

Tom Pinch and the Chuzzlewits

– what a fellow you are!
(MC, ch. 6, p. 100)

As so many popular writers before or after him Charles Dickens usually succeeds in winning the reader's attention through a captivating opening. After a few introductory passages or sentences the narration gets into gear, as it were, with a lively description, summary or, especially in the later novels, with an impressive scene conducive to stimulate interest. Conversely, the first chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit* is entirely taken up with a long-winded even though ironical account of the undistinguished family from which the main character is supposed to be derived until his history may "proceed in earnest with its task" (MC, ch. 1, p. 6). One wonders whether Dickens had found it more difficult than was usual with him to create a beginning and was too much under pressure to curtail his uncontrolled rambling before the first number of the new novel came out. There is indeed some evidence in his correspondence to support this view. In a letter to George Cattermole of 2 December 1842 (CDL, III, p. 388) he admits to having produced next to nothing against what he had hoped would prove a propitious occasion. Even the second chapter of the book is largely filled with an evocation of pastoral scenery that, however appealing in itself, has little bearing on the following events. Only when the narrator brings in the blustering autumn wind to complete an otherwise static panorama can the action truly commence; as if some striking effect was required to accompany the entry of the architect Seth Pecksniff, who is to play a leading part in the following narrative.

And yet that entrance, while it roughly interrupts the pastoral decorum of the preceding description, is by no means grand and is anything but heroic. The pompous Pecksniff is knocked down by the door upon entering his house in a gust of wind, suffering a few abrasions but no serious injury. An undignified mishap, which serves to comically undermine

the presumptuous bearing of the moral imposter even before his hollowness is fully revealed. At the same time this rather comic fall of Pecksniff may have been brought in to anticipate (or graphically mark) his final and unredeemable humiliation when he is dramatically felled by the elder Martin Chuzzlewit. There are in fact various further proleptic references to that spectacular show-down. At their first meeting Old Martin is at one point so incensed by his cousin's unctuous rhetoric that he is tempted to throw a candlestick at his head (MC, ch. 3, p. 41). On other occasions Pecksniff is aggressively assailed or meets with similar little accidents that challenge his posturing. Yet whatever the indignity, he is continually built up again, as if the author had begun to indulge in playing with his own creation. Dickens may really have been inspired by the Punch and Judy shows, as has been suggested.¹

It is significant that Dickens should have been so very pleased with the more substantial part of the second chapter of the novel, as it introduces two figures that were to occupy him a great deal – Seth Pecksniff and Tom Pinch, who appear here in their contrasted roles of master and servant, or, to be more precise, as an overbearing master who is defined by his devoted underling (CDL, III, pp. 414, 422). John Forster emphasised “the art with which that delightful character is placed at Mr Pecksniff's elbow at the beginning of the story, and the help he gives to set fairly afloat the falseness he innocently believes” (Forster, p. 312). More relevant, however, is a comment by Dickens himself which records his satisfaction with the gradual development of the two figures: “As to the way in which these characters have opened out, that is, to me, one of the most surprising processes of the mind in this sort of invention” (CDL, III, p. 441); as if the transition had taken place without any interference on his part. This piece of commentary must surely rank as one of the most revealing of the author's self-referential observations.² John Forster, who had witnessed the growth of the novel first hand, confirms the statement in offering a more comprehensive account of the writing of the novel:

Everything in Chuzzlewit indeed had grown under treatment, as will be commonly the case in the handling of a man of genius, who never knows where any given conception may lead him, out of the wealth of resource in development and incident which it has itself created. (Forster, p. 311)

The figure of Pecksniff is at once established as the embodiment of self-seeking hypocrisy, whereas his sensuality and viciousness are only gradually disclosed. Conversely, only a first and incomplete impression

of the other character is rendered in the initial context. Notwithstanding an extensive description, which dwells on his plain, ungainly, in fact unprepossessing features, conceding somewhat hesitantly that he should not be considered a “bad fellow by any means”, rather little of Tom Pinch’s persona is conveyed. While the ensuing dialogue between him and John Westlock, a former pupil who has broken free of the architect, reveals that he has received a good education and considerable training, the overall impression is once more that of a simpleton who is slavishly dedicated to his master Pecksniff. And yet, contrary to the reader’s expectations, what seems to have been laid down as the outline of a minor and hence static figure is to undergo considerable changes as the narrative progresses. Eventually even an attentive reader might well ask himself whether he has been deliberately misled into thinking Pinch a mere cipher. Or did the author himself initially not realise what development the character was to undergo?

