his own need to speak (as "a safety-valve by which to deliver my soul"), rather than on a desire to communicate a message to an audience, to effect some influence upon the world. Still, I think that his recourse to earnest, direct address in novels whose story and discourse are primarily distancing is a sign of his partial identification with all of the female voices that, like his own, could speak only through texts.

**DICKENS AND THE POLYVOCAL NARRATOR**

Anthony Trollope's access to the public ear, then, was confined to the utterances he made in his official capacity at the Post Office or in written texts. To find a contemporary whose standing as a public celebrity placed him in a contrasting situation, we need look no further than Charles Dickens. Dickens's passion and talent for oratory, public reading, and acting in melodramas are legendary; his own access to being heard in public was nearly unlimited. His personal fame attests to a difference between his status and Trollope's. When Trollope visited the United States and called on Brigham Young, having "been vain enough to conceive that he would have heard my name," he was "properly punished" by the "great polygamist's"
turning him away from the door and insisting that Trollope must be a "miner" (*Autobiography* 350). By contrast, when Dickens and his wife came to America for a tour of public readings, they were swamped with invitations and surrounded by adoring crowds who tried to touch the author or to take away souvenirs from among his clothes. Phyllis Rose has remarked that "in the annals of contemporary literary celebrity, there is nothing to which one can compare Dickens's reception in America in 1842"; his public reception resembled nothing so much as America's hysterical welcome to the Beatles in the early 1960s (157).

As his biographers have established, Dickens was extremely sensitive about his standing in the public regard. He sometimes went to absurd lengths to maintain credibility in his relations with his audience—witness the preface he appended to *Bleak House*, arguing for the scientific reality of death by spontaneous combustion, after the serialized version of the novel raised controversy over the circumstances of Krook's demise. Dickens was a public figure; his opinions, his imagination, and even his body were regarded by his admirers and himself as public property.

In this respect, Dickens stands apart from all of the other authors in this study except (in her later life and in a comparatively modest way) Stowe. Kingsley, Thackeray, Gaskell, Eliot, and Trollope all enjoyed literary reputations of varying degrees of exaltation, and each of them (with the possible exception of Kingsley) was "lionized" in the middle of the nineteenth century as their works have been canonized since. But as Trollope ruefully acknowledges in his autobiography, no one else achieved the fame and popularity that Dickens did.

If we think about novels' narrative discourse in relation to their authors' historical situations, we can find significance in Dickens's singularity: the most publicly present of all these novelists, he was also the least given to using address to a "reader" in heterodiegetically narrated novels. The moments in Dickens's novels where an uncharacterized narrator addresses an audience directly as "you" are rare: one occurs in *Little Dorritt* (300), where the narrator advises the reader to have patience in waiting to hear of a character's fate; several mock-formal addresses to "my Lords and Gentlemen and Honourable Boards" appear in *Our Mutual Friend* during scenes concerning Betty Higdon; significantly, these distancing interventions include no engaging appeals to "you." The ending of *Hard Times*, which has frequently been compared to a sermon, is framed as direct
exhortation to the audience: "Dear reader! It rests with you and me, whether, in our two fields of action, similar things shall be or not. Let them be!" (227). But the most well known and most frequently discussed instances of direct address in Dickens's work is the scene in Bleak House where Jo, the illiterate crossing-sweep, dies.

Because of that scene's prominence, and because of the novel's chronological proximity to the others in this study, I choose Bleak House as my example of Dickens's narrative practice, even though its unique structure makes it atypical of Dickens's work. Everyone who has read Bleak House remembers the scene of Jo's death; the climactic moment of authorial address is often seen as prototypically "Dickensian" in terms of its exploitation of melodramatic, emotional impact. How strange, then, that Dickens at his most Dickensian—Dickens in an engaging intervention—is actually Dickens taking an uncharacteristic narrative stance.

In terms of narrative perspective, Bleak House is highly experimental for its era. The basic pattern of alternating narrators between Esther's homodiegetic viewpoint and the other, unnamed narrator's heterodiegetic perspective is complex in the first place. The multiplicity of voices within that "other narrator's" utterances complicates the structure even further. It is not possible to determine who is speaking in Bleak House without first asking, When? In what chapter, what paragraph, what line? The interweaving of free indirect discourse with several recurring voices—among them a voice for the Fashionable Intelligence, and another voice that reports public occurrences at Tom-All-Alone's—produces a genuinely polyvocal novel that explodes the idea of an omniscient narrator-as-person. The narrative voice that alternates with Esther's is never a "who," but is rather a conglomeration of disparate languages and perspectives: it is, as Elizabeth Ermarth has called the realist narrators, "Nobody." The voice is bodiless, the perspectives are multiple, the strategies diverse. When the narrator suddenly asserts an intense personal presence through direct address during the scene of Jo's death, the moment's sharp contrast with the rest of the text draws special attention to the intervention's strategy.

