The Role of Tom Pinch in "Martin Chuzzlewit"

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IN a recent essay called *"Martin Chuzzlewit*: Pinch and Pecksniff,"[1] Michael Steig argues at some length for recognition of the crucial role of Tom Pinch in Dickens' sixth novel. Steig quite rightly observes that most criticism of *Chuzzlewit,* including excellent commentaries by J. Hillis Miller, Steven Marcus, and Barbara Hardy, has tended to underplay Pinch's importance.[2] And yet, Steig claims, "Tom Pinch is the most fully developed character in the work, as he is the only one . . . whose psychological development is presented in detail" (p. 181). The essay goes on to examine the relationship between Tom Pinch and Pecksniff, showing how the characterization of Pecksniff, one of Dickens' greatest creations, actually relies upon an interdependent connection between the arch-hypocrite and his selfless servant Tom Pinch. I find Steig's argument persuasive. But I should like to go even further, and argue a point that Steig only hints at in an early reference to Hablot K. Browne's frontispiece to *Chuzzlewit*: namely, that Pinch, while he may not be the novel's finest achievement, nevertheless stands at its moral and structural center, and is therefore in a certain respect its most important character.

Browne's frontispiece positions Tom Pinch, by far its largest figure, at the center of a flurry of little drawings representing important characters and scenes from the novel. The frontispiece reflects, I believe, Dickens' own conception of the central place of Pinch. The novel itself supports such a contention, for the very *idea* of Tom Pinch — the ultimately selfless man, radiating honest warmth

and unqualified love — is vital in a story which seeks, as Dickens explained in the Preface to the "Cheap Edition" of the novel, to "exhibit in a variety of aspects the commonest of all the vices; to show how Selfishness propagates itself; and to what a grim giant it may grow, from small beginnings."[3] I would agree with Steven Marcus that the unity of Dickens' novel is essentially thematic; and, while admitting certain formal weaknesses, I would take issue with Barbara Hardy's magisterial judgment that the novel is truly one of those "loose baggy monsters" that made Henry James shudder so. *Chuzzlewit* may not sustain its rhythms and its atmosphere so well as, say, *Great Expectations,* but the novel orders itself more effectively than Barbara Hardy suggests. It does so rather in the manner of a work like *Don Quixote,* by focusing insistently on a powerful idea, progressively turning it over and over and examining it again and again, giving its treatment such resonance that the novelistic statement gains coherence by the sheer force of ingenious repetition. Tom Pinch is essential in this process. Every major character in the novel is decidedly "selfish," and Pinch relates to each of them individually, and to all of them at once, in some important ways. It is just not quite true, as Barbara Hardy claims, that Tom Pinch has "practically nothing to do" in *Martin Chuzzlewit.*[4]

Dickens' imagination was "naturally dialectical" in its movement, as Steven Marcus has aptly observed,[5] and indeed a strategy of pairings and contrasts informs the whole structure of *Chuzzlewit.* This strategy is most critical as it affects the way characters are created and deployed in the novel. Consider, for example, the remarkable transformation of Montague Tigg into the alternative identity of Tigg Montague. Chuffey is a non-self whose virtual non-existence complements the aggressive selfhood of Anthony Chuzzlewit.[6] The great comic characters, Pecksniff and Sairey Gamp, are actually fragmented personalities. Pecksniff, a consummate hyprocrite, projects a false, con-

trived image while masterfully concealing his true self; Mrs. Gamp has created a fully developed alter ego, Mrs. Harris, who "lives" almost a separate existence but whose "being" is actually quite important to the definition of the self Mrs. Gamp presents to the world. Tom Pinch's function in *Chuzzlewit* partakes of the general strategy of parallels and contrasts. In the first place, as everybody recognizes, the novel blatantly offers Pinch as the opposite of Pecksniff — as a kind of dramatized moral alternative. In a brilliant early passage, Dickens ironically compares Pecksniff with his horse, suggesting that the horse resembled his master

> in his moral character, wherein . . . he was full of promise, but of no performance. He was always, in a manner, going to go, and never going. [He] was for ever so perfectly satisfied with his own speed, and so little disconcerted by opportunities of comparing himself with the fastest trotters, that the illusion [of going] was the more difficult of resistance. He was a kind of animal who infused into the breasts of strangers a lively sense of hope, and possessed all those who knew him better with a grim despair. (p. 117)

