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Writing Letters to Come to 'Terms' with Domestic Economy: Household Management in Dickens's Early Correspondence"

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In this essay, I will show how issues related to domestic economy are spelled out in epistolary form in Dickens's correspondence. This medium plunges us in an intimate form of perception of and reaction to these economic matters. A sample of Dickens's early correspondence exemplifies how his letters, at times, dealt with delicate financial issues involving close members of his family. The following epistolary exchanges yield invaluable insights first into the economic misfortune brought about repeatedly by Dickens's father upon his family, and then into Dickens's prospective domestic economy with his future wife, Catherine Hogarth. In Dickens's letters, family business dovetails with the negotiation of publishing contracts,[1] as well as with diverse other financial transactions. These business *cum* private matters partake of Dickens's epistolary biography. Besides, the very form and content[2] of these letters also produce a form of economic knowledge in that they show us how Dickens comes to "terms" literally and literarily with domestic economy. What unfolds before our eyes, as we read through these letters, is household management in progress. Thus, to some extent, Dickens's letters provide a form of economic and business knowledge.

In the light of recent analyses of epistolary discourse (e.g. Banks 2013), I will consider how Dickens tackles the financial matters already mentioned through epistolary modes and forms, in other words how these monetary considerations are expressed in his letters. In this respect, epistolary theory (e.g. Matthews-Schlinzig and Socha 2017) sheds light on Dickens's writing about domestic economy. On the basis of approaches to the discourse of the absent implied by letter-writing (e.g. Arrou-Vignod 1993), and with the help of the notion of an epistolary self (e.g. Earle 1999), as well as an analysis of the intimacy of letters between an individual and his nearest and dearest (e.g. Panzera and Canonica 2017), I will show that Dickens's epistolary self may be delineated through economic narratives of loss and redemption as well as through his prospects of household management.

Recent studies on business correspondence and private correspondence, as well as on the structure of these writings (e.g. Harang 2002) allow us to cast new light upon

Dickens's letters, as do inquiries into notions of time, distance, as well as into the toing and froing of letters and their conversational style (e.g. Haroche-Boyzinac 1995). Besides, an examination of the very medium, the page outlay, the writing, paper, mobility constraints, messengers, postal networks and other physical aspects of correspondence enable us to look into material aspects of Dickens's correspondence in connexion with the economic issues at stake. I will first use these perspectives to analyse his epistolary account of a domestic tragedy of insolvency.

A domestic tragedy of insolvency in epistolary form

Dickens's early correspondence reveals much about family business. One episode in particular stretches over several letters, as Dickens struggles to deal with his father's ineradicable propensity to run into debt, and to plunge the whole family into difficulty – a proclivity depicted in all the major biographies of Charles Dickens. This is a paradoxical situation to be in for a budding writer, like Dickens, whose letter reveals that though he recognizes and can predict recurring features in the events that are unfolding, he is by no means in control of the global storyline. The main protagonist of this unfortunate scenario, namely his father, is both the prime mover or main actor of this plot, and its victim, in that in running into debt, he recklessly acts against his better judgment, precipitating himself and his family from financial well-being into pecuniary distress. The rest of the family, barring Dickens, are endowed with very limited agency to face this calamity. They resemble spectators at a play watching with trepidation as events unfold. However, contrary to mere theatregoers, they are also directly affected by and feature as collateral damage of these events. They partake of this episode, though they are totally powerless. Literary categories, namely the theatre, and economic theory, namely limited agency, here dovetail to yield a better understanding of the family's financial predicament.

The financial episode I am interested in begins around 20th November 1834. Dickens is writing to Thomas Mitton, a close friend and solicitor,[3] to inform him of his father's disappearance. This is a case where Dickens seems to have resorted to letter-writing only as a second choice. His letter clearly shows that, in this matter, he would have preferred to confer directly with Mitton rather than resort to writing. Indeed, he informs his friend that he has tried to call upon him and that, short of having managed to see him on the previous day at his office at New Inn, he is now inviting him to dinner, in

the hope of being able to discuss this delicate matter with him *viva voce*.

