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"Seeking Nothing and Finding It": Moving On and Staying Put in *Mugby Junction*
James Mussell

Mugby Junction was the 1866 Christmas number of Charles Dickens's weekly periodical *All the Year Round*.[i] As per tradition, *Mugby Junction* was an ensemble piece organized around a theme and this time Dickens chose a lightly fictionalized railway junction (Mugby stands for Rugby). Exploiting the railway's propensity to gather people together only to move them on, Dickens used Mugby to accommodate the various spooky tales contributed by both himself and his fellow writers. *Mugby Junction* is about movement and the things that move, whether trains and those who travel, the telegraph and the signals it relays, or the post and letters that circulate. But this concern with media and mediation also makes *Mugby Junction* peculiarly reflexive. The railways and their attendant technologies transformed print culture, and at the heart of *Mugby Junction* is a consideration of the specific kinds of movement enabled by industrial print. As was traditional at Christmas, these tales concern the haunted, the ghostly, and the compulsive, but the repetitions that mark the gothic also describe the rhythms of the press. Reading printed material is to read one copy of many, and the seriality of the key print genres of the period—the periodical, the newspaper, and the part issue—meant that each issue was haunted by its predecessors even as it anticipated the issue to follow. Gothic economies of return threaten stasis, yet *Mugby Junction* illustrates the way that repetitive motion can be translated into a particular means of forward propulsion.

In this chapter I examine the way material media move in *Mugby Junction*, whether through space over the rails; through time, as one thing succeeds another; or through affect, as people are moved by what they receive. My argument, though, concerns the way this discussion of movement is framed. Dickens's first two contributions to *Mugby Junction* set up the conceit, telling us of a man called Barbox Brothers, the "gentleman for Nowhere," who gets off the train at Mugby but travels no further ("Barbox Brothers" 7). In dramatizing

Barbox Brothers's state of mind as he wanders up and down the platform, Dickens insists on the continuities between the steam engine and the heart, both mechanisms for repetitive motion that nonetheless move things on. The first section of my chapter explores these continuities as set out in the frame narrative. Part two focuses on the best-known of the tales in *Mugby Junction*, Dickens's short story "The Signal-Man." In this tale of animated media, the origins of messages become uncertain as agency becomes distributed between sender and medium, the living and the dead. In part three, I address the way things move through the post: in "The Signal-Man," narrative movement is achieved by putting things in their place, but in Hesba Stretton's "The Travelling Post Office," the very mechanism for sorting, the postmaster himself, becomes imperilled, misdirecting his letters as he misdirects his affections. In the final part I return to Barbox Brothers. Rather than the models of connection and movement offered by telegraph, railway, and post, Barbox Brothers finds a different way of moving on. *Mugby Junction* is a Christmas number of a weekly periodical and, in working out Barbox Brothers's story, Dickens provides an analysis of periodical form. Inherently repetitive, serials like periodicals and newspapers blend sameness and difference in every issue: a kind of re-making in which new content is mediated by known forms. It is replication that allows serials to move on by staying put, each issue new, yet a version of the one before. In *Mugby Junction*, this serial that is no serial, Barbox Brothers does the same. Telling tales of the lines might prolong the limbo of Barbox Brothers's procrastination, but it also becomes the means of a profound transformation: rather than introduce difference by moving on, Barbox Brothers decides to settle in Mugby, turning his haunt into his home.

Lines

Dickens contributed four of the eight stories that make up *Mugby Junction*. The first two, "Barbox Brothers" and "Barbox Brothers and Co.," set out the narrative frame for the number; "The Boy at Mugby," which follows, is the "Main Line," and "The Signal-Man" is

the first of the four branch lines. Betrayed by his lover and his best friend, Barbox Brothers, originally called Young Jackson, has worked so long that he has become indistinguishable from the firm; however, in one last effort, Barbox Brothers breaks free of the company and projects himself into the world. Arriving at Mugby to change trains, he changes his mind and stands, instead, on the windy, rainy platform. Dickens describes him as "a man within five years of fifty either way, who had turned grey too soon, like a neglected fire" (1). Prematurely aged, Barbox Brothers is haunted by a life he never had: by throwing off his old identity he has liberated himself from the firm but, by keeping its name, the past remains with him even as he tries to find a future. "With a steady step," Dickens writes, "the traveller went up and down, up and down, up and down, seeking nothing, and finding it" (1). Barbox Brothers exists in stasis: a neglected fire, but one that could, perhaps, be reignited.