Generally speaking, Dickens creates in Bleak House neither a distancing narrator nor an engaging narrator. It is not a "narrator" at all, in the sense that I have been using the term: a narrative voice representing a personal perspective that claims to parallel that of the novelist and that addresses an audience/auditor. To be sure, my concern here is not primarily
with the dialogic discourse that Dickens produced in *Bleak House*. Before looking in detail at the scene of Jo's death, therefore, I will briefly illustrate the variety among the heterodiegetic narrative voices. In that the experimental nature of the text necessarily calls attention to its nature as text—for readers today as well as Dickens's contemporary audience—*Bleak House* is a self-reflexive, metafictional novel. Its narrative interventions do not evoke a personally present narrator, nor do they insist upon an identity between narratee and actual reader. In these respects, it is primarily distancing, rather than engaging, according to the models I am using. As such, the text is consistent with Dickens's identity as a man whose voice had extra-literary access to public attention. He could (and did) reach his audience from stages and lecterns, and thus was at leisure to use literary texts for other purposes. Within its context, the one passage of direct address—which W. J. Harvey has called the "controlled crescendo" of *Bleak House* (*Character and the Novel* 963–964)—is a shimmering example of the power this feminine trope could wield within a predominantly masculine narrative situation.

Let us look, then, at some of the variations in voice that Dickens's heterodiegetic narrator undergoes in *Bleak House*. The narrative stance moves freely among the thoughts and words of both major and minor characters, resulting in drastic stylistic shifts from one scene (or one part of a scene) to another. Some passages resemble pages from a reporter's notebook, as for example the scene in the street in front of Krook's shop after the death of Nemo. A beadle arrives, seeking information and witnesses for the inquest:

Is immediately referred to innumerable people who can tell nothing whatever. Is made more imbecile by being constantly informed that Mrs. Green's son "was a law-writer his-self, and knowed him better than anybody"—which son of Mrs. Green's appears, on inquiry, to be at the present time aboard a vessel bound for China, three months out, but considered accessible by telegraph, on application to the Lords of the Admiralty. Beadle goes into various shops and parlours, examining the inhabitants; always shutting the door first, and by exclusion, delay, and general idiotcy, exasperating the public. Policeman seen to smile to potboy. Public loses interest, and undergoes reaction. Taunts the beadle, in shrill youthful voices, with having boiled a boy; choruses fragments of a popular song to
that effect, and importing that the boy was made into soup for the workhouse. Policeman at last finds it necessary to support the law, and seize a vocalist; who is released upon the flight of the rest, on condition of his getting out of this then, come! and cutting it—a condition he immediately observes. (195–196)

This short excerpt from the scene is narrated from a fairly consistent viewpoint, by an educated speaker whose evident contempt for the beadle comes across in such terms as “imbecile” and “idiotcy”; like all the heterodiegetically narrated chapters in *Bleak House*, it casts its verbs in the present tense. The speaker’s relative sophistication can be inferred from the distance he establishes between his perspective and the antics of beadle, crowd, and policeman. Although he has access to words such as “exasperating,” “innumerable,” and “vocalist,” his language is often invaded by that of the crowd. He can render their discourse directly (“‘was a law-writer his-self’”) or indirectly (“getting out of this then, come! and cutting it”), which blurs the margins between his own language and the crowd’s. The ungrammatical sentences rely on predicates without subjects (“Taunts the beadle”), dangling participles (“choruses fragments of a popular song to that effect, and importing”), and misplaced relative pronouns (“which son of Mrs. Green’s appears”) to suggest the loose style of the speakers on the street and/or of someone noting their words and actions rapidly. Casual language mingles with terms from “officialese,” perhaps the language of the beadle, or of the newspaper or institution for whom the reporter is taking notes (“appears, on inquiry, to be at the present time,” “who is released upon the flight of the rest, on condition”). The resulting polyvocal rendition of the scene is presented to the narratee of *Bleak House* almost as though it were some kind of document. This is not a mimetic representation of a speaker’s remarks to a personal addressee or even to a collective audience.