In the same passage Tom Pinch, who is never ridiculed in this fashion, receives a glowing tribute: "Blessings on thy simple heart, Tom Pinch, how . . . thoroughly, as with thy cheerful voice thou pleasantly adjurest Sam the hostler 'not to let him go yet,' dost thou believe that quadruped desires to go, and would go if he might! Who could repress a smile — of love for thee, Tom Pinch, and not in jest at they expense . . . . ?" (pp. 117-118). Derision for Pecksniff, a loving smile for Tom Pinch: these are the extremes of treatment that Dickens persists in throughout the novel. The "simple heart" of the intensely sentimentalized Pinch balances the hypocrisy of the grotesque Pecksniff, and becomes a standard of judgment. Similarly, Pinch's lack of guile balances the total cynicism and deviousness of Jonas Chuzzlewit. At the end of Chapter 39, we find a passage which introduces the matter of this balance, alluding at least obliquely to Jonas, who has recently become involved with that other greedy cynic, Tigg Montague. "Tom,

Tom!" the narrator exclaims, "The man in all this world most proud of his distrust of other men . . . shall never find . . . the time come home to him, when all his wisdom is an idiot's folly, weighed against a simple heart!" (p. 692). Likewise, in the early episodes of the novel, Tom's wide-eyed honesty provides a contrast to the mean-spiritedness of young Martin.

In all of these instances, Tom's character supplies a kind of moral barometer of loving selflessness by which other characters are measured. In effect, the significance of these characters' experience is understood at least partly in the light of Tom's example. This basic feature of the novel's strategy is fairly obvious, and does not need more elaborate definition here. But it is an oversimplification to describe Tom's role only in these terms. *Martin Chuzzlewit* focuses on the theme of selfishness, which is to say that it deals with people's unwillingness to establish meaningfully reciprocal relationships with the world. Greed is a most blatant form of selfishness, and a good many characters in the novel are greedy. But hypocrisy is another and perhaps more insidious form. J. Hillis Miller has described the hypocrite Pecksniff as a fragmented personality internally engaged in a kind of reflexive relation between two selves; such a splitting allows him to "perform selfish acts as though they were acts of public service and generosity."[7] The projected self is false, but it functions to justify the true self. An individual so fragmented puts on a mask, which becomes a functioning part of the personality, and such an individual inevitably perceives the world with faulty vision and responds to it unreciprocally. The result is isolation. Sairey Gamp, and Pecksniff himself, are the novel's most extreme examples of this form of isolation from other people. But Tom Pinch also partakes of these failures in reciprocity, although not in such spectacular fashion. The novel gives considerable attention to the business of dramatizing Tom's struggle with his failures, and to his success in establishing an integrated personality

and a harmonious relationship with the world. This growth in Tom's character supplies, through contrast, a meaningful gloss on the characters who do not develop in this way.

In Dickens' scheme of things, persistence in a wrong-headed vision of the world constitutes a failure in human reciprocity; in other words, it is a form of selfishness. For a good many years of his life Tom Pinch's very identity has depended upon Pecksniff, and this dependency reflects a fragmentation of personality similar to that manifested by Pecksniff and Mrs. Gamp. Tom, in his meekness, blindly regards his own being as bound and defined by that of his "patron," whom he sees as standing in a paternal relation to himself. Furthermore, in the face of incontrovertible evidence (of the kind presented to him by John Westlock), he persists in affirming the honor and goodness of this false man as a means of preserving and justifying his personal self-image. His blindness leads to distortions in his relationships with other people, while it also poses a threat to his own welfare, and paradoxically helps to validate the mask of honor that Pecksniff wears. Pecksniff has exploited Pinch, as John Westlock once tries to explain to his friend. "I have grown up in his house," Tom replies, "I am in his confidence, I am his assistant, he allows me a salary: when his business improves, my prospects are to improve too." Westlock responds sarcastically: "He doesn't keep you as his assistant because you are of any use to him; because your wonderful faith in his pretensions is of inestimable service in all his mean disputes; because your honesty reflects honesty on him . . ." (pp. 74-75). On a later occasion, Westlock insults Pecksniff's character, and Tom rises to leave his presence. "I cannot listen to this," he admonishes his young friend, and when Westlock begs his pardon, he answers, "It's not my pardon you have to ask, John. You have done *me* nothing but kindnesses" (pp. 263-264). John thereupon addresses Pinch, begging Pecksniff's pardon: it is granted,

and they drink the arch-hypocrite's health. Clearly, Tom does not make an adequate distinction between Pecksniff and himself, and despite his words to the contrary, he cannot separate a challenge to Pecksniff's honor from an injury to his own.