Mugby Junction is a junction but Barbox Brothers does not know which line to take. Staying overnight in a hotel, he is haunted by memories from his past: his mother, his schoolmaster, his superior at the firm, and, most bitterly, the "deceit of the only woman he had ever loved, and the deceit of the only friend he had ever made" (3-4). Wandering around the countryside, Barbox Brothers in turn haunts Mugby, his daily walks taking him to the railway junction and, eventually, the home of a disabled girl called Phoebe and her father, known as Lamps. To help decide where to go next, Barbox Brothers travels each of the lines and returns to them both with a tale. The stories that follow—the "Main Line" and the five "Branch Lines"—are those that Barbox Brothers brings back but, crucially, it is not these journeys that have the potential to transform him, to introduce the singular difference that can reignite his inner engine, but their retelling back at Mugby. The railway might mediate Barbox Brothers, moving him up and down the lines, but it is his own role as medium, as teller of tales, that moves him on. The railway lines at Mugby Junction become the printed lines in *Mugby Junction*, each of which puts off the eventual departure as it brings it closer.

The railway junction provides Dickens with a promising narrative structure, but for Barbox Brothers the challenge is to give the junction narrative shape. When he looks down at the lines, he is bewildered by their complexity. “But there were so many Lines,” Barbox Brothers reflects, “there was no beginning, middle, or end, to the bewilderment” (4). Not knowing where to start, Barbox remains transfixed as he, too, takes on the form of the junction:

> Barbox Brothers stood puzzled on the bridge, passing his right hand across the lines on his forehead, which multiplied while he looked down, as if the railway Lines were getting themselves photographed on that sensitive plate. (4)

This transference marks Barbox Brothers’s dehumanized condition, mechanically reproducing the scene while also taking on its muddle. But immediately he rubs his hand across his forehead the junction springs to life:

> Then, was heard a distant ringing of bells and blowing of whistles. Then, puppet-looking heads of men popped out of boxes in perspective, and popped in again. Then, prodigious wooden razors set up on end, began shaving the atmosphere. Then, several locomotive engines in several directions began to scream and be agitated. Then, along one avenue a train came in. Then, along another two trains appeared that didn't come in, but stopped without. Then, bits of trains broke off. Then, a struggling horse became involved with them. Then, the locomotives shared the bits of trains, and ran away with the whole. (4)

The short sentences, each beginning with “then” combine mechanical repetition with succession, producing movement as one thing follows the next. If Barbox Brothers is trapped in repetitive stasis, walking aimlessly about, this scene is animated, alive in a way that he is not. It may be a muddle, but there is system here, and it is one that links together human and machine. The railway can provide matter for telling, but to do so Barbox Brothers needs to be

able to become part of it, to insert his body into the system and become mediated, so that he can mediate in turn.

A junction is a nowhere place, neither origin nor terminus, and when he first arrives Barbox Brothers, in his own living death, is startled by Mugby Junction's periodic resurrections. "A place replete with shadowy shapes," trains "covered with palls and gliding on like vast weird funerals," convey themselves about "as if their freight had come to a secret and unlawful end" (1). This funereal, silent motion is contrasted with the noise of the engines, which shriek and groan "as if the tortured were at the height of their suffering" (1). On the carriages, cattle, presumably on their way to die, are mute, "eyes frozen with terror, and mouths too," the long icicles hanging from their lips ("or what seems so") like sound frozen in silence (1-2); in contrast, the lights of the signals write themselves in unknown languages, "conspiring in red, green, and white, characters" (2). Such confusions—between the human and nonhuman, the organic and the mechanical, those who tell and those who provide matter for telling—are precisely the point. Alluding to a Midlands railway junction, Mugby might not be the heart of the rail network but it did evoke the industrial heart of England. The link between the heart and the steam engine was often made, not least by Dickens himself, and while Barbox Brothers's fire is neglected his engines are well-stoked. Both the engine and the heart operate on the principle of repetition, beating out pulses that keep the mechanism moving. This mechanical body might alienate the human body, threatening to render it mere machine, but at the same time it offers the possibility of life to the inorganic productions of the industrial age.

