

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

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*I*n this essay, I will show how issues related to domestic economy are spelled out in epistolary form in Dickens' correspondence. This medium plunges us into an intimate form of perception of and reaction to these economic matters. A sample of Dickens' 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' father upon his family, and then into Dickens' prospective domestic economy with his future wife, Catherine Hogarth. In Dickens' 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' epistolary biography. The very form and content² of these letters also produces a sort 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' 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' 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' 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' letters, as do inquiries into notions of time and distance, as well as into the toing and froing of letters and their conversational style (e.g., Haroche-Boyzinac 1995). In addition, an examination of the very medium, the page outlay, the writing, paper, mobility constraints, messengers, postal networks, and other physical aspects of correspondence enables us to look into material aspects of Dickens' correspondence in connection with the economic issues at stake. I will first use these perspectives to analyze his epistolary account of a domestic tragedy of insolvency.

A domestic tragedy of insolvency in epistolary form

Dickens' 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 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 theatergoers, 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 theater, 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 20 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 Mitton directly. The sensitive nature of the financial issue to be dealt with accounts for Dickens' 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 might be useful to him in finding 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' father through his son's pen. John Dickens appears – though this is never said in so many words but implied by the behavior outlined in the document – as a person who systematically shirks his responsibilities. Having failed to find the money needed to settle his accounts, John Dickens 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 behavior. 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 to which Dickens and his family have unfortunately become accustomed. As a result, Dickens confesses that he feels no immediate alarm regarding his father's disappearance, since – sadly – this unfortunate event is a 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). Thus, 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 are playing out a private drama of insolvency. He actually uses a dramatic simile later in his letter, when he describes this financial plight in literary and theatrical terms: "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 endeavors 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 Mitton, dated 21 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 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' 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' "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' 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' 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 21 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' insolvency thus draws Dickens into fairly complicated financial schemes involving sundry intermediaries.⁴

In his letter, Dickens informs Mitton that he has tried to collect the salary owed to him by his current employer. This amount he does not get directly but receives from an agent in the City, using an order for the amount of £5 made out to him by his employer. Unfortunately, Dickens arrives too late on that day to cash in the order. Consequently, in order to be able to bail out his father, he finds himself asking Mitton to lend him some money in exchange for his employer's check. The idea is that Mitton or a colleague of his, Hartland, will later present the bill to the City agent and redeem it:

Dear Tom.

I am over in Cursitor Street. As I go on at 8 and wish particularly to see you before I leave there, will you step over as soon as you return. I have an order in my pocket from my french Employer for £5, on an agent in the City who always pays me. They pay as the order notifies "between 2 and 4" and I did not get it until 5 today. I want to give the Governor some money, and if you will let me have as much as you can on account of the order, or the whole, you can have the check, or let Hartland present it which you please.

Believe me

Sincerely Yours

CHARLES DICKENS (*Letters* 1:45)

A further letter dated 24 November 1834 reveals that Mitton apparently represented John Dickens in one of the London Debtor's Courts to try to sort out his financial difficulties (*Letters* 1:46). Things however come to a head notwithstanding, as appears in a letter dated 29 November 1834 and addressed to another recipient, Dickens' friend the journalist Thomas Beard. Both worked for the *Morning Chronicle*, and Dickens alludes to his work as a journalist in the opening to his letter, informing his friend that he has been on assignment in Birmingham, and that he spent the previous evening

correcting proofs for the journal. Professional considerations thus mingle once again with private ones, as exhaustion resulting from work combines with anxiety regarding family affairs:

Dear Tom.

I arrived from Birmingham at 7 this Morning and remained at the office until 10, correcting the proofs of the “*Whack*” for a Second Edition I am rather fagged as you may suppose, having perpetrated four columns in as many hours before I left the town of dirt, ironworks; radicals, and hardware. (*Letters* 1:46-47)

The letter in question however is centered upon the family’s financial plight, which Dickens describes to Beard. He thus reveals that the family is not only obliged to leave its current lodgings to move into cheaper accommodation but that, in so doing, they are forced to separate:

The fact is simply this for a time, at all events, we must disperse ourselves as best we can, consistently with a reasonable hope of consulting the interests of all. My father I apprehend will not re-join his family for some time; my mother and two sisters will reside in the immediate neighbourhood of our present Lodgings I hope in comfortable quarters, where they are not Strangers and I, taking Frederick with me, to instruct and provide for as I best can, shall repair to Chambers in Furnivals Inn. (*Letters* 1:47)