The extent of Pinch's commitment to Pecksniff becomes clearest at the time when it is about to be broken. During his pivotal conversation with Mary Graham, whom he quietly loves "from his soul with such a self-denying love as woman seldom wins" (p. 562), he suddenly learns the truth about his patron. Pecksniff has meanly attempted to violate Mary's honor. His ugly lust ironically parallels Tom's own self-effacing, purer desire, and this contrast strikes Pinch with great force, driving him to clear vision as no other kind of evidence has been able to do.[8] Previously, Tom had occasionally worried that he might someday out of his own inadequacy prove to be the agent of his patron's destruction — his "evil genius" (p. 462). Now, having recognized the truth, Pinch knows that the real Pecksniff is not the idol he had worshipped, and that he must be repudiated. In his discovery, Tom had the anguish of remembering what Pecksniff "never was." For as his "blindness in this matter had been total and not partial, so was his restored sight. *His* Pecksniff could never have worked the wickedness of which he had just now heard, but any other Pecksniff could; and the Pecksniff who could do that could do anything, and no doubt had been doing anything and everything except the right thing all through his career" (p. 563). This is an excruciatingly painful recognition, causing great suffering to Tom, whose "compass was broken, his chart destroyed, his chronometer had stopped, his masts were gone by the board; his anchor was adrift, ten thousand leagues away" (p. 563). Tom faces, it seems, the dissolution of the boundaries of his own being. "There was no Pecksniff; there never had been a Pecksniff; and all his other griefs were swallowed up in that" (p. 571).

But, as is frequently the case in Dickens' novels, suffering has a redemptive power, and for Tom it leads to a new knowledge of himself, and a new perspective on the world. His image of Pecksniff destroyed, he is no longer blinded by its false light, and furthermore he is now able to find self-definition without fragmentation. The result is a reintegration of his personality. This process is gradual, but very nearly total. The famous "Man in the Monument" passage showing the exiled Tom in London, trying to find his way to John Westlock at Furnival's Inn, brings the process to completion. The Monument itself resembles Pecksniff, and upon discovering that the attending Man in the Monument (of whom he is about to ask directions) is a "Cynic; a worldly man," Tom decides that he cannot put trust in him (p. 652). Only moments later, after chancing to meet Charity Pecksniff in the street, Pinch realizes that "the altered relations between himself and Pecksniff were somehow to involve an altered knowledge on his part of other people, and were to give him an insight into much of which he had had no previous suspicion" (p. 654). In fact, Tom has already given signs of such insight. Very shortly before this time, while sitting over breakfast with Westlock and discussing the newspaper advertisements, Tom makes some astute observations: "Here," he says, "are all kinds of employers wanting all sorts of servants, and all sorts of servants wanting all kinds of employers, and they never seem to come together . . . . It really seems . . . as if people . . . found it a comfort and consolation to proclaim 'I want such and such a thing, and I can't get it, and I don't expect I ever shall!' " (p. 641). Such keen perception of failures in human reciprocity is new to Tom, as is his power to recognize hypocrisy when he sees it. When he goes to fetch his sister Ruth from her employers, he instantly sees their meanness and pretentiousness for what it is, and thinks to himself that perhaps "there are more Pecksniffs than one" in the world (p. 644). However, from his "guileless dis-

trust" of the maze of London's streets and manners, Tom does not develop into a cynic. The novel makes it clear even before his departure from Salisbury that he was "far from being sage enough to know that, having been disappointed in one man, it would have been a strictly rational and eminently wise proceeding to have revenged himself upon mankind in general, by mistrusting them one and all" (p. 629). On the contrary, Tom now possesses a balanced vision of the world.

The intervention of old Martin Chuzzlewit in Tom Pinch's life in no way undermines the novel's affirmation of Tom's new wisdom and stature. Old Martin replaces the false paternal image of Pecksniff, but he is a truly supportive figure whose very anonymity implies an assertion of Pinch's capacity to sustain his personal identity. Tom's words to his sister, describing a "lurking" sorrow over his unfulfilled love for Mary Graham, reveal a degree or renunciation and a maturity of feeling very few characters in the novel can match: "There has fallen in my way a good and beautiful creature, who but for the selfish regret that I cannot call her my own, would, like all other good and beautiful creatures, make me happier and better!" But "I hardly dare to call this lurking something a sorrow," he goes on; for "whatever name it may justly bear, I thank Heaven that it renders me more sensible of affection and attachment, and softens me in fifty ways" (p. 846).