A first change in the presentation of Tom Pinch becomes noticeable in the fifth chapter, in which his drive to Salisbury is related. An extensive catalogue description of the sights and sounds of this bustling town as they would strike an ingenuous observer commences with an apostrophe to the character: “Blessings on thy simple heart, Tom Pinch” (MC, ch. 5, p. 63). Recalling the ironical tone through which Pecksniff’s doings and deliberations are always narrated, one might erroneously think that a similar mode was here employed; which is however not the case. In fact the various impressions which affect Tom so intensely are not only evoked to demonstrate his naivety but also betray considerable perceptiveness and discernment on his part. It is telling that his interest is particularly attracted by the volumes displayed in a bookshop. Tom is evidently a great reader and keen on widening his knowledge, which his position with Pecksniff prevents him from doing – “what a heart-breaking shop it was!” (MC, ch. 5, p. 70). Old Martin Chuzzlewit’s device of employing him to catalogue an unsorted collection of books, however demeaning it may be, is not without foundation. Otherwise his intellectual achievements are hardly ever acknowledged. Young Martin, who long labours under grave misconceptions about Tom, may find it convenient to let him read to him, but does not even bother to enquire which poem or scene by Shakespeare Tom has chosen. Not even the narrator, to be sure, finds it necessary to approach his literary taste more closely (MC, ch. 6).

As Martin Chuzzlewit's fortunes, and excessive self-esteem decline, he begins to question his condescending view of Tom Pinch, eventually arriving at an entirely different judgement. Only very occasionally though, are his thoughts directly conveyed to the reader. On the whole, *Martin Chuzzlewit* pertains to the more traditionally structured novels which are mediated through an omniscient narrator, a puppetmaster who continually intervenes between his figures and the audience. It might seem, at least initially, quite out of character that Tom Pinch should hold a unique position in this respect. It is only in the last third of the novel that the narrating mediator focusses on Jonas Chuzzlewit, and to some extent on his anxious victim. As so often, the mental state of a murderer absorbed Dickens's interest, and the relevant chapters doubtless constitute the most impressive part of the book. In many other instances it is Tom Pinch's perspective that is preferred, whereas the reader is, excluding one or two brief instances, never allowed to gain a glimpse of the doubtless very uncanny thoughts that pass through the mind of Old Martin Chuzzlewit. The course of the narrative is every so often interrupted by passages in which Tom's mind is directly opened to the recipient, whether in interior soliloquies or through thought reports which come close to the mode of the narrated monologue.

Even the extensive descriptions, which some contemporary reviewers regarded as expendable, are usually understood as being perceived by Tom, whose vivid response to new impressions marks a striking contrast to the rare examples when they are related to another observer. Whereas Pecksniff merely regards travelling to London as a torturous experience from which the mind is best withdrawn, Tom, who undertakes the trip on a later occasion, reacts excitedly to every sensation that the ride offers. The famous view from Todgers's (MC, ch. 9), is perceived by the all-knowing narrator who is also at pains to elaborate on the quaint angularity of a room in a tavern at an English sea port, which does not seem to strike Martin Chuzzlewit and Mark Tapley, who are regaling themselves therein on a hefty repast (MC, ch. 35). The din and bustle of a busy landing place, on the other hand, gain in animation as it affects the fascinated Tom (MC, ch. 40). It would be quite erroneous though to dismiss such instances, which manifestly captured Dickens's imagination, as digressions from the narration. Knowingly, or possibly still unconsciously, Dickens has interspersed his tale with seemingly autonomous reflective moments which lead up to Tom Pinch's function as the chorus or moral conscience of the multitudinous tale.

By this time the passive innocent has developed into an independently-minded, active person, who is quite able to hold his own in critical situations. To effect this transition Charles Dickens resorts to the love motif, involving Tom in a romantic attachment to Mary Graham, whom he almost immediately comes to regard as unattainable. It seems paradoxical though that Martin Chuzzlewit has advised his fiancée to turn to Tom Pinch without any hesitation as if “he were an old woman” (MC, ch. 14, p. 241). In fact, the meek person, who was thought to have not “half enough” or nothing whatsoever of the devil in him (MC, ch. 2, p. 21) turns out to be capable of much passion when his feelings are truly aroused. Characteristically, a slighting remark about Mary Graham by Jonas Chuzzlewit prompts him to hit the bully over the head with the stick the other had raised against him (MC, ch. 24). While the impulsive action is instantly deplored by Tom, he stands his ground on a later occasion, when Mary does indeed appeal for his assistance. Pecksniff’s devotee is horrified to hear that his much admired, indeed deeply worshipped master has been molesting the young lady, abusing her precarious position as a temporary attendant on Old Martin Chuzzlewit, who has seemingly abdicated his wits to the deceitful architect. Has the middle-aged, ever so cautious widower really fallen in love with the beautiful young woman, or is it merely in keeping with his hypocritical character that the English Tartuffe should conceal a strong sensual nature which he has no qualms to gratify when the occasion arises?

The ensuing showdown, in which Tom Pinch frankly declares his love for Mary, ends in his dismissal from the Wiltshire scene where Pecksniff, now that both his daughters have left him, will henceforth reign supreme. Yet, his ultimate preponderance notwithstanding, he unaccountably restrains himself from making any more advances on the unprotected girl. Many months will pass during which nothing whatsoever happens to affect the lives of the architect and his guests. Not a single new pupil is ensnared to Pecksniff’s household, which quite significantly remains ignorant of young Martin’s picaresque adventures in the new world. It would seem as if an enchantment had fallen over this part of England.