What is striking in the imparting of this news to Thomas Beard is that Dickens purports to convey the information to his friend not so much on his own behalf as on behalf of another sender, namely his mother. This is interesting in terms of the construction of an epistolary self, for the snippet moves from apparent selflessness to acknowledged selfishness. Dickens’ letter professes to be a way of sparing his mother the need to make these “very distressing” revelations to Beard herself. Dickens thus claims to take upon himself the burden of divulging the news to Beard and his sister who are close friends of the family:

My mother appears most anxious that your sister and yourself should be made acquainted with the situation in which she is placed. Knowing the anxiety of her feelings on this head, and concurring most sincerely with her, in valuing the friendship of yourself and family, most highly, I think it better to spare her the pain of making any communication, by writing to you myself at once. (*Letters* 1:47)

The distress of the disclosure appears to be transferred from Dickens' mother to Dickens himself, through the latter's decision to put pen to paper. Once again however, the letter is presented as a fallback, since Dickens mentions that he would have preferred to meet his friend face to face to impart the information to him by word of mouth: "If I had not a little business to transact on my own account to-night, I should, tired as I am, run the chance of finding you at home, for the purpose of saying a few words to you on a very distressing subject" (*Letters* 1:47).

Nevertheless, letter-writing may also be seen here as a way of circumventing a direct meeting with Beard that might have proved somewhat awkward and embarrassing. As in the case of the exchange with Mitton, Dickens nonetheless alludes to the fact that he had not only anticipated what has happened to his family but had also already communicated some of his fears to Beard. The announcement of their current trials and tribulations is therefore not as unexpected and sensational as it seems:

I do this [make this revelation] with the less reluctance as I have already, more than once, hinted to you my fears that the state of my father's affairs, and his want of attention to them would render a change in our situation, imperative. (*Letters* 1:47)

Previous revelations have dampened the force of the story thus communicated, but they have also made the process of revelation easier. Dickens seems to realize this while in the very process of writing the letter. Explaining his family's pecuniary difficulties to a friend in writing seems to have a therapeutic effect upon him, in that it paves the way toward a better acceptance of and reaction to fate. While the letter first alleged to convey the

“very distressing subject” it contains on behalf of Dickens’ mother, it ends up by admitting that the revelation provides relief to Dickens himself and that the letter is more self-centered than it initially purported to be:

There may be something of selfishness in this; for one never values friends so highly as in seasons of adversity, when their good feeling is best remembered, and when their loss would be most felt. You may attribute this communication to what cause you please As far as I am concerned I can have no wish for concealment, and to my mother and sisters I know it will be a relief to find that you, and yours, know the worst. (*Letters* 1:48)

It also allows Dickens to embed within his message the reaction he hopes to draw out from its recipient, namely “good feeling” and support toward close friends overcome by financial difficulties. These are two more good reasons for putting pen to paper, since this enables him to project his intended reader into his text and to try to condition its reception. Similarly, Dickens professes to construe his letter in such a way as to enable his reader to decide how much information he wishes to receive or to be spared:

[...] but as I wish you to know the real state of the case without delay, and as I know my Mother does the same, I have no hesitation in confiding it to you, to disclose just as much, or as little of, as you think proper. (*Letters* 1:48)

By the end of this letter, Dickens seems to have somewhat overcome the initial feelings of dejection caused by his family’s current situation, and to be able to reassess things in a more upbeat manner. In addition to concrete action undertaken with the help of Thomas Mitton, letter-writing enables Dickens to gain mastery over such awkward financial predicaments, partly by shedding a new light upon them and seeing them from a different angle. This epistolary process delineates a pattern of loss and redemption not unlike those of the financial negotiations Dickens finds himself obliged to enter into, as a consequence of his father’s improvidence:⁵

I will conclude this long and gloomy epistle by saying that after much trouble and anxiety, I think I have, in conjunction

with a friend of ours, succeeded in making the best general arrangement that could possibly be effected. We have much more cause for cheerfulness than despondency after all; and as I for one am determined to see everything in as bright a light as possible, having thank God little at present to fear on my own score, and not much on theirs, I will not add another word on the subject. (*Letters* 1:48)

