

The Authorial Dominance and Anxiety: A Reading of *Martin Chuzzlewit*

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Two places of particular significance dominate the world of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. H. M. Daleski suggests the firm of Anthony Chuzzlewit epitomizes the whole text of *Martin Chuzzlewit*(92); Dorothy Van Ghent claims that the view from Mrs. Todgers's commercial boarding house paradigmatically represents Dickens's unique perspective on his fictional world(219-220). Let us begin by thinking about how we can get to these twin focal points of centralization. Unfortunately, the task is not easy: "[n]obody had ever found Todgers's on a verbal direction, though given within a minute's walk of it. Cautious emigrants from Scotland or the North of England had been known to reach it safely by impressing a charity boy, town-bred, and bringing him along with them; or by clinging tenaciously to the post-man"(MC, 113). The firm of Anthony Chuzzlewit is "in a very narrow street somewhere behind the Post-Office; where every house was in the brightest summer morning very gloomy"(MC, 153). What is noticeable is that both of these places, which are sequestered in obscure corners of the metropolis, can be defined and mapped by the existence of 'the Post Office'. Looking from the opposite perspective, we could say that the topographies of these emblematic places reflect ubiquity of the postal service in the text. No matter how 'invisibly' a house or an individual exists in the city, the post can identify all of them. This power of identification necessarily reminds us of various critical discussions about the regulative policing function of the Victorian post office. Mary Favret, for instance, notices the several acts issued at the end of the eighteenth century that allowed the Post Office "to scrutinize, appropriate and restrict any written material circulating in and out of England". She claims that "the image of the Post office" in many Victorian novels was not merely "a device for narrative control" but also a figure of "a general restructuring of society", "that squeezed the irregularities of correspondence out the public image"(39, 203). Alexander Welsh points out the close connection between the post and the police, as both of them were able to watch over communication(55-60). *Martin Chuzzlewit*, topographically corroborating this invisible ubiquity of the post, presents many meaningful letters and their circulations that are closely tied with the characters' experiences'. Drawing on all these factors, this paper will analyze how the letters revolve around the various characters, how the post office is involved with those movements, and how those circuits can be interpreted in terms of the author Dickens's consciousness about his authorial control over writings.

Starting our analysis from the above emblematic places, we soon notice an interesting paradox. Despite the fact that the topography endorses the ubiquity of the post, the inhabitants are reacting against the postal operation. The maid at Mrs. Todgers's house is "a perfect Tomb for messages and small parcels", because whenever "dispatched to the Post-office with letters" she has been seen "endeavouring to insinuate them into casual chinks in private doors, under the

delusion that any door with a hole in it would answer the purpose”(MC, 438). Whilst she pretends to believe in the omnipresence of the post, she actually frustrates and confuses the proper transmission of letters. Pecksniff, while staying at the house, goes to the Post Office every day inquiring after letters. Though this daily routine could at first suggest that his life is heavily dependent on the postal operation, it could also imply that he and Mrs. Todgers’s house detach themselves from the system of the Penny Post². They are not waiting to be identified as the addressees, but rather actively deciding when and how they will receive those letters by stopping the delivery half-way. Moreover, other characters in other places are similarly associated with confusing the circulation by the post. Looking at Thomas Pinch, he involuntarily betrays the service when he meets Montague Tigg. Tigg pretends to be short of money due to an undelivered letter. Tom thinks “of reminding the gentleman (who, no doubt, in his agitation had forgotten it) that there [is] a Post-Office in the land”(MC, 92). He actually suggests that the problem will be solved by sending an inquiring letter. This simplicity is reversely exploited by Tigg, and Tom lends some money on the false promise that it “will be returned by post”(MC, 98). Although these episodes ostensibly corroborate Tom’s innocent belief in the powerful efficacy of the post, what he actually does is to invent a fictional circulation of letters outside the postal operation, to help Montague’s swindle, and thereby to foil the policing function of the post. This ‘betrayal’ becomes more obvious when Mary asks Tom if he has heard from Martin in America. He forges a letter to console her: “No letters have ever reached me, except that one from New York”. More significantly, he explains away Martin’s laziness by the inefficacy of the post: “But don’t be uneasy on that account, for it’s very likely they have gone away to some far-off place, where the posts are neither regular nor frequent”(MC, 420). Through forging the fictional letters and putting them into circulation only within his imagination, Tom is subverting the function of the post. Furthermore, there is another character who paradigmatically represents these problematic epistolary movements, Nadgett. He is writing “letters to himself about himself constantly”(MC, 505), and putting “them into a secret place in his coat, and deliver them to himself weeks afterwards, very much to his own surprise”(MC, 386). He creates a space of his own of which the post cannot have the slightest intelligence. To sum up, all these characters are respectively establishing their own spaces, in which they themselves are in charge of creating the itinerary of letters, and by which they can implicitly negate the capacity of the post to penetrate into private space³.