The narration of *Bleak House* continually shifts in style and perspective. The chapter following the one in which Nemo’s death occurs depicts the Dedlocks in Paris. Here the narrator’s voice undergoes appropriate alterations, exaggerating the superficial differences between the world of Lady Dedlock and that of her former lover:

Sooth to say, they cannot go away too fast; for, even here, my Lady Dedlock has been bored to death. Concert, assembly, opera, theatre, drive, nothing is new to my Lady, under the
worn-out heavens. Only last Sunday, when poor wretches were gay—within the walls, playing with children among the clipped trees and the statues in the Palace Garden; walking, a score abreast, in the Elysian Fields, made more Elysian by performing dogs and wooden horses; between whiles filtering (a few) through the gloomy Cathedral of Our Lady, to say a word or two at the base of a pillar, within flare of a rusty little gridiron full of gusty little tapers—without the walls, encompassing Paris with dancing, love-making, wine-drinking, tobacco-smoking, tomb-visiting, billiard card and domino playing, quack-doctoring, and much murderous refuse, animate and inanimate—only last Sunday, my Lady, in the desolation of Boredom and the clutch of Giant Despair, almost hated her own maid for being in spirits.

She cannot, therefore, go too fast from Paris. Weariness of soul lies before her, as it lies behind—her Ariel has put a girdle of it round the whole earth, and it cannot be unclasped.

Here, the elaborately literary diction contrasts with the casual language of the previous chapter. “Sooth to say,” “poor wretches,” “she cannot, therefore, go too fast”—the formal locutions align themselves with clichés (“bored to death,” “under the worn-out heavens”) to mimic the artificial stiffness of Lady Dedlock’s existence. The literary allusions (to Ariel and to Giant Despair) and the use of personification (Boredom) combine with sardonic wordplay (the Elysian Fields “made more Elysian”) to elevate the tone of the language. And yet even this passage is mixed in its voices. The long aside that occurs between dashes to depict “low-life” on a Sunday in Paris interrupts Lady Dedlock’s insipid existence with a vivid string of activities. Dickens’s famous penchant for list making comes into play, as the narrative voice contrasts Lady Dedlock’s static list of occupations, all named by nouns (“Concert, assembly, opera, theatre, drive”) with the life going on around her in exuberant participles and gerunds (“dancing, love-making, wine-drinking,” etc.) The voice of the Fashionable Intelligence which reports on the Dedlocks’ movements (56) gets interrupted and thrown off course by the voice of street life, even as Lady Dedlock’s own world is soon to be thus disturbed.10

To look at every passage in Bleak House’s present-tense chapters in this much detail would obviously be to undertake a monumental task—and yet
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even this level of detail cannot begin to describe all the complexities with which the narrative voice plays off one kind of discourse with another. Without attempting to describe the subtleties of every passage or, indeed, of the novel as a whole, I want simply to emphasize that such narration does not mimic conversation, for the speaker’s identity is constantly shifting, and the narratee’s position is questionable and problematic. If we cannot establish who is speaking, how can we hope to know “to whom”? Unlike Esther’s narrative, which manifests a strong awareness of a potential reading audience, the present-tense sections seem to be addressed to nobody in particular, to “nemo.” The narratee, like the narrator, is “Nobody.”

“AND DYING THUS AROUND US EVERY DAY”: THE ENGAGING MOMENT

This shifting conglomeration of narrative voices and stances is what renders the moment of direct address at Jo’s deathbed so memorable. All the force of the chameleon narrator suddenly consolidates into a voice that focuses itself outside the text for a unique moment of discursive contact between narrator and readers. The placement of the address at the end of a chapter seems to suspend narrative time, thus emphasizing the effect of extending the passage’s point of reference outside the text. (Had the passage occurred at the end of a “number” in serial publication, the suspension of narrative time would have been even more strongly enforced, but as it happened, Dickens placed this chapter at the beginning of the fortieth installment of Bleak House [1947–948].) The chapter ends with Allan Woodcourt leading the dying boy in the Lord’s Prayer, which Jo continually interrupts to ask “is the light a-comin’, sir?” (705). Jo stumbles through the prayer’s third line and expires:

“Hallowed be—thy—”
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. (705)

Coming in the context of Bleak House’s narrative indeterminacy and relativity, this unabashedly didactic address has a peculiar power. It begins in

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the distancing mode, addressing a narratee with whom very few people can identify, "Your Majesty." This is not the first appearance of that narratee in the novel: the voice of the Fashionable Intelligence directs one snide remark to "Your Majesty" much earlier (55). This time, though, the voice moves on, to address the increasingly comprehensive groups of Parliament ("my lords and gentlemen") and Christian ministers ("Right Reverends"). The stance is still distancing, because only a minority of readers can answer personally to these addresses, and because the narrator ensures that many of them will refuse to identify with the next appellation he chooses, "Wrong Reverends of every order." The distancing stance implicitly places the blame for Jo's death on all of these public figures, with whom most readers would not identify themselves.