This change of perspective leads to further action, and Dickens undertakes to influence his family's destiny by making arrangements for his brother Fred, whom he has taken in in Chambers at Furnival's Inn. Interestingly, the provisions made for Fred consist in asking Macrone in a letter dated 27 July 1836 to employ him in his Counting House, presumably to instill business habits in him. Dickens not only wants his brother to make a living, but he seems to consider that of all trades, accountancy is one of the most adequate occupations. It is true that it requires balancing and reckoning skills that Dickens' father obviously lacked, and that Dickens is clearly eager to have his brother learn:

My dear Macrone

If you still think that Fred would be of any use to you, I have made up my mind that I should very much like him to be initiated into business habits, in your Counting House. I know you will find him very quick and steady; and if you really want any sharp young fellow, you cannot have one better suited to your purpose. I have deliberated a long time about the propriety of keeping him at his present study, but I am convinced that at his present period of life, it is really only so much waste time. If you write me word that you will give him a stool, he shall sit himself upon it forthwith.

(*Letters* 1:157)

During the same period, similar pecuniary concerns also pervade Dickens' letters of love and courtship to Catherine Hogarth. These letters contain repeated allusions to the constraints but also more joyful prospects of household management.

Letters of love and domestic economy

Letters of love and courtship are a well-known epistolary subgenre.⁶ They are fueled by the absence of the beloved⁷ – in Dickens’ case by his separation from Catherine Hogarth, who was living in Brompton at the time; for various reasons that will be explained in this essay, Dickens could not see her as often as he wished. Such letters revolve around absence, and this stimulates the lovers’ fervor, often expressed, as in the case of Dickens’ letters, by a multiplication of pet names and by repeated professions of affection.⁸ From a material point of view, the lovers’ life is punctuated with the collection and distribution of mail.⁹ We, as unintended readers,¹⁰ are somewhat conspicuously plunged into the intimacy of Dickens’ relation with Catherine.¹¹ The feeling is at first a little unnerving, but we gradually grow accustomed to this familiarity, and get used to frequenting by proxy the small social microcosm delineated by the series of letters at stake.¹²

What is striking in the relationship that unfolds before our eyes, are the numerous practical considerations related to household management that these love-letters contain. Dickens’ letters to Catherine offer by no means what Peter Ackroyd in his biography calls the “theatrical display of feeling” exhibited by the letters he addressed to Maria Beadnell (143). The letters to Catherine Hogarth are more subdued, and preoccupations about professional business and domestic economy crop up in them again and again. They partake of the dynamics of these epistolary communications. Thus, in a message dated 25 November 1835, Dickens explains to his future wife that he will not be coming to see her for he is being pressed by his publisher John Macrone to complete the sketch he is currently writing:

My dearest Kate

Macrone has urged me most imperatively and pressingly to “get on”. I have made considerable progress in my “Newgate” sketch, but the subject is such a very difficult one to do justice to, and I have so much difficulty in remembering the place, and arranging my materials, that I really have no alternative but to remain at home to-night, and “get on” in good earnest. (*Letters* 1:97)

In order to sweeten the pill of his absence from her side, Dickens resorts to an astute strategy: he claims to be working twice as hard in order to be able to set up house with Catherine. This, he argues, should preclude any feeling of annoyance on her part, though he concedes that she may be disappointed. The letter skillfully sets up a common goal for both of them, thereby associating Catherine to Dickens' professional exertions, in the hope of placating her feelings of frustration. Dickens' letter even imagines and anticipates Catherine's possible irritation, and he endeavors to circumvent it in advance:

I will not do you the injustice to suppose that knowing my reason and my *motive* for exertion, *you* of all people will blame me one instant for my self-denial. You may be disappointed: I would rather you would at not seeing me; but you cannot feel vexed at my doing my best with the stake I have to play for you and a home for both of us.
(*Letters* 1:97)

Through his letter, Dickens is seen to attempt to control, or at least influence, Catherine's mood and mindset. This epistolary ploy is used repeatedly in his early correspondence with the young woman. Dickens' epistolary style thus exemplifies the combination of seduction and manipulation studied by Marie-Claire Grassi in *Lire l'épistolaire* (1998). Additionally, the letters exemplify a process of negotiation and argumentation whose ultimate goal is to persuade Catherine that the values defended by Dickens are the right ones, and that she should support them. In theoretical terms, Dickens aims at securing "cooperation and co-construction" on the part of Catherine and at fending off confrontation.¹³ Moreover, in so doing, his letters contribute as much to the construction of an epistolary self as to that of an epistolary other or recipient.¹⁴