The pressing nature of this invitation to dinner – in which Dickens mentions that the family is even prepared to delay the time of their supper to accommodate their guest – confirms how keen Dickens was to confer with Thomas Mitton directly. The sensitive nature of the financial issue to be dealt with accounts for Dickens's obvious reluctance to put the matter into writing. Here, epistolary form is only second best to direct oral communication, in part because of the delicate nature of the revelations, and in part because Dickens visibly deems the issue easier to deal with through direct dialogue. Mitton is someone whom he not only trusts, but whose professional skills he hopes will help him find a way out of his present predicament. In terms of epistolarity in connection with economic issues, the question that arises here is which form of communication seems the most appropriate to express and represent the misfortunes affecting a private domestic economy.

Short of being able to communicate the matter to Mitton orally, Dickens thus falls back upon letter-writing to impart it. He informs his friend and solicitor that after an unsuccessful attempt at finding some money to pay outstanding debts, his father has vanished, and that their landlord, Robert Burr, is unwilling to wait any longer for unpaid rent:

> They are all in great tribulation here; my father went out yesterday accompanied by Alfred, to endeavour to get some money, as Burr refused to wait beyond last Evening. He sent the boy home to say he had been unsuccessful, and has not made his appearance all night, or forwarded a message of any kind. (*Letters* 1: 44)

This letter thus delineates a portrait of Dickens's father through his son's pen. John Dickens appears – though this is never said in so many words but implied by the behaviour outlined in the document – as a person who systematically shirks his responsibilities. Having failed to find the money needed to settle his accounts, he not only does not return home, but no longer gives his family any sign of life. Instead, he somewhat cowardly chooses to send one of his sons back home with the bad news of his insolvency, while he himself shows a clean pair of heels.

In the light of this letter, what primarily characterizes John Dickens is avoidance behaviour. This avoidance is qualified by Dickens as a typical stance adopted by his father in similar situations. The letter hints at a repetitive pattern, or well-known scenario that Dickens and his family have unfortunately come to be used to. As a result, Dickens confesses that he feels no immediate alarm regarding his father's

disappearance, since this unfortunate event is a sadly recurring one. Repetition has led the family to anticipate a well-known sequence of events rather than experience surprise:

> I own that at present his absence does not give me any very great uneasiness, knowing how apt he is to get out of the way when anything goes wrong. (*Letters* 1: 44)

The repeated events have created a corresponding horizon of expectation. Economic anticipations and literary reception here meet in capturing what is happening to the family. However, the situation as a whole, namely that the chief of the family has absconded and left his family at the mercy of their creditors, is by no means less stressful for all that, since it plunges the family into economic uncertainty.

Dickens himself does not lead the game here as he does in his sketches. He is at the mercy of unexpected developments that he cannot anticipate, and he finds himself reacting to circumstances rather than devising them. He knows neither whether nor when his father will show up again. Economic uncertainty here plays out as a suspenseful narrative, and the letters show how Dickens reacts to this indeterminacy:

> As, however, if we do not gain some tidings of him in the course of the day I shall hardly know what to think, and as at all events it may be necessary to hold a consultation, you will greatly oblige me by complying with my request. (*Letters* 1: 44)

All Dickens can do is play it by ear. In his letter, he depicts himself faced with the suspense and uncertainties of real life that is playing out a private drama of insolvency. He actually uses this theatrical simile later in his letter, when he describes this financial plight in literary and theatrical terms as a “domestic tragedy”:

> I have not yet been taken, but no doubt that will be the next act in this "domestic tragedy". (*Letters 1*: 45)

This is a scenario in the making over which Dickens has no control, though he does anticipate and dread some of its developments. In the unfolding of the affair, Dickens foresees that he is to be a passive victim rather than an actor of his own destiny. His letters show him desperately struggling to regain control and agency over a course of events that eludes him. Dickens strives to recover financial control over his family’s situation. And in order to do so, he endeavours to frame their predicament through letter-writing, in a desperate attempt to endow events with some sense of purpose or teleology akin to storytelling or plot elaboration.