Neglected fires and shadowy shapes, brooding carriages and shrieking engines, the steam engine and the heart: just as material media of various kinds make content reproducible, so Barbox Brothers has to play his part in passing on messages even if they have non-human origins. Industrial mechanism can be deadening, degrading human life in

repetitive labour, but at Mugby Junction it is vital and alive. Barbox Brothers must travel the lines if he is to move on, but it will not be the journeys that will affect a transformation but their retelling. Barbox Brothers must learn to be a conduit for other stories, messages from the rails, if he is to overcome the repetition in which he is trapped and so translate repetition into motive force.

Signals

The best-known story in *Mugby Junction* is Dickens's "The Signal-Man."[ii] In the story, the narrator—presumably Barbox Brothers although he is never named—visits a signalman at his post in a damp, desolate railway cutting. Bounded by a "dripping wet wall of jagged stone," the cutting is tomb-like, pervaded by an "earthy, deadly smell" ("Signal-Man" 21). The trains pass through, but the signalman remains in place, the line "a crooked prolongation of this great dungeon" in one direction and terminating in the "gloomy red light" that marks the start of the "gloomier entrance" to the tunnel in the other (21). When he first meets him, the signalman has been twice warned by a ghostly figure of some impending tragedy that has subsequently occurred. In the first instance, the ghost cried out "Hulloa! Below there!" and then "Look out! Look out!"; six hours later there was an accident and the "the dead and wounded were brought along through the tunnel over the spot where the figure stood" (23). The second time the ghost appeared it was silent, but in the attitude of a figure on a tomb; later that day a young woman died instantaneously on a train, her body brought into the signalman's hut. The signalman is troubled as the figure has returned again, crying out "Below there! Look out! Look out!", ringing his telegraph bell, and making a gesture that the narrator interprets as "For God's sake clear the way" (23). The previous visitations have convinced the signalman that the spectre is a harbinger of disaster but he is frustrated that, once again, the warnings do not contain anything on which he can act. At the conclusion of

the story, the signalman is struck down and killed by a train, the driver signalling for him to get out of the way in the manner of the ghostly warnings.

"The Signal-Man" concerns questions of termination: suspended, the signalman lacks the ending that would allow him to put things in place; the narrator, on the other hand, can exploit the signalman's demise to account for the various signals in the story, regardless of their origins. Repetition disrupts linear temporality, the ghostly warnings rightly coming before the accidents but only making sense in retrospect. For Jill Matus, this points to trauma, affect without cognition that allows traumatic experience to escape the system of memory that would keep it past.[iii] Yet the narrator does manage to tell the tale, filling the various signals with content in such a way that effaces their troubling otherness.

Mediating objects are intentional: if used correctly, it is as if they are not there at all, leaving only an apparently unmediated connection between sender and receiver. In this way, mediating objects can act as surrogates (the letter as its sender's representative) or prostheses, extending human faculties across time and space. However, even when working as intended, media technologies never really divest themselves of their materiality, their otherness, as they depend upon their material features to function. Content is produced and moved by mediating bodies, not despite them, and there is always the potential for the production of other messages and so the corresponding propogation of senders and receivers, too.[iv] The telepathic touch of mind on mind—the medial imaginary—depends upon a kind of repression, as mediating bodies, and all those hands through which they have passed, are cast aside in order to liberate content apparently as sent. Just as messages can mean many things depending the hands into which they fall, so too can the bodies of media enable all sorts of connections, whether intended or otherwise.