By denying himself the pleasure of seeing Catherine Hogarth until he had made some headway in his writing, Dickens let professional imperatives impinge upon his private life.¹⁵ This created a vivid tension highlighted by his biographer, Edgar Johnson, who noted that "[his life's] tragedy grows out of the way in which the powers that enabled him to overcome the obstacles

before him also contained the seeds of his unhappiness” (Johnson 1:51). This neatly summarizes Dickens’ position *vis-à-vis* Catherine Hogarth and augurs rather ill of what is to follow. The power of Dickens’ creativity that enabled him to fend off poverty and ensure financial stability for himself and his family also caused domestic unhappiness. Catherine Peters has depicted this trait of Dickens’ character as “a relentlessness in his creative drive” that supersedes every other consideration.¹⁶ However, Dickens used epistolary strategies to attempt to fend off Catherine’s irritation by anticipating her reactions and endeavoring to mollify her by renewed professions of love.¹⁷ In his letters, monetary considerations are couched in terms of self-defense aimed at justifying Dickens’ prioritization of professional imperatives over personal ones. Dickens seems to be defending himself as though before a tribunal.¹⁸

In his efforts to humor Catherine’s vexation regarding his absences, Dickens often refers to budgetary constraints, but he builds them up into acceptable cases. In a letter dated 21 February 1836, he explains to his future wife that he must write as a duty, and that pleasure is not to be considered a factor in the present equation:

My Dearest Life

You must not be “coss” with what I cannot help. I like the *matter* of what I have done to-day, very much, but the *quantity* is not sufficient to justify my coming out to-night. If the representations I have so often made to you, about my working as a duty, and not as a pleasure, be not sufficient to keep you in the good humour, which you, of all people in the World should preserve – why then, my dear, you must be out of temper, and there is no help for it. (*Letters* 1:133)

What Dickens ingeniously suggests, in quasi-economic terms, is that his incentive for writing is in fact a sense of obligation and responsibility, not pleasure – for the pleasure of writing might have been seen as unfairly competing with his feelings for Catherine. Here Dickens resorts to the Victorian work ethic to describe his work as a writer, reserving bliss to qualify his relation with Catherine. This epistolary construction of himself as

a dutiful writer is meant to placate Catherine and secure her support. Dickens addresses her as if he were casually talking to her, interspersing his letter with apostrophes. He once again and, in a performative manner, pictures her reactions to his message and reckons that his arguments will induce her to relent:

I can fancy, if you began to read this note with a frown, that a smile has taken its place by this time: and so I shall speak rationally about what I have been doing, as I hope I shall always be able to do, to my own Wife. (*Letters* 1:133)

Dickens' tone sounds nevertheless somewhat patronizing when he professes to speak "rationally" to Catherine about the content of his work, though it also betrays anxiety about being able to discuss his work and his professional concerns unreservedly with his future wife. This is exactly what Dickens then proceeds to do in this letter. However, surprisingly, he does so in a manner that is not "rational."

As a matter of fact, his letter goes on to allude to the progress of his *Pickwick Papers*, not in an abstract and rational-like manner referring, as he did previously, to "matter" or "quantity," but plunging himself and his intended reader, Catherine, into the heart of his unfolding narrative, as though he and she were part of the story itself. Dickens' letter mingles allusions to real life and to fiction by setting himself and his characters on the same diegetic level. He depicts himself as a stage manager but one who also seems to be in his narrative, since he describes himself putting his characters on a coach, getting them to a ball, to their inn, and then going to bed himself, before seeing his publishers in the morning. The momentum of the developing story, added to the pressure of having to submit it to his publishers in the morning, strengthens Dickens' case about having to stay at home that evening in order to write up his latest ideas.¹⁹ This is another instance of self-defense and self-justification:

I have at this moment, got Pickwick, and his friends, on the Rochester Coach, and they are going on swimmingly, in company with a very different character from any I have yet described, who I flatter myself will make a decided hit. I

want to get them from the Ball, to their Inn, before I go to bed and I think that will take me until one or two o’Clock, *at the earliest*. The Publishers will be here in the Morning, so you will readily suppose I have no alternative but to stick at my Desk. (*Letters* 1:133)

In this love *cum* business letter, the material aspects of letter-writing are also alluded to very clearly in that Dickens invites Catherine to send him an answer via his brother Fred, but begs her not to cross her letter, because this practice – aimed at saving on the use of paper – made the process of reading more laborious, especially by candlelight. Here monetary considerations are discarded for the sake of clearer communication within the couple: “Write me a long note by Fred, but if you *can* avoid crossing it, do: for my eyes are none of the best at night, and I feel some difficulty in reading it by candlelight” (*Letters* 1:133).