Critics who dismiss Tom Pinch as an entirely passive, in fact almost masochistic persona³ would face some difficulty to explain why he should not remain in the state he was first encountered during this interval, maintaining his part as the humiliated and exploited serf; still functioning as a foil to underline the selfishness of Pecksniff as whose opposite number

he has entered the narrative. Yet Charles Dickens would have lost all sense of the potential of the figure had he opted for such a course of action. As a matter of fact, the character of Tom Pinch has reached a decisive stage of development at this point which the author saw fit to follow up on. In the ensuing chapters Pecksniff's former assistant is raised to the function of a major figure, receding in importance only when the plot centring on Jonas Chuzzlewit sets in. Having been forced to leave his habitat Tom may have lost his bearings but has gained in firmness and self confidence. His eager sense for novel impressions and keen gift of observation have already become apparent on his walk through the streets of Salisbury where he had been sent to meet the new pupil, Martin Chuzzlewit. From now on his talents will be better employed through the resoluteness which he has won. "It was," as he tells himself, "wonderfully pleasant to reflect that he was his own master, and could plan and scheme for himself" (MC, ch. 36, p. 557). The erstwhile underling has gained independence and may well be expected to control his own affairs.

A first example of the newly gained self-assurance is furnished by his encounter with the overbearing factory owner whose spoilt child Tom's sister Ruth has laboured to educate. Once again it is an instance of male oppression that rouses Tom's anger. Exploited and despised, Ruth has borne the infamous, often censured lot of the Victorian governess without complaint. It is only on his visit to her employers that Tom senses her plight, which now moves him to action. In the ensuing dispute he keeps his ground against the imperious plutocrat. Brother and sister depart from the ostentatious mansion as moral victors. With more than a touch of self-reliance Tom now resolves to set up house with Ruth, whom he is only too eager to support. This instant decision leaves no further doubt that a turning point in the career of Tom Pinch has in fact been gained.

To be sure, Tom is fully aware of the difficulty of gaining suitable employment in a large and to all appearances anonymous and friendless city; as his ruminations to John Westlock, the only person he might after all turn to in his situation, amply demonstrate. Nevertheless there is not the slightest doubt about his firm determination to do well for his sister and himself. One might well wonder why he is so little disposed to refer to his qualifications as an architect and land surveyor in his attempt to find an occupation that will maintain both of them. Yet this is the point where further deliberations must stop, as the application Tom is about to pen is never completed. Whatever career Dickens might have been considering

for his favourite, at this stage he chose to let Providence intervene on his behalf. Quite mysteriously as his doings usually are, Old Martin Chuzzlewit has set up a suitable place for him that will keep him occupied until the all-knowing benefactor resolves to reveal his own identity. The obligation to order and catalogue a pile of dusty books for a modest if regular wage hardly amounts to more than a stipend but lends a dignity to Tom's efforts which his former post evidently lacked. It also offers intellectual gratification, as the book-lover is soon to learn. And yet, could the "happy, quiet, studious kind of life" (MC, ch. 40, p. 619) really satisfy the inward cravings of a man who had erstwhile been quite desirous of managing his own affairs and taking an active part in society? Does the assignment, which could after all be only temporary, meet with his wish for comfort and security? And why is it that Tom's sister should be quite contented that her brother, to whom she must look for support, should busy himself at a job that will in no way provide for the future?

Even though the arrangement of a book-sorting business on behalf of Tom Pinch should not have been all that troublesome to Old Martin Chuzzlewit, who acts as a benevolent enchanter in the novel, such considerations will hardly settle the question of why he made nothing of his protégé's professional skill in obtaining work for him. While Tom has been never allowed to enter on any more qualified work as an employee of Pecksniff, the various references to his duties as an assistant and tutor leave no doubt about his competence. Or is it that a job with an architect would not have been a "suitable" occupation for a man of his moral integrity – notwithstanding the pervading importance of architecture in the novel?

Architecture is indeed a major theme in *Martin Chuzzlewit* as the frequent and varied references to Pecksniff's calling make obvious, and it is invariably presented as a spurious profession. In pointing to matters "Pecksniffian and architectural" in the heading of the sixth chapter, the narrator leaves little doubt about his low estimate of the trade as such. After all, Pecksniff has on his entry into the narrative already been introduced as a self-proclaimed architect who "had never designed or built anything" (MC, ch. 2, p. 12). To comprehend these slighting allusions fully we have to bear in mind that architecture had not been established as a proper trade at the time in which the novel is set. Practising architects were often self-taught or had learnt the craft as apprentices to practitioners of good reputation who had themselves gained some experience as builders. It was only in 1835 that a 'Royal Institute of British Architects' was

founded to prevent dilettantes and swindlers from claiming professional qualifications. For a considerable number of years though, uncertainty about the profession prevailed, which permitted malpractices to continue. Especially so, as a vast amount of building, requiring more planning and designing than had ever been called for, went on at the time

Dickens could hardly have made a better choice than to set the mountebank Pecksniff up as an architect whose professed expertise is as pretentious as his self-styled status and assumed goodness. Significantly, the “brazen plate” on his front door, the drawings and technical equipment inside the house are not so much intended to attract clients, who would soon discover the incompetence of the mountebank, but serve their turn in persuading young people that they are in the hands of a master. The altercation between John Westlock and Pecksniff, which sets the action in motion, offers an exemplary case. Deceived into entrusting himself to the deceiver’s tutorship, the pupil has finally gained the means to struggle free, thus breaking off a bond that has cost him dearly. It seems very telling that the pupils who commit themselves to Pecksniff’s guidance are usually of a young age and still bereft of the discernment which will ultimately determine them to turn their backs on him. None of them, it would seem, has taken up architectural work after his emancipation. Westlock’s belated resolve that he might set himself up in the country “in his old profession” (MC, ch. 53, p. 815) seems rather half-hearted, while the hero’s ultimate prosperity lacks even that distinction.