Dickens was acutely aware that he depended upon other people's handling of his works, relying on his printers and publishers for how they looked, for instance, and his

readers for how they were read. In other words, Dickens knew that he himself was partly made by others. *Mugby Junction* is significant among the Christmas numbers as it was the first in which Dickens abandoned anonymity. The Christmas numbers were lucrative: at fourpence they were twice the price of the regular issues of *All the Year Round* and, whereas weekly sales were around 100,000, the Christmas numbers could be expected to sell between 200,000 and 250,000.[v] As ensemble pieces, however, they were an editorial headache and Dickens was often frustrated by his collaborators' contributions.[vi] For *Mugby Junction*, not only did he make clear the parts that he had written, but he also advertised them in advance. The first advertisements for *Mugby Junction* appeared on November 3 and contained the titles of Dickens's sections; it was not until November 24, just a couple of weeks before publication, that the rest were advertised.

In its exploration of the origins of messages, "The Signal-Man" figures authorship as one mediated presence among others. Ill-disciplined media derail messages, confusing sender and receiver, and Dickens had experienced a literal derailment at Staplehurst in June 1865, eighteen months before the publication of *Mugby Junction*.[vii] Travelling back to London from Folkestone, his train jumped the rails, the rear carriages falling from the bridge into the fields below. He had just been in Paris with his lover, Ellen Ternan, and Dickens made sure to get them discretely back to London before attending to his fellow passengers. Dickens knew that his fame meant he would become part of the account of the accident, but he also made sure to provide his own textualized account of himself. In the "Postscript" appended to both the final instalment of *Our Mutual Friend* and the two-volume book, Dickens alluded to the accident, claiming he was accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Boffin "in their manuscript dress" (*Our Mutual Friend* 309). After doing what he could to help others, Dickens tells his readers that he clambered back into the train "to extricate the worthy couple" (309). "I can never be much nearer parting company with my readers for ever, than I was then," he writes, "until there

shall be written against my life the words with which I have this day closed this book: - The End" (309). *Our Mutual Friend*, concerned as it is with death and resurrection, is full of endings and this postscript—the second time we have read the words "The End"—is another. Replacing the earlier removal of Ellen Ternan with a later rescue of the Boffins allows Dickens to appropriate their narrative ending and insert himself into his work, as both originating author and character, to efface any marks left by himself as man.

Misbehaving media in "The Signal-Man" also need rewriting. The signalman is frustrated as the ghost's appearances only become warnings after each accident occurs; beforehand, they are experienced merely as the empty forms of their media, whether shout, gesture, or ringing bell. Neither channel nor content is clear and this uncertainty as to what might constitute a message, as well from where the message has originated, pervades the story. When the narrator first meets the signalman, the signalman mistakes him for the ghost because of the narrator's cry, "Halloa! Below there!" (20, 22). Yet the narrator, looking at the signalman's "fixed eyes and […] saturnine face," suspects that he too "was a spirit, not a man" (21). Unsure of the narrator's mortality, the signalman avoids touching him when they first meet, and so withholds his tale. Eventually convinced of their mutual corporeality, they agree to meet again and, as he recounts his tale, the signalman repeatedly touches the narrator's arm, establishing a contact between man and man that creates a channel for whatever it is the ghost has to tell. The uncertainty of these intermittent connections is also represented typographically. In both the story and the table of contents, "signalman" is always written as one word, reducing the signalman to his role. However, in the story's title it is given as "Signal-Man," directing the reader's attention to the space between signal and man, rather than the signalman himself. In the text, the signalman, one word, is a defective agent, unsure of the signals he receives and sends; the title, however, signals the spaces in-between, insisting that it is connection that is important as it puts everything into line.