Be that as it may, the suspense regarding the possibility of Dickens’ presence at Catherine’s side becomes, as it were, as momentous as the dramatic tension in his fictional narratives. Catherine is left in constant expectation as to whether and when Dickens will come and see her: “I hope and believe I shall be able to get out between my turns, tomorrow night about half past 9. But should I be prevented, I hereby solemnly pledge myself to be out, God willing, on Tuesday” (*Letters* 1:133-34). Thus their future marital life already promises to be seriously impinged upon by constraints related to Dickens’ work, so much so that Dickens even imagines in a post-scriptum to his letter a sort of commodification of Catherine that would make her into some kind of fixture in his study, thus ensuring her continued presence at his side without interrupting or disrupting his professional pursuits:

Believe me

My dearest Love

Ever Yours most affecy.

CHARLES DICKENS

I wish you were a fixture here I should like to have you by me *so much*. (*Letters* 1:134)

This image of Catherine as a piece of furniture or equipment is meant to emphasize Dickens' attachment to her, but it is also disturbingly telling about the way he envisages future connections between his professional and private life.

The previous image of Catherine as a fixture in Dickens' study is no trivial detail. Fixtures are in fact another important concern in the domestic arrangements made by Dickens and Catherine Hogarth. In a letter dated 27 February 1836 and addressed to Catherine's maternal uncle, William Thomson, Dickens asks the latter to bring back from Edinburgh a very specific kind of kettle for Catherine. The notion of value, both sentimental and economic, is at the heart of Dickens' argument.²⁰ What bears a strong sentimental value for Catherine does not have the same worth for Dickens, and the somewhat negative and ironical implications contained in his evaluative letter are very clear about that.

The pressing need for a Scottish kettle and its strong desirability are attributed to Catherine only. This transpires from the way the very name of the kettle is somewhat long-sufferingly spelled out by Dickens, who snidely remarks that such items can be commonly found in London but that this one "*must*" be purchased in Scotland. The italicized modal verb ascribes the request conspicuously to Catherine, as if Dickens wanted to embed her very words in his report, the better to distance himself from the request. It also emphasizes Catherine's insistence in this matter, thus implying that Dickens questions the reasonableness of this alleged necessity. The item's intrinsic value is also called into question by the phrasing of the letter. Nevertheless, Dickens asks Thomson to purchase and pack one of these "desirable" kettles while he is in Scotland. The word "desirable," though not italicized, is again to be understood as Catherine's perspective counteracted by Dickens' irony. For Dickens, the value of the kettle spells out rather as a logistical hassle and an extra charge to his account, all of which he reluctantly accepts for the sake of domestic harmony:

My Dear Sir.

I embrace a moment's opportunity before packing up my Parcel, to say that I hope you will call for *your* copy of "Boz", on your return to town; and also to beg you to execute a little commission for me, in Edinburgh.

Catherine is very anxious to have for her Establishment, a little Toddy-water kettle I suppose it should be called, like the one they have in York Place. Now such things can be got in London with great ease, but it appears that it *must* be brought from Scotland, or it is of no value. Will you do me the favor to put one of these desirable kettles in your Portmanteau, and "charge the same to my account"?

Believe me

My dear Sir

Ever Yours Sincerely

CHARLES DICKENS (*Letters* 1:135)

Dickens' eagerness to set up house with Catherine Hogarth and to make the necessary domestic arrangements to reach this goal is further emphasized in a letter dated 4 March 1836. It reiterates Dickens' anxiety about meeting publishing deadlines and about accumulating enough money to be able to get married. In this letter, Dickens' personal life is depicted as a moment snatched from his writing of the *Pickwick Papers* whose installments are proving more difficult to achieve than he had anticipated. Dickens' personal life is getting the smallest share of his time and is being fitted, more or less successfully, into the larger scheme of his professional life:

My Dearest Love

I snatch a moment to say that Fred shall be out, for you and Mary tomorrow, about 4. *Pickwick* is not yet completed. The sheets are a weary length I had no idea there was so much in them. It will certainly be finished by Sunday Morning, but I hope to do it to-night, if I get a short turn.
(*Letters* 1:137)

As pressure increases, the progress of the *Pickwick Papers* is no longer enthusiastically described, as was the case previously, in terms of plot development, but rather in purely quantitative terms related to the filling of blank sheets of paper.