It is precisely the kind of sensitivity and personal equilibrium achieved by Tom that characters like Pecksniff, Jonas, and Sairey Gamp are never able to reach. In the presence of Pinch and others, old Martin melodramatically strips off Pecksniff's mask, and the hypocrite reacts predictably — it has always been a "special quality, among the many admirable qualities possessed by Mr. Pecksniff, that the more he was found out, the more hypocrisy he practised" (p. 753). Significantly, his words to Martin suggest an ironic parallel to unspoken feelings earlier ex-

perienced by Tom when he learned the truth about Pecksniff: "You have deceived me, sir. . . . To have been deceived implies a trusting nature. Mine is a trusting nature. I am thankful for it" (p. 890). Pecksniff has indeed been tricked, but by the man he would have used ruthlessly if he could. He proceeds to "forgive" old Martin, thus declaring with finality his refusal to discard the false face he has always worn before the world. It is difficult to tell whether Pecksniff has duped himself as completely as he had once duped Tom Pinch, or whether he actually has the kind of self-knowledge Fielding attributes to the hypocrite in the Preface to *Joseph Andrews*. At any rate, he remains a fragmented and therefore isolated individual, totally unwilling to establish a meaningfully reciprocal relationship with his fellow human beings. He is thoroughly reprehensible, and the account of Tom Pinch's similar but differently resolved crisis helps to carry and define the judgment that the novel passes against Pecksniff.

Jonas Chuzzlewit and Sairey Gamp are likewise judged in light of the contrast between their experience and Tom's. The re-integration of Pinch's personality that comes after he is disabused of his false image of Pecksniff provides a commentary on Mrs. Gamp's response to Betsey Prig's declaration about Mrs. Harris: "I don't believe there's no sich a person!" (p. 834). Like Pecksniff, Mrs. Gamp refuses to yield up her false self-justification, and she too remains a divided personality, hopelessly separated from the world. Jonas Chuzzlewit's drive for control, first over his father and then over Tigg Montague's financial empire, splits and isolates him disastrously. Jonas trusts absolutely no one except himself; his own false self-image is supported by an entirely negative estimate of everybody else, which also feeds his desire for power. As a viciously devious man who reaches out to destroy others, Jonas paradoxically indulges in the most radical kind of reflexive action within the self; he succeeds in destroying his own being. His grasp for supremacy over others re-

sembles Pecksniff's and Mrs. Gamp's, but he represents selfishness in its crudest and least "human" manifestations. Late in the book, when his escape from Montague's clutches is aborted by a message Tom unwittingly bears to him, Jonas turns upon Pinch with a clenched hand: "There are not many human faces," the narrator observes, "capable of the expression with which he accompanied that gesture" (p. 704). Tom's loving, selfless nature, and his positive movement toward equilibrium and happiness, contrast sharply with Jonas' cruelty, and with his disintegration and ultimate self-destruction.

Tom Pinch's character defines an important alternative to the moral posture represented by *Martin Chuzzlewit's* chief exponents of selfishness. But Tom also relates significantly to the experience of the novel's titular "hero," young Martin. Like Tom, Martin undergoes a maturation process, and his "crisis" occurs in the novel simultaneously with Tom's; the most pertinent chapters (31, 33, 34, 36, and 37) are almost exactly juxtaposed. Generally selfish and insensitive, but basically good-natured, Martin is blindly committed to a false image of himself as a genius capable of great success in America. He awakens to clear vision only after a fever and a narrow escape from death. His own recovery comes at the beginning of his companion Mark Tapley's affliction, and as he sorrowfully witnesses poor Mark's suffering, the spectre of "Self, Self, Self" comes to haunt him (p. 597). The dramatization of Martin's awakening is abbreviated, though it is fuller and more convincing than some critics of *Chuzzlewit* have admitted. Nothing rings hollow when, just before sailing for England, he speaks of this experience to his American friend Mr. Bevan, solemnly remarking that we "live and learn, Mr. Bevan! Nearly die and learn: and we learn the quicker" (p. 617). Undoubtedly, Martin's transformation gains credibility through the presence of Mark Tapley, a selfless creature whose very existence is a standing judgment on Martin. Mark serves the important pur-

pose of extending into the American episodes the idea of his old friend Tom Pinch, and at one point, Martin's thoughts make this connection quite explicit. While ruminating over Mark's kind helpfulness toward an unfortunate fellow passenger and sufferer, his mind turns to Tom; it occurs to him that Tom "would be very likely to have struck up the same sort of acquaintance under similar circumstances"; and he wonders at the ways in which Mark and Tom, "two people so extremely different," were "like each other, and were unlike him" (p. 596). What Tom represents, as mirrored in Mark, works with great force upon Martin at this juncture, and with great success. Furthermore, the treatment of Martin's growth into moral maturity gathers authority by analogy with the account of Tom's similar but more fully detailed process of maturation. Mark Tapley, whose role in the novel is of course not limited just to the service of "playing" Tom Pinch in the American episodes, ultimately goes through his own process of moral development, renouncing his selfish habit of gaining "credit" by finding jollity in grim situations where others find only misery. He realizes, as J. Hillis Miller has put it, that "there is a lack of generosity in the desire to be wholly alone in one's unselfishness."[9]