Unsure of what to make of the warnings, the narrator finds himself in the same dilemma as the signalman but, at one more remove, he has another troublesome medium to consider. Recognizing the signalman's distress and the fact it might jeopardize the public safety, he asks himself "how ought I to act, having become the recipient of this disclosure" (24). Rather than worry about any accident that might occur, the narrator first considers reporting the signalman to his superiors before deciding to encourage him to seek medical advice instead. This all comes too late, of course, and when he returns the next night the signalman is dead and the narrator has another message to relay. In the final paragraph of the story, he admits his complicity in this spectral circuit, this transference and counter-transference, noting that the words of the train driver immediately before he struck the signalman, "'Below there! Look out! Look out! For God's sake clear the way!'", combine the words of the ghost (which were also called out by the narrator), "'Halloa! Below there! Look Out!'", with the narrator's verbal description of the ghost's gestures, which he interpreted as "'For God's sake clear the way!'" (25). Misbehaving media mean that nobody can be certain what messages they are conveying, nor from whom they come. While the signalman lives, the narrator too is trapped, paralyzed by uncertainty as to where the messages originate and what they might mean. The death of the signalman, however, ends the narrator's uncertainty and allows him to tell all to the reader. After leaving the signalman's hut after his first visit, the narrator tells us he felt "a very disagreeable sensation of a train" behind him (22). Only the signalman is unfortunate enough to feel a real train at his back and this absolute difference, dividing the living and the dead, allows the narrator to tell his story.

The signalman's account is disrupted, derailed; but the narrator's places the events in order, filling the signals—the ghosts, the signalman's—with content. Narrative is itself a form of media, allowing the same story to be told over and over again, but, crucially, it avoids repetition through the introduction of difference. The train that kills the signalman

ends his haunted condition and so frees the narrator from his own haunting. No longer troubled by what to do with the signalman and his ghostly messenger, the narrator turns the signalman's death into a narrative ending and so breaks the spell of repetition. The signalman remains haunted, but only within the bounds of the narrator's narrative; if they still double one another, such doubling is mitigated by the narrative ending that differentiates them. This is repetition made replication, sameness made safe by the introduction of difference.

Transport

The telepathic promise of unmediated communication was both realized and imperilled by the postal system. On the one hand, its cheapness, utility, and relative security meant that it was the most ready means of linking people together; on the other, private messages were entrusted to a vast state-run bureaucracy, vulnerable to prying eyes and light fingers. Heralded as a triumph of Victorian civilization, the post office dealt rigorously in exteriors, every letter sorted according to what was written on its envelope with (supposedly) no interest in what it might contain. To open a letter is to reveal its true nature and read words written for the intended recipient. Such words might be meant to be shared, they might be about public business, they might even be the same words as mailed to many other people; regardless of what they say, the letter's identity creates the impression of contact while repressing the means through which it reached its destination.

The reliance on outsides to direct letters to their recipients meant that there was plenty of potential for things to go wrong, for letters to move in unexpected ways and so produce strange moments of contact. Hesba Stretton's "The Travelling Post Office", the fourth "Branch Line", focuses on the theft of some letters to meditate on the troublesome relationship between envelopes that the letters they contain. The story itself concerns a clerk, Wilcox, who sorts mail onboard a train. Wilcox has been carrying on a mild flirtation with what he thinks are three sisters, the Cliftons, exchanging notes back and forth but never

meeting. When charged with carrying the Prime Minister's despatch box back to London, a young lady, claiming to be one of these sisters (with a signed order from Wilcox's superior, Huntingdon, to prove it) accompanies him for the journey. The train is held at a signal at Camden Town, the young woman gets off, the despatch box is nowhere to be found.

Although the young woman is suspected, nobody can see how she got the despatch box out of the train and the case goes no further. A few years later, however, Wilcox is sent to Egypt to assume control of the post office at Alexandria from Huntingdon's dying son-in-law, Forbes. On arrival, Wilcox discovers the despatch box and the mysterious young woman, now Forbes's wife. She tells all, explaining that she passed the box out of the window for money to marry, and the story ends with Wilcox returning home to marry a genuine Miss Clifton, after sending the false Miss Clifton, now Mrs Forbes, to a convent.

The post not only provided means of interconnection, erasing space under the master sign of the penny, it also allowed things to move. A nervous system, it flashed thoughts across the country; a circulatory system, it put feeling into motion. The postal system's disregard for content, sending any letter any distance for the same price, ought to function perfectly, but no system is perfect and Wilcox, its representative worker, has a heart that can be tempted. As he sorts letters, he puts into practice the system's reliance on outsides, differentiating between envelopes that look more or less alike on the basis of how they are addressed. Yet the story shows Wilcox sending the wrong people messages all the time: not only does he think he has been corresponding with three Clifton sisters when one of them is actually their mother, but the Miss Clifton he meets that night is no Miss Clifton at all.