Domestic arrangements took the form of sundry purchases made by Dickens for their future abode, as shown in a letter dated 10 March 1836. Dickens evidently delights in enumerating the items he has bought for their home and, in so doing, whetting Catherine's curiosity and anticipation. Moreover, short of going to see Catherine at her lodgings, Dickens coaxes her to come to see him by inviting her to come and admire the objects destined for their prospective home. For the time being, the acquisitions symbolically make up for the separation the couple have to put up with, while they wait to be able to set up house together. The items prefigure so to speak their future home. Besides listing his latest acquisitions for their lodgings, Dickens emphasizes in this same letter that money continues to come in, thanks to Macrone's liberality. However this does not induce him to spend hand over fist. In fact, he proudly boasts of sound qualities in domestic management in that he has successfully managed to negotiate bargains for every one of the objects he has purchased. One cannot but note here that Dickens seems to be striving to differentiate himself from his father in emphasizing his household management skills, and thus his ability to spare the financial resources of his future couple:

My Dearest Love.

As I have been walking about, all day, and have to be in the House at a quarter to six, I have only time to say, that I fear I shall not be able to get out to Brompton to-night. From what I see of the business for the Evening, I fear I shall have a heavy turn.

As your Mama has not seen the sideboard, and as there are a great number of new purchases which even *you* have not seen (!) I think the best way will be, for you, and she, and Mary, to spend the day here, on Saturday. I will ask Mother

to come to tea: the purchases can be completed, and you can all get home by the last Buss.²¹ Let me know what you think.

I have bought today, a pair of quart Decanters, and a pair of pints, a chrystal Jug, & three brown dittos with plated tops, for beer and hot water, a pair of Lustres, and two *magnificent* china Jars – all, I flatter myself, slight bargains. Macrone has tipped up the balance manfully.

God bless you Wig. Believe me

Ever Yours most faithfully & affecy.

CHARLES DICKENS (*Letters* 1:138-39)

The wheel comes full circle when the two issues of domestic economy that lie at the heart of these epistolary exchanges, namely domestic misfortune and upcoming household management, become connected. In a letter dated 31 March 1836, Dickens alludes to his father's improvidence in connection with his upcoming marriage to Catherine. This dovetailing of the two questions gives rise to an interesting attempt at a business negotiation of sorts on the part of Charles Dickens. He is writing to his uncle Thomas Barrow to tell him that, thanks to the publication of the first series of *Sketches by Boz*, his financial situation is now sufficiently stable for him to be able to marry Catherine Hogarth. He claims to be extremely keen to introduce his wife to his uncle, but on one condition – that Thomas Barrow take up with John Dickens again. Barrow had stood security for John Dickens in 1814: the latter being unable to repay his debts, Barrow had had to bail him out and pay interests on these debts to boot. In the Pilgrim edition of Dickens' letters, a note indicates that this incident was certainly the cause of the estrangement between the two brothers:

My Dear Uncle.

The great success of my book, and the name it has established for me among the Publishers, enables me to settle at an earlier period than I at first supposed possible; I have therefore fixed Saturday next, for my marriage with Miss Hogarth – the daughter of a gentleman who has recently distinguished

himself by a celebrated work on Music, who was the most intimate friend and companion of Sir Walter Scott, and one of the most eminent among the Literati of Edinburgh.

There is no Member of my family to whom I should be prouder to introduce my wife, than yourself, but I am compelled to say and I am sure that you cannot blame me for doing so that the same cause which has led me for a long time past, to deny myself the pleasure and advantage of your society, prevents my doing so. If I could not as a single man, I cannot as a married one, visit at a relation's house from which my father is excluded: nor can I see any relatives here, who would not treat him, as they would myself. (*Letters* 1:144)

Dickens' argument is of an interesting kind. He is not asking his uncle to condone John Dickens' irresponsible ways in terms of financial management; he wishes him to forgive his brother for sentimental and family reasons:

When I say, Uncle, that I should be more happy than I can possibly express, if you would place it in my power, to know you once again on those terms of intimacy and friendship, I so sincerely desire, I hope you will not misunderstand my meaning. I do not ask you I should conceive that I lowered and disgraced myself, if I did – to alter your determination. I may think that time might have softened the determined ani[mosity – y]ears; I may [...] do an injus[tice (...)]²² I have no doubt) to my father's real character. I cannot, however, be an impartial judge, because I cannot be an unprejudiced one; and I do not presume therefore to arraign your decision.