Young Martin Chuzzlewit, who enters Pecksniff’s house as a mature man, differs in this as in many other ways from his predecessors. As the sham-architect regards him as his grandfather’s, Old Martin Chuzzlewit’s, declared heir, he is treated as a distinguished guest and apparently exempted from paying the large premium that would normally be demanded. He also seems to have acquired some previous know-how of architecture, or at least he anticipates gaining employment as a designer and builder once he has settled in the New World; expecting “great prospects of doing well” (MC, ch. 14, p. 237) in the land of the free where a man’s basic merits might be expected to rate higher than his qualifications. Would the few days that he staid with Pecksniff have sufficed to enable him to make sanguine claims of that order? To be sure, he does indeed finish the design of a grammar school during this time, which Pecksniff is only too eager to pass off as his own. As Martin is incensed to discover after his return from America, though the swindler has, “in his droll humour” (MC,

ch. 6, p. 88), candidly laid his intentions open from the very beginning. Whereas the young man is certainly resolved to gain recognition for this work, it apparently does not occur to him to practice the trade after he has regained the financial support of his grandfather. Though his erstwhile resolution to make good through hard work what he may still lack in training speaks for him, we cannot help feeling that Martin's relationship to architecture is as flimsy as Pecksniff's pretensions are unfounded.

Critics of *Martin Chuzzlewit* have made much of the architectural theme, which is so eminently suited to accommodate the novel's main concern, to exhibit in a variety of aspects "the commonest of all the vices" (Prefaces of 1844, 1850), the prevalence of selfishness, of unrestrained self-esteem seeking to gain its ends through falseness, deception and ultimately fraud. The palatial abode which Tigg Montague has set up to persuade investors to place their money in his fictitious company as well as the printed bills which Mrs Gamp distributes to authenticate her professional expertise as a nurse and midwife testify to the same wish for self-aggrandisement through deceit as the false claims of bogus architects. On the other hand, the view that the very structure of the novel metaphorically reflects the deviations of architectonic pretensions and architectural failures⁴ goes too far. We are on safer ground in assuming that the devious repute of architectural activities was common knowledge at the time when the novel was written; to the extent that Dickens could rely on his readers' unqualified response to "Pecksniffian" malpractices. It cannot have been by chance that none of the contemporary critics saw fit to question or at least make mention of the pseudo-architectural background, which, as we have tried to show, goes far to characterise the major figures of the novel.

To what extent does it define the character of Tom Pinch though? Recalling once more the fraudulent doings of Pecksniff, the former's immunity against the air of falsity he has been exposed to for so many years, doubtless testifies to his probity even though it may be founded on a guilelessness which Martin Chuzzlewit contemptuously mistakes for weakmindedness. John Westlock's emphatic assertion that Tom is a proud person at heart (MC, ch. 12, p. 199) might offer some insight into his personality, were it not immediately dismissed by Martin. It is only after he has lost his excessive self-esteem through severe suffering that he arrives at a just estimate of the once so despised underling. As Mercy Pecksniff's belated repentance proves, he is not the only one who eventually comes

to comprehend Tom's moral superiority and intellectual vigour. All this might help to explain why the author would not let the seemingly omnipotent enchanter set up an architectural career for his ingenuous protégé. Tom, who has remained untainted by Pecksniff's underhand practices and dishonest strategies, must not be thrown upon the devious and false world of architecture.

Tom Pinch then is the goodnatured man against whose virtues the majority of the other characters is tested. The magnanimous John Westlock, exemplifying the quality of friendship, the plucky Mark Tapley, the best companion a man bent for adventure might ever find, and the so very kind-hearted hostess Mrs Lupin are indeed notably free of the vice shared by the entire Chuzzlewit clan; yet they are not as centrally placed in the structure of the novel as is Tom Pinch. At the same time, the various characters' moral calibre can hardly be assessed through their configuration. It cannot be overlooked though that all those who fully grasp Tom's goodness should escape the censure of the satirist. Once more, Mercy Pecksniff may serve as an example, whose giddy frivolousness and thoughtless cruelty are continually dwelt upon until, partly to spite her sister Charity, she lightheartedly accepts Jonas Chuzzlewit for a husband. From now on her sufferings as the wife of a brutal lout qualify her as an object of compassion, whom Tom, only too ready to forgive her erstwhile taunts, can hardly associate with her former self. Conversely, the broken-hearted woman begins to look up to him, appealing to his sympathy and understanding.