When he first meets the false Miss Clifton, he is too ready to believe that the "small slight creature" (36) was one of the originators of the messages in a "clear, delicate, and educated" hand that passed between him and the real Miss Cliftons (35). Earlier, Wilcox had explained that when he first started working on the travelling post office, he suffered "from a

hurry and tremor of nerve" (35). Over time he overcame these symptoms but, working in the presence of the false Miss Clifton, they return. "'You had better not talk, or you'll be making mistakes'" she warns and Wilcox confirms it "was quite true; for, a sudden confusion coming over me, I was sorting the letters at random" (36). Wilcox has learned how to deal with movement, but what he has to learn is how to manage the way he becomes moved by the woman he thinks is stood next to him.

Both motion and emotion unsettle Wilcox and his ability to sort, but he is also misled by those who forge or otherwise pretend to be other than they are. The false Miss Clifton carries a letter, signed by his superior, Huntingdon, and in the handwriting of his clerk, Forbes, that both testifies that she is who she says she is and justifies her irregular ride on the travelling post office. When Huntingdon later inspects this letter, he suspects Forbes's hand was forged, but cannot determine whether or not he signed it. From his daughter, we learn that the signature was genuine—when she presented it to him to be signed he was distracted by gout—but the letter was not: his signature, in other words, authorized instructions from elsewhere.

Forgeries always trouble notions of authenticity, and in "The Travelling Post Office" what things are is difficult to establish. For instance, when Wilcox first sees the despatch box, he notes it was "very similar in size and shape to the old-fashioned workboxes used by ladies" (35). Later, Wilcox finds the box is actually being used by the false Miss Clifton (now Mrs Forbes) as a workbox. And it is not just containers that become something new. When challenged, Mrs Forbes defends herself by insisting the letters were worthless:

> I would never, never have taken a registered letter, or anything with money in it you know. But all those papers could be written again quite easily. (41)

While intended to show her naivety, Mrs Forbes is, in a way, right: the letters could be reproduced, containing exactly the same information as those that were stolen. What she

inadvertently reveals, though, is that what makes those letters valuable is not the hand that wrote them, or what they contain, but when they were written and for whose eyes. The letters become very different when diverted to a different address.

Such questions of authenticity—how to sort one thing from another—are linked to the sexual economy of the story. The next time the forged letter from Huntingdon is mentioned, he has just dispatched Wilcox to Alexandria to relieve Forbes. Wilcox tells us, in parenthesis and "though it has nothing to do with the story," that he later married a real Miss Clifton (39). At this point this information is indeed parenthetical—it has not happened yet—but once we learn that not only is Mrs Forbes the alluring false Miss Clifton but that she has recently become a widow (it is the first thing she tells him), we know that Wilcox will be safe from further indiscretion. Wilcox's mind, he reassures us in retrospect, was on the job, and so he sorts Mrs Forbes into the convent.

By 1850 the post office was understood as a closed communications system, a set of channels that linked sender and receiver. The fiction of outsides took work to maintain and sorting, in particular, linked together two different sets of anxieties. Firstly, there was the fear that letters could not be sorted, the address illegible or not corresponding to the system of "alphabeticalized space", as Kate Thomas has called it, ushered in by the penny post (19). Secondly, and more worrying, were those letters that did not reach their destinations because they had been stolen, those entrusted to sort able to feel the contents of envelopes as they passed through their hands. There is a striking illustration of this conjunction in an article published in the very first issue of *All the Year Round's* predecessor, *Household Words*. In "Valentine's Day at the Post Office" Dickens and his subeditor William Henry Wills offer an account of the General Post Office at St Martin's-le-Grand. While Dickens and Wills are fascinated by the repetitive work of sorting, they are drawn to the possibilities for theft. To sort, here, is to be tempted and above the sorting office is a tinted window "whence an unseen

eye watches the sorters who are listening to temptation" (9). Wondering if the sorters dream of sorting, Dickens and Wills also wonder whether they have nightmares that indulge the temptation to steal repressed during the day (9).[viii] It is not the sorters who are to blame, however: later in the article a senior official blames the public for subjecting its "sorters, carriers, and other humble *employés*" to temptation by sending coins through the mail (10). When Dickens and Wills note again the dimmed glass window at the article's close, it stands, panopticon-like, as an externalised conscience, saving the sorters from themselves (11-12).