Nothing that has occurred to me in my life, has given me greater pain, than thus denying myself the society of yourself and Aunt. (*Letters* 1:145)

On this occasion and in keeping with the emotional strategy he has chosen in the hope of swaying Thomas Barrow's determination, Dickens does not hesitate to play on his uncle's heartstrings, reminding him that, as a young boy, he attended him in hours of need and implying that he now expects some form of emotional payback:

This is a very painful subject, and I have many associations connected with you, which render it much more painful in this case, than in any other. I cannot forget that I was once your little companion and nurse, through a weary illness, nor shall I ever cease to remember the many proofs you have given me, in later days, of your interest, and affection [...]

I have only to add that the contents of this letter are unknown to everybody but Aunt Charlton, to whom I have written on the same subject: and that come what may, I shall ever be, at heart,

Dear Uncle

Your most affectionate Nephew

[CHARLES DICKENS] Thomas Barrow Esqre. (*Letters* 1:144-45)

Conclusion

At the end of the day, Dickens' epistolary discourse through its vocabulary, phraseology, grammatical traits and syntax, turns of phrases, abbreviations, but also through its salutations, argumentations and postures²³ provides interesting insights into the construction of his epistolary self as well as of his addresses in connection with matters related to domestic economy. They also show how he dealt with such issues in his correspondence. This in turn reveals how, at a microeconomic level, a writer like Dickens can literally and 'literarily' endeavor to come to 'terms' through letter-writing with household management. The epistolary form allows for a dialogic and seemingly spontaneous expression of thoughts and feelings, and its rhetoric

and discursive practices²⁴ lend themselves to multiple forms of negotiations, some business-like, others of a more private and personal nature, the two being often brought together in instructive amalgamations. Series of letters, like the ones analyzed here, provide a more complete perspective on the economic situations at stake, as well as on the financial motivations and actions of all the protagonists involved in the issue, not to mention the epistolary and economic networks thus delineated.

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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 proffered 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' business and domestic life.

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

⁵ Toby Ditz has studied letters of credit as narratives of loss and redemption (see Earle 2). This can be applied here to Dickens' financial dealings in connection to his father's insolvency.

⁶ On this epistolary subgenre see Sinding (33).

⁷ For more information on correspondence as the discourse of the absent see Arrou-Vignod (26).

⁸ The use of pet names in correspondence is examined by Arrou-Vignod (26).

⁹ Arrou-Vignod (42) and Haroche-Bouzinac (77) have studied such epistolary clocks and the toing and froing of letters.

¹⁰ David Paroissien mentions that Dickens was shocked by the use that was made of the private letters of public men and that he therefore was intent on destroying his own letters to avoid this from happening to him (35). This is why I speak of “unintended” readers.

¹¹ For more information on this empathy between the extra-diegetic reader and the protagonists of the correspondence that he or she is discovering, see Arrou-Vignod (45).

¹² See also Simone Bernard-Griffiths and Daniel Madelénat for further analysis of family relations in intimate forms of writing in the nineteenth century.

¹³ This approach draws from Siess’s theories on negotiation in letter-writing (2010).

¹⁴ On the epistolary other or recipient delineated by correspondence see Amossy (1998).

¹⁵ Another reason often prevented Dickens from seeing Catherine, namely the recording of parliamentary debates.

¹⁶ This compulsive drive was also stressed by Forster and Ackroyd (see Peters “Three Major Biographies” 53).

¹⁷ Maria Panzera and Elvezio Canonica have analyzed this aspect of the reception of private letters and the feelings of addressees (7-25).

¹⁸ On this tribunal-like aspect of correspondence see Harang (44).

¹⁹ Françoise Leriche and Alain Pagès have shown how much correspondence partakes of the process of literary creation and how it is paramount in the genesis of some literary works.

²⁰ On the question of values in letter-writing, see Tassel 2010. This book examines “the textual practices that govern the elaboration, localization, and transmission of values within letters” (7).

²¹ Bus is spelled “Buss” in this letter and in others.

²² The formatting of the square brackets is presented like this in the Pilgrim edition of the letters.

²³ These features of epistolarity are analyzed by Banks 2013.

²⁴ See Jean-Michel Adam, “Les genres du discours épistolaire,” 37-53.

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