There is then ample reason why many critics of *Martin Chuzzlewit* should have perceived the figure of Tom Pinch as an image of goodness only. His goodnaturedness appears in every incident in which he is involved, is constantly emphasised and occasionally even invoked. Even more to the point, this supreme virtuousness is never diminished by any flaws in Tom's character, if we except his naivety, which may, though rather infrequently, lead him into harmless errors. Since Tom, in contrast to his hypocritical master, never appears self-righteous or unctuous, it might be due to his ingenuousness that he is so often censured by readers of the novel. As John Westlock observes, "it is much easier to slight than appreciate Tom Pinch" (MC, ch. 48, p. 735). This would explain why Martin Chuzzlewit, even after having observed him for a while, should feel inclined to dismiss him as a "poor, strange, simple oddity" (MC, ch. 14), thus setting up a categorisation that has been followed ever since

by the majority of critics. One feels tempted to assume that Tom would fare better with modern readers if there was a touch of sacredness attached to him. But there can be no doubt that he will not even fit the type of the saintly fool. Sylvère Monod, who had earlier on characterised Tom Pinch as a “poor half-witted youth”⁵, came to devote an entire chapter in his monograph on the novel to ‘The Salt of Pinch’, wherein Tom and his sister Ruth and the critical responses they have engendered over the years are considered at length. Monod concludes that the Pinches function as idealised figures without which the Chuzzlewit saga with its wide range of offensive personae would sink into a gross account of meanness and greed, but deplores Charles Dickens’s apparent overindulgence towards his own creations.⁶

It is especially the sentimentality of the scenes involving the siblings that is censured by critics, who fail to perceive that what appears as mawkish to present-day readers might have appealed to contemporaries of the author, who would also have been more perceptive of the specific circumstances and aspects of the close relationship between brother and sister. It has to be borne in mind that Tom and Ruth are said to have been separated for many years and have indeed never been able to live together in a home of their own making. However strange this may seem to a twenty-first-century reader, Ruth’s former stations in life would have excluded the possibility of ever acting as her own housekeeper. As the narrator emphasises, it was “a grand novelty to be mistress of anything” (MC, ch. 39, p. 597). Is the comfort and happiness which the Pinches, who grew up as poor orphans, draw from their improved situation really so excessively rendered? In fact a summary view that Dickens has here declined into sentimentalising the happy world of his favourites will not bear scrutiny. While the viewpoint from which these scenes are observed is certainly the narrator’s, the tone of the description should be conceived as a reflection of the enthusiasm of the two characters involved. It would also be quite mistaken to construe the emphasis Ruth’s housekeeping receives in this context as an anticipation of future marital obligations. In fact the narrator, as if to forestall such animadversions, does not fail to point out that her professional training enables her to make a financial contribution to their joint estate (MC, ch. 48). While “cheerful, tidy, bustling, quiet little Ruth” (MC, ch. 39, p. 597) takes utmost delight in her new little world, Dickens makes sure that she is not belittled. It is not by chance that this most devoted of sisters will often smile at Tom’s innocence.

Are the various readings of the novel that would reduce Tom to a simpleton, whose modesty and naivety were only meant to offset or demonstrate, like a “moral barometer”⁷, the overbearing egotism of the Chuzzlewits, justified then? Such characterisations, whether assenting or dismissive, overlook the intellectual side to his personality, which while less pronounced is never entirely lost sight of. His wide reading, love of books and passion for music are indeed often described. It should not be overlooked that he is apt to forget his low estate and indulge in “great thoughts and hopes” (MC, ch. 5, p. 71) when playing the organ. The sights and bustling street life of London absorb his mind as much as the display of recent publications in a bookshop has done. As stated before, Tom Pinch is about the only figure allowed to ruminate and reflect in the course of a long panoramic narrative. It is significant that the all-knowing narrator should employ him as his spokesman when an intermediary is required between him and the reader. What else are we to make of a long monologue in which Tom philosophises about the incompatibility of human desires? Overlooking the advertisement pages in a newspaper, he can only marvel at the various requests for employment which never seem to find a match among the vacancies offered. The social system is doubtless riddled with discrepancies and anomalies –

Neither do any of these single gentlemen who want an airy bedroom, with the occasional use of a parlour, ever appear to come to terms with these other people who live “in a rural situation, remarkable for its bracing atmosphere, within five minutes’ walk of the Royal Exchange.” Even those letters of the alphabet, who are always running away from their friends and being entreated at the tops of columns to come back, never do come back, if we may judge from the number of times they are asked to do it, and don’t. (MC, ch. 36, p. 568)

As John Westlock, to whom these words are ostensibly addressed, fails to respond to Tom’s reflections, one can only conclude that they are indirectly meant for the reader, who might wonder from where a person seemingly naive and unworldly could have gained such insights into the pitfalls of the social web. Yet this meta-fictional passage is only an overture, and might in fact have been intended as a preparatory piece to a later monologue of Tom’s which reaches far beyond the confines of the fictional world which the speaker is supposed to inhabit. When Ruth, who has intuitively grasped her brother’s passionate regard for Mary Graham, tries to persuade him that he might still win the heart of Martin’s fiancée, he dismisses her notions as unfounded and romantic. Whatever his claims, it

is only in fictional tales ruled by the principle of poetical justice that the exemplary hero must be happily united with the beautiful heroine. W. M. Thackeray may have had this passage on his mind when he wound up the history of the *Newcomes* (1853–1855) in the following fashion:

The poet of Fable-land rewards and punishes absolutely. He splendidly deals out bags of sovereigns, which won't buy anything; belabours wicked backs with awful blows, which do not hurt; endows heroines with preternatural beauty, and creates heroes, who, if ugly sometimes, yet possess a thousand good qualities, and usually end by being immensely rich; makes the hero and heroine happy at last, and happy ever after.