Letters that cannot be sorted go to the Dead Letter Office, the "final resting place of the undeliverable," as Kate Thomas has put it (19). It is here that wealth accumulates, Dickens and Wills reporting that £11,000 currently resides there unsorted. Dead letters also feature in "The Travelling Post Office". When Wilcox writes to Huntingdon to tell him that his daughter was the thief, he hears by return that Huntingdon died the day the letter was due to arrive "some disease of the heart" (41). The implication is that the letter killed him, but the letter might just have been a dead letter, never reaching its destination. For John Durham Peters, the letters in the Dead-Letter Office are dead precisely because they have no chance of interception. These letters no longer move, can no longer conjure senders and receivers; instead, they are bodies that have been interred (the word repository also means tomb).[ix] The Dead-Letter Office, then, is a necessary corollary to the emergent role of the postal system in the broader information economy, serving as a material supplement to the disembodied content moved from place to place. As Durham Peters argues, the "need for it to exist at all is an everlasting monument to the fact that communication cannot escape embodiment and there is no such thing as a pure sign on the model of angels" (169). Desire and death: this is not a problem of the rupture of minds, but of bodies. The story might not offer anything about replication as forward progress, but by presenting Wilcox with an array of Miss Wilcoxes it sets out the erotics of sorting. Wilcox must learn to differentiate while being moved, to

maintain faith in a system of outsides that requires him to repress not only his own body, but those of the envelopes that pass through his hands.

Numbers

What is odd about *Mugby Junction* is that the story that makes the difference is the second in the series, not the last. "Barbox Brothers and Co." tells of a trip to a "great ingenious town," Birmingham, where Barbox Brothers stumbles across a lost little girl called Polly. It transpires that she is the daughter of his former lover and, like Phoebe back in Mugby, whose name Polly's resembles, she becomes the means of moving Barbox Brothers. In forgiving his former lover and her husband, Barbox Brothers becomes Barbox Brothers and Co., taking, "thousands of partners into the solitary firm" (16) and has one final tale to tell back at Mugby. No longer haunted, no longer "The Gentleman for Nowhere," Barbox Brothers is no longer compelled to haunt. However, while this exorcism produces a temporal change, a before and after, it does not propel Barbox Brothers anywhere in space. Rather than taking a line to somewhere, he takes a house at Mugby, moving on by staying put.

As Ruth Livesey has recently argued, Phoebe, a supposed image of immobility, actually represents a networked modernity. Lying at Mugby watching the smoke of the trains come and go, she makes lace, a "net-work" that knits together the lines of the junction that she cannot see (216). Yet if Barbox Brothers comes to embrace an identity formed "from the threading vectors of parallel lines, knotted, netted, and worked together," *Mugby Junction* itself offers a distinctive mode of linear movement (216). By closing the frame narrative prematurely with "Barbox Brothers and Co.," the remainder of *Mugby Junction* does not have anything to do with Barbox Brothers and there is no internal logic to dictate the order of the Lines. Instead, these stories stand in sequence, moving the reader on while keeping Barbox Brothers where he is.