Thus in the next letter to Thomas Mitton, dated 21st November 1834, Dickens informs his friend that his father has just been arrested and incarcerated in a sponging house in Cursitor Street. The creditors this time are wine merchants. Dickens finds himself struggling between his own professional commitments and the need to find time to sort out his father's financial embarrassments. He even fears that he himself might be arrested, presumably, as indicated in the notes to the Pilgrim edition of his letters, because he backed some of his father's bills.

The tone of the letter is factual and non-accusatory, but anxiety transpires through the increasingly pressing, though polite, exhortations made by Dickens to Tom Mitton to assist him in this crisis. Dickens reiterates his invitation to have Mitton for dinner, no doubt in the hope of discussing the matter with him directly rather than in writing, and to seek advice:

> Dear Tom.
> On waking this morning, I was informed that my father (whom I have not seen, for he had gone out) had just been arrested by Shaw and Maxwell the quondam Wine People. Will you have the goodness the moment you receive this, to go over to Sloman's in Cursitor Street and see him for me, and ascertain whether anything can be done?
>
> I must work this morning, but tell him please I shall be with him about Six. — I dine at 5 if you can come up. (*Letters 1*: 45)

Added to the anxiety related to his father's incarceration is Dickens's ignorance of the extent of his father's insolvency. His uncertainty and extreme apprehension as to the magnitude of the sums owed to diverse creditors is emphasized by the use of italics in the very body of the letter. This epistolary snippet again exemplifies the uncertainties agents can be confronted with in the real economy, and how they try to deal with this lack of economic knowledge:

> I fear it is an awkward business, and really I have no idea of *the extent* of his other embarrassments. (*Letters 1*: 45)

What the letters have shown us so far are the intense deliberations mixed with emotions that this domestic tragedy of insolvency has given rise to. One can recognize here what John Forster in his biography called Dickens's "passionate resolve, even while he was yielding to circumstances, not to be what circumstances were conspiring to make him" (38). Crushing financial difficulties, which reveal Dickens's very limited economic agency, are fruitfully turned into deliberation followed by action through the process of letter-writing. Reflecting upon his predicament enables Dickens to outline a plan of

action and its modalities. Thus letter-writing is part and parcel of Dickens's way of dealing with financial setbacks. In an effort to overcome adversity, he applies himself to repaying his father's debts. A subsequent letter dated 21st November 1834 to Thomas Mitton shows him in the process of doing this. However the settlement described is more convoluted than one would expect. John Dickens's insolvency thus draws Dickens into fairly complicated financial schemes involving sundry intermediaries. [4]

See the rest of this article in :

- **« Writing Letters to Come to 'Terms' with Domestic Economy : Household Management in Dickens' Early Correspondence », *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, vol. 46, n°1, 2019, 123-148.**

Notes

[1] This essay builds upon information drawn from Robert Patten's book *Charles Dickens and his Publishers* (2018).

[2] Regarding epistolary form however, David Paroissien points out that "Although Dickens owned the 18-volume set of *Elegant Extracts in Prose, Verse and Epistles* (1812), and was familiar with *The Complete Letter-Writer* (1768), both of which profferred model letters for every occasion, he did not believe that letter-writing could be reduced to easily learned formulas" (36).

[3] David Paroissien mentions letters to Thomas Mitton retained as archival materials pertaining to matters of business (35). Here one can see that the issue at hand is related both to Dickens's business and domestic life.

[4] This kind of communication combining the standards of business letter and those of more personal epistles are of the kind analyzed by Julien Harang in his book *L'épistolaire* (2002).