But then, in the modulation to "men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts," the narratee is suddenly transformed into "you" (through the phrase, "your hearts"): no adult reader can escape the address, or the implication of culpability. The final coda, "and dying thus around us every day," takes the ultimately engaging step of unifying the narrative "I" with "you" into the figure of "us"—this narrator, who up to now has had no unified voice, no identity to tie him to any personal perspective, is momentarily revealed to all of his readers as one of them, one of the "men and women" who are bound to take some action on behalf of Jo's memory. The action the narrator takes—of course—is to speak for the inarticulate Jo and to enlist the sympathy of actual readers for actual deaths.

Dickens's strategy at such a moment is melodramatic, sensational, sentimental. It is also engaging in the technical sense. For one instant in a very long novel it evokes the presence of actual readers, and it requires those readers to consider the relation of the book in their hands to the world they inhabit. Barbara Hardy says of the moment that "Dickens at last finds a perfect voice for death," in which "the individual experience is given a resonance and intensity, the reader's sympathy engaged through ritual or ritualistic appeals" (Forms of Feeling 73). Hardy attributes the passage's affective impact to "the generalization which attaches the emotion dramatized inside the book to a broader emotional experience": the experience, that is, of "you" and "us." The highly self-conscious literary frame that surrounds the moment is technically distancing. Still, in allowing his slippery narrator one personal manifestation, one instance of intimate contact with actual readers, Dickens was borrowing an engaging technique.
What did it mean for a Victorian male novelist to borrow a feminine narrative gesture? Women novelists had, after all, appropriated earnest direct address from the rhetoric of male preachers and politicians, transporting it from the public realm into the pages of their fiction. For women, this formed the most direct means of access to real-world political influence. Through women's novels, it also came to form part of the feminine literary tradition of manipulating literary rhetoric in order to effect real-world change. Dickens had more access than most men to the public's attention, because he could speak in his own voice and be assured of an attentive audience. (His famous public readings were to attest to his pleasure in commanding that public eye and ear.) As we have seen, the metaliterary structure of a novel such as *Bleak House* demonstrates the male novelist's resulting leisure to cavort through a text, to be—as S. J. Newman puts it, in reference to Dickens—"at play." When a male novelist felt a need to "get serious," if only momentarily, he could reach across the gap in gendered interventions to grasp the technique that women were devising for the purpose.

Cross-influence among male and female novelists has long commanded the attention of critics and reviewers. Dickens himself thought that Stowe, for example, borrowed too much from fellow novelists. In an 1852 letter, he wrote of his reaction to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> She (I mean Mrs. Stowe) is a leetle unscrupulous in the appropriatin' way. I seem to see a writer with whom I am very intimate (and whom nobody can possibly admire more than myself) peeping very often through the thinness of the paper. Further I descry the ghost of Mary Barton. . . . [B]ut in spite of this, I consider the book a fine one. (quoted in Leavis 166)

The "writer with whom I am very intimate" must be Dickens himself. Playfully, he appropriates Stowe's American dialect to frame the very phrase in which he accuses her of unscrupulously borrowing material from him. The timing of this letter suggests, however, that he may have been protesting too much: indeed, he may have borrowed from the intervention strategies of *Uncle Tom* and *Mary Barton* while composing the scene of Jo's death. *Bleak House* was written in installments, beginning in November 1851 and ending in August 1853. Dickens did not write the chapter containing Jo's death until the summer of 1853, after he had written the
1852 letter about *Uncle Tom*. The "ghost of Mary Barton" he saw in *Uncle Tom* could have been the spectre of presence evoked by the repeated passages of earnest direct address so characteristic of both women's texts. That ghost—the feminine presence that speaks earnestly to "you"—may have risen again for Dickens as he composed a scene whose purposes had so much in common with the two women's novels. When he needed to appeal to preachers and politicians and to the "men and women" who formed their audiences, he borrowed from the women novelists the technique that they had adapted from public speakers.

Critics have come to see Esther's narrative as the location of femininity in *Bleak House*.¹³ The engaging moment after Jo's death, however, shows signs of the feminine carrying over into the heterodiegetically narrated parts of the novel, enabling Dickens to achieve his sentimental effects even within this multivalent, metaliterary structure. Like his female contemporaries, Dickens did not disdain the rhetoric of sensation: the power and popularity of his novels attest to the potential effectiveness of crossing the gendered boundaries of narrative intervention.