This premature ending effects a change of genre. Whereas Barbox Brothers's story sets out as serial fiction, with each part contributing to the overarching plot, as soon as his story has finished we are left instead with the one-after-the-other of the periodical. "Barbox Brothers and Co" is supposed to mark the moment where Barbox Brothers shifts from being narrated to becoming a narrator: rather than a character in someone else's story, the subsequent stories are supposed to be ones he tells. However, these stories are dead letters, no longer speaking to the overarching frame narrative and so are not spoken by Barbox Brothers or heard by Phoebe and Lamps. And as the remaining lines have nothing to do with Barbox Brothers's story, they also transform the role played by the ghost of Dickens: author no more, he is instead back in the familiar role of conductor, moving the reader along the lines rather than Barbox Brothers. The Lines of *Mugby Junction* are not structured by the linear progress of narrative, nor even the stop-start of serial fiction, but the play of sameness and difference through which periodicals assert a larger ongoing whole with every issue published. Through its textual progress from one story to the next, *Mugby Junction* performs periodical progress. It performs replication.

Periodical publication is haunted by haunting, by the threat of falling from replication into repetition. Every issue of a periodical must offer its readers enough that is new to make it worth reading, but not so much newness that it appears to be a different publication. Like hearts or steam engines, periodicals translate repetitive motion into linear force; but as a print genre they are driven by the tension between the requirement to stay the same while, nonetheless, moving on. Too much sameness, and the periodical risks becoming stuck, like Barbox Brothers, in repetition; but in constantly chasing novelty there is also the danger that it will break free from the structure set out over its back issues and so, like Barbox Brothers and Co, become someone else.[x]

In narrative, it is only at the end that the beginning and the middle can be perceived as a whole; serials like periodicals, however, are always in the midst of unfolding. To replicate, whatever is to be replicated must be finished, have edges, and be a whole, so open-ended genres like periodicals take advantage of the provisional closures at the ends of articles, issues, and volumes to establish forms that can be used again and again. Neither author nor narrator, the periodical editor does not furnish narrative wholes but a precarious middle from which the reader surveys the past (represented by the neat sequence of back issues) and the future, tantalizingly out of reach but reassuringly expected to be much the same. As a print genre predicated on not finishing, periodicals enable repetition while ensuring progression—replication— ordering both past and future by allocating each a period and numbering it accordingly. Like Barbox Brothers, periodicals move on by staying put: every issue displaces its predecessor, replicating its form while presenting itself as new. Barbox Brothers might reach his happy end, but the stories keep coming nonetheless.

The railway setting of *Mugby Junction* allowed Dickens and his collaborators to explore various aspects of media and mediation in the period. All questions of mediation involve form and content, body and soul, and, in telling tales of the triumph of message over media, it is not surprising that the stories often involve repetitive gothic returns. *Mugby Junction* exploits its gothic themes to offer an examination of the dangers inherent in mechanical repetition, dangers that often result in haunting or being haunted. It acknowledges the tendency of content to efface both machines (and those that tend them) and the matter they make move. It also describes the sheer drudgery of mechanical labour, whether bill-brokering, sorting, or tending engines. Yet *Mugby Junction* retains a privileged place for replication as a distinct mode of movement. Characteristic of print, replication provided means of moving forward through re-making, structuring novelty through past forms. Steam engines might be mechanical, but the heart beats and print culture moves.

[i] It is a curious feature of *Mugby Junction* that it does not carry a volume number of *All the Year Round* nor is it paginated as part of the volume. I have cited it accordingly.
[ii] For a brief account of "The Signal-Man" in another context, see Mussell "'Scarers in Print.'"
[iii] Chapter 3.
[iv] Derrida calls this "destinerrance". See "Telepathy" and *The Post Card*. For destinerrance as concept, see Miller, chapter 3.
[v] *Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions* (1865) sold 200,000-250,000 copies; *Mugby Junction* sold its run of 265,000; *No Thoroughfare* sold 300,000. See Slater, pp. 546, 554; Drew, p. 11.
[vi] See Slater for an account of Dickens's difficulties with *The Haunted House* (1859), p. 479.
[vii] See Slater, chapters 23 and 24.
[viii] Dickens and Wills do not name theft itself, instead it remains sublimated, present in waking only indirectly in the question "does he never dream of *that?*" P. 9.
[ix] See Stauffer, paragraphs 1-28.
[x] For more on periodicals and repetition see Hughes and Lund, Beetham, Mussell, "Repetition."

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