The public power of the post is challenged not only by the circulation inside each of the characters’ spaces but also by the interrelations between them. This becomes obvious on various occasions where secrets and crimes are involved. For instance, in the scene where Jonas Chuzzlewit tries to escape from England fearing that his crime of parricide might be disclosed, Nadgett writes a letter to detain him only to find that he has no means to deliver it. He relies on Tom Pinch who happens to be nearby. The letter which identifies the crime and the criminal thus travels through the hands of various characters – Nadgett, Tom and Jonas – without going through the post. In this sense, the post, which should have been ‘ubiquitous’, regulating all the lodgings and the individuals of the city, does not deliver justice. Furthermore, when Martin leaves England for the States, he sets up an elaborate route of correspondence with Mary in order to prevent his letters from falling into the hands of Pecksniff. He says that his letters will be

addressed “under cover to Mrs. Lupin” who will “deliver it to” Tom “without saying anything about it elsewhere”, whereas Mary’s letters should be “sen[t] through Pinch”(MC, 207-9). Martin believes that the only way to circumvent the viciousness of Pecksniff is not to rely on the post office but to establish his own private circuit. These episodes gather together to show that hand-deliveries are to some extent at odds with the postal delivery. They obstruct the post by encroaching upon its function as a watcher of society. They undermine the post by frustrating its monopoly of a gigantic flow of information.

If the characters react against the postal service by internalizing circulation and by resorting to archaic hand-delivery, can this be interpreted as showing the nostalgia of Dickens for an age that is free from the post, its surveillance and the gigantic circulation of letters? The opening chapter would answer this question in the negative. The chapter is concerned with many letters which have existed since before the post office and which have been inherited through hand-delivery. The narrator says that the noble origin of the Chuzzlewits could be affirmed by the letters “yet in the possession of various branches of the family”, recording that one of the Chuzzlewits “was in the habit of perpetually dining with Duke Humphrey”(MC, 3). Admitting that there would be many skeptical people who doubt the truth of these records, he mentions the fact that one “of its members had attained to very great wealth and influence”, which can be attested by “such fragments of his correspondence as have escaped the ravages of the moths”(MC, 4). Finally, the chapter concludes that “having shown that they must have had, by reason of their ancient birth, a pretty large share in the foundation and increase of the human family, it will one day become its province to submit, that such of its members as shall be introduced in these pages, have still many counterparts and prototypes in the Great World about us”(MC, 5). The chapter comically exaggerates the shabbiness of the letters which have long stagnated within the household and implies their lack of appeal to people in the public. In so doing, it suggests that the letters handed down from one generation to another might not be qualified as a sufficient testimony to the origin of the Chuzzlewits. Furthermore, through suggesting that the subsequent chapters of the novel will become another piece of evidence to show the significance of the Chuzzlewits in the future, it also implies that the whole text of *Martin Chuzzlewit* may again stagnate within the hands of the family until one day someone discovers it and thinks of using it. In this way, by its own existence and its own textual origin, *Martin Chuzzlewit* indicates the danger of hand-delivery, the potentiality of stagnation and its lack of trustworthiness⁴.

Martin Chuzzlewit undermines the postal operation and its surveillance by hand-delivery. Yet that text also suggests that the old-fashioned circuits can be of no utility. Why, then, does it dramatize such a variety of problematic circulations? The answer may be found in the interface between the inside and the outside of the text – the preface – which presents Dickens’s declaration that “in all my writings, I hope I have taken every possible opportunity of showing the want of sanitary improvements”(MC, 718). Significantly, the Victorian discourse of sanitary reform was inseparable from the concept of circulation, as we can see in the various terms frequently used in its debates – ventilation, sewage, drainage etc. And epidemic diseases were almost always discussed in association with the idea of stoppage or blockage⁵. David Trotter maintains: “it would not reduce Dickens’s politics absurdly to say that he was for circulation and