Yet this is not how the affairs of men proceed in the real world, as Tom maintains; or as they should be ordained: "But there is a much higher justice than poetical justice [...] and it does not order events upon the same principle" (MC, ch. 50, p. 763). Accordingly, what we encounter as the realities of life must be cherished rather than deplored. Happiness is thus not found in dreams but in contentment.

While these reflections might be read as just another instance of Tom's self-denial, the aesthetic paradigm, or in fact the philosophy of life which they reveal cannot be downgraded as the inconsequential ramblings of a simpleton. One might, it is true, find this critical view of romance literature somewhat incompatible with his enthusiastic, empathizing response to a trivial theatrical show he and his sister have been invited to attend by John Westlock (MC, ch. 39, p. 618), unless we remember that the future writer David Copperfield proves equally responsive on his first visit to a London theatre, and is ridiculed for his admiration by his false mentor Steerforth. Dickens would have known that even an uncritical responsiveness to literary works is anything but a sign of dullness. We shall arrive at a better understanding of *Martin Chuzzlewit* if we consider Tom Pinch not only as the moral but also as the intellectual centre of the novel. Notwithstanding the repetitive assertions of the guilelessness of Tom in the text, the author seems to have been quite aware of the complexity of the character. His overall approving response to the casting list of an early dramatic adaptation of the novel by Edward Stirling includes a note of scepticism as regards this, his favourite figure: "But a queer sensation begins in my legs, and comes upward to my forehead, when I think of Tom" (CDL, IV, p. 150). It is indeed noteworthy that several dramatisations of *Martin Chuzzlewit* confer a more active role on the character, stressing his importance in the plot. It is also always Tom Pinch who occupies the central position in the final tableau that is supposed to wind up the action.

In another domestic drama of 1844 of this title by Thomas A. Higgin and Thomas Hailes Lacy it is not John Westlock who helps to bring Jonas Chuzzlewit to justice. A later adaptation of 1881, which even changes the original title to *Tom Pinch*, enters him into the love plot when the intriguing Cherry Pecksniff makes Martin Chuzzlewit believe that Tom has in his absence won the heart of his fiancée Mary Graham. Martin's unexpected angry outburst at Tom in chapter 50 is here prompted by jealousy rather than greed.

What after all is the reader really to make of this highly dramatic scene in the novel when the happy tranquillity of the Pinch household is disturbed by the abrupt entrance of the incensed Martin, who immediately accuses Tom of having deceived him, while he had been misled into "pouring out" his heart to him (MC, ch. 50, p. 759). A strange ambiguity prevails in the following dialogue, or rather monologue, as Tom is barely allowed to protest his innocence. It seems fairly clear that the young man suspects his false friend to have insinuated himself into Old Martin's confidence and hence ousted him from whatever share in his property he might still hope for. There is, however, a further charge implied when Martin rhetorically blames Tom of having made "his election", of having opted for "wealth and favour" rather than the "friendship of an abandoned, struggling fellow". Although the young man eventually apologises for his blunder, the mistake is never satisfactorily explained. Conversely, it is noteworthy that Martin, in asking Tom's pardon on this occasion, should continue to hold Mary's "proud young beauty" in close embrace (MC, ch. 50, p. 805).

But not only Martin's misjudgement, the insertion of this discordant episode itself would require explanation. Why should Dickens, who had described the hero's moral reformation at some length, have chosen to let him regress into aggressive selfishness once again? Conversely, if Martin's remonstrances merely expressed a fear of having ultimately lost an inheritance, why should such a materialistic concern be couched in a highly literate diction, not unworthy of a Pecksniff? Yet, as the ensuing scene between brother and sister, who have been left mystified and disconsolate by the unexpected visit, proves, Charles Dickens has in this instance abandoned the ironical tone in which so many parts of the novel are rendered. In fact, the following dialogue concerns Tom's hopeless attachment to Mary Graham, which Ruth has intuitively suspected for quite a while. This is the context in which he, or really the narrator, dismisses the love plots in

romances as false constructions that bear no relation to the truth of life. Ruth, however, who has become deeply attached to John Westlock, cannot understand why her brother of all men should once again be reduced to a solitary life. Especially so, when Tom proudly expresses the heartfelt conviction that Mary Graham of all people will eventually “open Martin’s eyes” (MC, ch. 50, p. 764).