At the end of the novel, Martin gains the reward of Mary Graham's hand in marriage, and Mark is wed to Mrs. Lupin. Ruth Pinch and John Westlock also marry. But Tom enjoys no such rewards, and it has sometimes been seen as a contradiction in this novel about the vice of selfishness that its chief exemplar of selflessness is left alone at the end. Perhaps it is an unwitting contradiction. The almost embarrassing picture of Tom playing his organ — that instrument once elevated by Mary Graham's touch (p. 462) — for the rest of his days might be used to support such a contention, although it is difficult to believe that Dickens was at all aware of the auto-erotic suggestiveness of this picture. In fact, Dickens obviously meant to show us a genuinely happy Tom Pinch at the

end of the novel, and he placed him significantly at the very centre of its resolution. Tom is not alone at all. A dinner held in anticipation of the coming nuptials displays him, surrounded by all those loved ones whose lives he has touched, in a state of great joy: "If there were a genial face at that board, it was Tom's. They all took their tone from Tom. Everybody drank to him, everybody looked to him, everybody thought of him, everybody loved him . . . His heart was full, he said, of happiness. And so it was. Tom spoke the honest truth" (pp. 902-903). Dickens' language is especially patronizing in the novel's late comments on Tom, as Steig and others have complained, and it is hardly arguable that the sentimentalized treatment of Pinch only intensifies annoyingly at the end. Nevertheless the aim in the last chapters is to re-emphasize the focus upon Tom Pinch as a character whose experience has, through analogy and contrast, served to sharpen the definition of other characters' experience and to clarify its significance. The purpose is also to re-emphasize the function of Tom as exemplar. His virtue may not have been rewarded in marriage, like that of his fellow "good" characters. But his kind, selfless nature is shown to be powerfully fertile. The final brief paragraph of the novel places Tom against the background of a garden "bestrewn with flowers by children's hands" (p. 918). By contrast, Jonas is dead, Mrs. Gamp is displaced, and Pecksniff has degenerated into a drunken old fool.

As the novel concludes, Tom Pinch radiates warmth and happiness in all directions, participating with full reciprocity in the lives of everyone. The image of Tom at the organ, as drawn by Dickens and reflected in Browne's frontispiece, gains another kind of significance when seen in this connection, for the instrument sounds out the "noble music" of unselfish love in the "rich swelling" of its "mellow harmony" (pp. 916, 918). The vital role assigned to Pinch in the closing chapters of the novel is perfectly consistent with what Dickens has made him perform up to

this time. Tom is, throughout *Martin Chuzzlewit*, at the very centre of things. He may not be so memorable as Pecksniff, Sairey Gamp, or even Jonas or Tigg; but it seems reasonable to claim for him a much greater importance than Dickens' critics have usually recognized. Virtually all significant experience in the story is seen in the light of his example, and takes at least part of its definition from a reflection cast by his central character. This has a meaningful unifying effect upon the novel. I would submit that, when looked at with reference to the crucial role of Tom Pinch, *Martin Chuzzlewit* appears to be a more carefully organized, more fully coherent narrative than has always been allowed.

NOTES

[1]*Studies in the Novel*, 1 (1969), 181-187.

[2]See Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), pp. 98-142; Marcus, *Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 213-268; Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 100-121.

[3]P. 39. All references to the novel are to the excellent and widely available Penguin paperback (1968), edited by P. N. Furbank.

[4]*The Moral Art of Dickens*, p. 108.

[5]*Dickens: From Pickwick to Dombey*, p. 232.

[6]See Marcus, pp. 232-233.

[7]*Charles Dickens*, p. 123. Miller's discussion of the whole issue of reciprocity is extensive and excellent.

[8]Steig suggests that what is involved here is a "detailed parody of the oedipal conflict: the child [Tom], feeling inadequate in the face of his father's [Pecksniff's] virtue and power . . . suddenly discovers that his father's desires and deeds are no purer than his own" — whereupon he is cast out of his father's house ("*Martin Chuzzlewit*: Pinch and Pecksniff," pp. 184-185). I think Steig is right in the main, but I would argue that it is primarily because Tom recognizes Pecksniff's desires as *less* pure than his own that he finally sees the arch-hypocrite for what he is. Heretofore, Pinch has always chosen to regard Pecksniff as a man surpassing even himself in honesty and purity of motive.

[9]*Charles Dickens*, p. 122.