against stoppage”, and “[he] thought that the lives of the poor could only be made tolerable by the proper circulation of air and water through their houses”(103). In the light of these observations, the stagnation of letters in *Martin Chuzzlewit* can be interpreted as a rhetorical index by which Dickens attempted to represent the socio-cultural situation of the Victorian period: “the want of sanitary improvement”. Furthermore, the gap between the preface and the text highlights his authorial dominance. Whereas the text is written by a third person narrator, who is close to, but still different from Dickens, the preface is obviously written and signed by the name of Charles Dickens. This nominal difference can suggest: Dickens is not as vulnerable as the unnamed narrator whose text is bound with the instability of the postal operation and the stagnation of the handed-over letters. On the contrary, he is the author who self-consciously produces and controls these absences of circulation, with the intention of representing “the want of sanitary improvements” in a metaphoric way. By the power of this inimitable author, the text that contains, and is contained in, the various phases of stagnating letters can be finally put into public circulation. Indeed, Dickens’s own consciousness as the circulator of what he writes can be attested by the preceding work’s title, *American Notes for General Circulation*. The preface to the text, declaring that his readers will “acknowledge that [he] had reason in what [he] wrote”(278), betrays the young author’s pride that he is the one controlling the text and advocating the meaning among his readers.

In this paper, I looked at the problematic circulation of letters around the characters and considered its difference from the preface signed by the powerful author, Charles Dickens. The obvious difference seems to highlight Dickens’s superiority to his writings and to his readers: whereas the narrator and the letter-writers are intimidated by their writings and are entrapped within the frustrated circulation of letters, Dickens is the only person who can control what he writes and what he wants to circulate among his audiences. That is to say, the stagnated letters and the letter-writers’ conflict with their own letters seem to be deliberately used as some textual device by Dickens, for impressing his authority. Interestingly, however, his worshipper and critic, George Gissing, envisages an utterly opposite image of the author. He evaluated *Martin Chuzzlewit* as follows: “no great work of fiction is so ill put together as [this novel]. But for this imperfection” it displays “the fullness of his presentative power, the ripeness of his humour, the richest flow of his satiric vivacity, and the culmination of his melodramatic vigour”(2004, vol. i, p. 135). Put more bluntly, Gissing was enthralled by the image of the suffering genius, who cannot but be overwhelmed and subverted by his own disruptive imagination. Taking these two opposite interpretations together, we may point out Dickens’s secret anxiety: he might have noticed that his writing can overwhelm and subvert his authorial control. He might have recognised that the text that he had composed and readers’ individual interpretations can threaten his creating self, and thereby undermine his intended meanings. Such a bitter realisation might have compelled him to project that anxiety onto his characters’ frustrated relationships with their letters and writings. And by the same anxiety, he might have been necessitated to insist on his authorial dominance in the preface. Though these possibilities cannot but be restricted to our speculation, we can define the text of *Martin Chuzzlewit* as a promiscuous space in which various conflicts between writers and their writings meet and intersect: the unusual letter-writers who are writing to themselves and entrapped within their own self-closed spheres of writings; the

innocent letter-writers who are unwittingly frustrating the circulation of their letters and thereby foil the proper transmission of meanings; the vulnerable image of the genius writer suffering from his own productive power; and the author who strenuously tries to take a firm grip of his own novel and its meaning.

Notes

¹ Carol Hanbery MacKay actually claims that the letters and the letter-writings embody “the convoluted relationship between the private and public selves of” the characters (737).

² Kate Flint insists that Dickens was certainly conscious of the system of the Penny Post when he wrote *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in her ‘The Middle Novels: *Chuzzlewit*, *Dombey* and *Copperfield*’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Charles Dickens*. She argues that “Rowland Hill’s Penny Post was introduced in 1840, and hence this serves as a further pointer to the way in which, in this novel [MC], Dickens invests social change with anxieties concerning legibility on the one hand, and the vulnerability of openness on the other”(38).

³ As to this ‘self-directedness’ of all the characters, J. H. Miller notes that “the novel is full of people who are wholly enclosed in themselves”(104).

⁴ Though many critics – such as George Gissing (1898, p. 51), and Sylv_re Monod (18-19) – have denounced this opening chapter as dull and irrelevant to the subsequent story-line, my observation can illuminate its significant function in the narrative as a whole.

⁵ See, for instance, John Kirk, *Papers on Health* in eleven volumes (for the notion of ‘circulation’, particularly see, vol. 2, pp. 243-248. and vol. 5, pp.166-169). Also see, *The Elementary Catechisms of Sanitation, the Means of Health* and Thomas Thatcher, *Common Sense: Health Reform*.

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All the quotations are given after this edition, abbreviated as MC.

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