Charles Dickens seems to have been very much aware that he had created a figure with a very comprehensive potential that might be realised in various ways. While Tom has been introduced as a weakling whom “sparkling eyes and snowy breasts” have no qualms to address flirtatiously (MC, ch. 5, p. 65), several subsequent instances would point to the contrary. Dickens may all too frequently resort to the Victorian buzz-word “manly”, but he would not have emphasised the “manly faith” (MC, ch. 52, p. 804) of Tom without good reason. Tom Pinch is certainly capable of defending his sister against her oppressive employer, stands up to Jonas Chuzzlewit on more than one occasion, and responds passionately when Mary Graham turns to him for assistance. There is doubtless a sexual element suggested by his love for the young woman, who is always on his mind and turns up in his dreams (MC, ch. 24). His eagerness to protect her against the advances of his master Pecksniff bespeaks his nobleness, but is not utterly devoid of jealousy; though it is the villain and not he whose sexual feelings are dwelt on. That Dickens may have subliminally identified with the perpetrator rather than with the protector in this respect would reflect his own uncertainty as regards the treatment of sexuality.

Although few critics have regarded the ending of the novel as unsatisfactory, we have some reason to think that Dickens had at least intermittently thought of a different conclusion in which Tom Pinch is in fact rewarded with the hand of Mary Graham. He must have known that the final union between the beautiful heroine and the title figure of the novel, a handsome young man with a “keen dark eye” (MC, ch. 5, p. 73), his gross selfishness and heedless immaturity notwithstanding, follows the rules of romance somewhat closely; too closely, in fact, when Tom’s so persuasive censure of that convention is considered.

On the other hand, Charles Dickens eschews another traditional model in leaving the deeply suffering and utterly redeemed Merry Pecksniff uncared for. Old Martin’s offer of support foreseeing a “brighter and better future” (MC, ch. 54, p. 823) for the deserted young widow, remains

inconclusive. Again we can detect a number of references that would seem to anticipate a matrimonial set-up in which Tom Pinch, possibly through the old man's paternal interference, is finally wedded to his former master's daughter, who has learnt to respect him, while he fully sympathises with her. There is indeed some indication that he has taken more than a passing interest in Merry, now that she so fervently appeals to his kindness. How else were we to explain the function of the somewhat laboured scene of Tom's uncalled-for visit to Jonas Chuzzlewit's house where she throws herself between him and her irate husband (MC, ch. 46)? The incident has in fact been anticipated by one of Tom's meta-fictional digressions in which he muses on the affectionate and gentle nature of women. These passages might suggest that the author had for a while at least considered yet another variant which would not have left Tom a celibate.

To fully grasp the many-sided character of Tom Pinch his somewhat ambivalent social standing should also be taken into account. We learn that he is the grandson of a domestic servant, who did whatever she could to have him educated as a gentleman and, labouring under false assumptions, secured a place for him with the sham architect. While Pecksniff, who has exploited him for years, censures his sympathetic conduct as the pretentiousness of an underling who may be forgetful of his position (MC, ch. 5, p. 84), he is indeed always treated as a gentleman by the village people. This is certainly the designation he claims in the altercation between him and the overbearing brass founder (who has been equally disdainful of Pecksniff). It is noteworthy that Mark Tapley, whom Tom befriends wholeheartedly, will usually address him as "Sir". Martin Chuzzlewit's close companionship with Mark in the American wilderness notwithstanding, the latter's servant position is after all as firmly entrenched as is his character.

Mark Tapley, always ready to serve, stands out as the sanguinary man as compared to the melancholy man, the feeble Augustus Moddle, and the choleric of the brutal Jonas Chuzzlewit. Any attempt to contrast Tom Pinch with one of these figures will reveal the complexity of his personality. It may be more helpful for our purpose to juxtapose him to the character of the mysterious Mr Nadgett, who has so far attracted little critical attention though he must have absorbed the interest of Charles Dickens for quite a while.⁸ The strange behaviour of the private detective and houseowner, about whom Tom knows so little, though he is his landlord, is described at some length in chapter 28. At one point Dickens

does in fact consider a comparison between the two men (MC, ch. 38, p. 586), in which Nadgett would presumably come out as the modern type of city-dweller who prefers to drift anonymously among the crowds whereas Tom, once he has overcome an initial countryman's distrust of London, stays open and well-disposed towards everything and everybody that crosses his way. Even the obtrusive Mrs Sarah Gamp, whom he justly admonishes for her ill behaviour (MC, ch. 40, p. 623), is in the end courteously treated by him.

What was Dickens to make of this, in every sense of the word outstanding, character if a rise in his station as well as marriage to a congenial partner had ultimately proved unsuitable? It might have seemed paradoxical to Dickens's readers that Tom Pinch, who has so convincingly argued against the concept of poetical justice, should indeed be the only character in *Martin Chuzzlewit* who does not meet with his deserved reward when the author winds up his story in an utterly traditional way. In the theatrically conceived denouement, in which Pecksniff receives his comeuppance, all the young men are happily disposed of under the benevolent eyes of Old Martin, whereas Tom, having even lost his beloved companion Ruth to John Westlock, is to remain solitary. The tableau scene reaches another climax when Tom is cheered by everyone:

And Martin took him by the hand, and Mary too, and John, his old friend, stoutly too, and Mark, and Mrs Lupin, and his sister, little Ruth. And peace of mind, deep, tranquil peace of mind, was in Tom's heart. (MC, ch. 52, p. 805)

Is goodness then its own reward? In a letter of 19 March 1844 to Thomas Noon Talfourd, written while the novel was far from finished, Charles Dickens briefly and for the first time suggested a suitable ending for *Martin Chuzzlewit*, without, however, going into details: "So far as I know, it is quite a new thought, and if I can work it out as I have it in my head, I think it will be very gentle and pretty" (CDL, IV, p. 78). These words might be taken as a first indication of the actual finale, which only covers little more than one page though, whereas the letter distinctly speaks of two to three. Did Dickens find himself unable to fully realise his intention? He had certainly settled his mind on the issue some months later when he gave detailed instructions about the frontispiece to be issued with the last number to his illustrator Hablot K. Browne, which the artist followed to the letter. In this design Tom Pinch occupies the central and dominant position:

I shall break off the last chapter suddenly, and find Tom at his organ, a few years afterwards. And instead of saying what became of the people, as usual, I shall suppose it to be expressed in the sounds; making the last swell of the instrument a kind of expression of Tom's heart. Tom has remained a single man, and lives with his sister and John Westlock who are married – Martin and Mary are married – Tom is a god-father of course – Old Martin is dead, and has left him some money – Tom has had an organ fitted in his chamber, and often sits alone, playing it; when of course the old times rise up before him. So the Frontispiece is Tom at his organ with a pensive face; and any little indication of his history rising out of it, and floating about it, that you please; Tom as interesting and amiable as possible. (CDL, IV, p. 140)

Hablot K. Browne's drawing, which seems to have met with the author's complete satisfaction, fully responds to these suggestions. As does the text through which Dickens achieved a rather unusual completion of the narrative. The novel is wound up through an apotheosis of Tom Pinch. The strains which he raises from the instrument, varying between soft, joyful and then again solemn tunes, do indeed reflect the fates of all the characters mentioned in the foregoing summary, without going into detail as to what calling the young men might have taken up. Rather more is made of Tom's relationship to his godchild, Mary's daughter, who is apparently more closely attached to him even than to her own mother. But the last sentences of the novel, somewhat unexpectedly, revert to Ruth. She, it seems, is the person to whom his love belongs foremost now – "thy kindling face looks on her with a Love and Trust, that knows it cannot die. The noble music, rolling round her in a cloud of melody, shuts out the grosser prospect of an earthly parting, and uplifts her, Tom, to Heaven!" (MC, ch. 54, p. 832).

The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit ends on a religious note then, evoked through a character that fulfils a central function in the novel yet is still not its nominal hero. It should be pointed out that the last words underwent a change in later editions, authorised by Charles Dickens, foretelling a complete unison between brother and sister, who will rise to Heaven together: "The noble music, rolling round ye both, shuts out the grosser prospect of an earthly parting and uplifts ye both to Heaven!" To fully comprehend the import of this final apostrophe one should consider the virtual absence of religious sentiments throughout the novel. Only the narrator allows himself an occasional perfunctory plea that the goodnatured man should receive his share of blessings. Tom does indeed attend the village church regularly, but mainly in his office as a voluntary organist, who takes great delight in playing the instrument.

Nothing is ever said about a priest officiating at church services, to whom Mary might have turned in her distress, nor does churchgoing ever feature in the narrative, though Pecksniff is said to indulge in a comfortable corner seat in the most distinguished pew. His straying into the church by accident, whereupon he overhears the dramatic dialogue between Tom and Mary, is ironically viewed (MC, ch. 31, p. 485f.); as is his hypocritical denouncement of his assistant, whom he now knows to perceive his falsehood. This might have offered the author an occasion to contrast Pecksniff's warped attitude towards religion with genuine religious feelings that might be ascribed to the other. But Dickens let the point pass. What passes through Tom's mind on his departure from the house of the architect, who regards the dismissal as a "duty he owes to society", is determined by genuine moral thoughts and humane concerns only.

The so very belated, and somewhat unexpected last shift in the narrative admits of one conclusion only. It must have occurred to Charles Dickens that more should be made of this greatly important character that undoubtedly stands apart from the novel's large number of dramatis personae, whose ways of life are gathered together towards the end of the narration. One solution, by no means unusual for a figure so distinguished through his self-effacing goodness, would have been to let Tom Pinch meet with a fatal accident or slowly fade away, much mourned by his friends and all those who knew him. But Tom is neither as ethereally conceived as angelic little Nell of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, nor as doomed as the wasting, and indeed equally transfigured Smike in *Nicholas Nickleby*. In fact Tom is always described as a robust man who is shown to take as much delight in prolonged walks as we know his creator to have done. Such considerations may have moved Dickens to end with a parting tribute to his favourite that amounts to a canonization of Tom Pinch. In the final scene, following abruptly on one of the broadest and most farcical episodes of the novel, the organist features as the Manager of the Performance or, to go one step further, the creative impulse from which the varied fortunes of the Chuzzlewits arise. It is in his music and hence in his mind that the past and the future take shape. In this dominant function, for which the preceding meta-fictional excursions have to some extent prepared the reader, Tom occupies an elevated dimension which may suitably be rendered in religious terms. Having thus moved him beyond the sphere of ordinary human concerns, the narrator may safely bid farewell to his old friend, dear Tom.