The Allegory of *Great Expectations*

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Great Expectations is notable for the numerous interconnections between its various characters: Estella, we discover, is the daughter of Magwitch, while Magwitch's arch-enemy, Compeyson, is the traitorous lover of Miss Havisham, Estella's mother by adoption. These connections of blood or experience should not be regarded as technical contrivances by Dickens the story-teller; rather they are significantly revealed as the story unfolds to articulate an underlying, universal logic. It is clear that Dickens perceived reality as operating not through a random progression of events, but organically as links in an unbroken chain: "Pause you who read this, and think for a moment of the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day" (p. 67).[1]

The novel opens with Pip's mature voice remembering his childhood encounter of a "fearful man all in coarse grey". Why should Pip recall this incident? Why does he not begin, as David Copperfield does in his autobiography, with the event of his birth, the beginning of life? Pip selects this incident for the personal significance which underlies the literal happening: "My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening". The boy Pip is both literally and symbolically alone: contrary to the common conception of parents as the sculptors of the child's sensibility, Pip's parents are all too plainly dead at his feet. This is the condition of the individual: fatherless and motherless, the child has to struggle to form his identity by his own unaided perception of reality. Even though divested of a family so early in life, Pip attempts to dream it into actuality: "As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them . . . my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones". Yet the fundamental ineffectiveness of the child's parents is made dramatically clear by the sudden, brash entrance of Magwitch into the scene:

1 *Great Expectations* (London: J. M. Dent, 1907; repr. 1972), p. 67. All subsequent page references are to this edition.

> 'Hold your noise!' cried a terrible voice, as a man started up from among the graves at the side of the church porch. 'Keep still, you little devil, or I'll cut your throat!' (pp. 1-2)

And so Pip is confronted by the first link of the binding chain which he subsequently begs us to pause and consider. Pip knows that in order to fulfil Magwitch's demands he must transgress the laws of his home environment. By choosing to help Magwitch, in effect Pip renounces his sister's code of behaviour for one that will embrace the convict's need; he adopts Magwitch as a kind of spiritual father—a relation of mutual trust is established. The replacement of Mrs Joe by Magwitch is emphasized later in the narrative by Pip's recollection of her footsteps as the convict climbs the stairs to his room after returning from New South Wales. By making his first small decision independently of his guardians, Pip initiates the long chain of experience by which he is henceforth bound. His later involvements with aspects of Magwitch's past—Miss Havisham, Estella, Compeyson—seem to be foreshadowed by his fluke encounter in the graveyard; he has become involved in a far-ranging network of experience. He has taken his first step towards maturity.

As Magwitch limps off at the conclusion of the opening chapter, a bleak prospect opens up before Pip:

> The marshes were just a long black horizontal line ... On the edge of the river I could faintly make out the only two black things in all the prospect that seemed to be standing upright; one of these was the beacon by which the sailors steered ...: the other a gibbet ... (p. 5)

Pip gets into the habit of comparing this marsh-view with his "expectations": "I used to stand ... thinking how flat and low both were, and how on both there came an unknown way and a dark mist and then the sea" (p. 100). This detail, together with the strategic placing of the prospect at the conclusion of probably the most important chapter of Pip's life, suggests that the landscape has a structural application of the novel as a whole—the narrative may be regarded as an allegory of an individual's journey over morally difficult marshes. Gazing fearfully over the "long black horizontal line" of the marshes only two things intelligibly impress themselves on Pip's vision—a beacon and a gibbet; the former an object of navigation, the latter one of execution. Locked forever in his imagination these two shapes construct his morality: he must navigate wisely, direct his journey past obstacles which, like Scylla and Charybdis, threaten execution—absolute moral failure. It is significant, in addition, that

once Satis House has been summoned out of the mist by Pip's meeting with Magwitch, Estella and Miss Havisham take their place in the marshes' allegorical scheme: "Whenever I watched the vessels standing out to sea . . . I somehow thought of Miss Havisham and Estella" (p. 102). Estella is thus proposed as a kind of prize—a clinching link in the chain—that Pip may achieve once he has picked his treacherous passage through the marshes, guided only by the beacon of his own fallible judgement.[2]

As marshes are treacherous places, pitfalls are inevitable, and Pip's pretensions and falsehoods are not contemptible but are part of his painful growth to maturity. The inclusion in the affairs of a convict is no simple proceeding for Pip: his perception of his environment is dramatically disturbed: "He [Magwitch] gave me a most tremendous dip and roll, so that the church jumped over its own weathercock" (p. 3). This violent disturbance is repeated once Pip begins to receive Magwitch's money and, in acknowledgement of this fact, Pumblechook offers him his first glass of wine: "[I]f I had turned myself upside down before drinking, the wine could not have gone more direct to my head" (p. 144). So while Pip feels that his new found wealth has "morally laid upon his back, Trabb's boy" (p. 143), it has turned him upon his head. Pip's experience of Satis House enables him to pinpoint aspects of his home environment which are uncongenial to his developing self: he refuses to be subject to the bullying inquiries of Pumblechook and Mrs Joe, and he begins to resent Joe's simplicity: "I wished Joe had been rather more genteelly brought up, and then I should have been so too" (p. 57). Pip's aspiration to be a gentleman, as Q. D. Leavis argues,[3] is not contemptible but is a natural nineteenth-century desire; his superior intelligence makes his growth away from Joe an inevitable condition of selfhood.

But Joe must be afforded all due credit: Satis House blinds Pip to Joe's kindness and basic goodness, as though Magwitch's violent "dip and roll" did indeed addle his perceptions. The mature voice of Pip acknowledges his unfair treatment of Joe:

> In a word, I was too cowardly to do what I knew to be right, as I had been too cowardly to avoid doing what I knew to be wrong. I had had no intercourse with the world at that time, and I imitated

2 Of course this proposition relies on my belief that the revised ending of *Great Expectations* is far superior to the original, which precludes a union between Pip and Estella.

3 F. R. Leavis and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 298.

> none of its many inhabitants who act in this manner. Quite an untaught genius, I made the discovery of the line of action for myself. (pp. 37-8)

Pip wrongly believes that Joe would have condemned his assistance of Magwitch; on the contrary, Joe's attitude is unequivocal:

> 'We don't know what you have done, but we wouldn't have you starved to death for it, poor miserable fellow-creatur.'

And he includes Pip in his pity:

> 'Would us, Pip?' (p. 36)

But mixed up with Pip's undoubted pity for Magwitch is an element of cowardice: he does not act with total moral conviction in response to Joe's unshakeable goodness; rather he acts predominantly out of fear of the consequences, fear of Magwitch's wrath. Pip's subsequent rejection of Joe is an enforcement of his original failure to perceive the strength of Joe's ingenuous goodness. Surreptitiousness has merely been transformed into conceitedness. He suffers bitterly for his error: permeating the links of the chain, his blurred perception reappears in his revulsion from Magwitch and his infatuation with Estella, culminating in the lime-kiln scene in which, swinging helplessly from a rope, he has lost all power of effective action, as though he were once again dipped by Magwitch's powerful grip. In this scene Pip finally perceives the awesome consequences of his first small act of deceit: "My mind, with inconceivable rapidity, followed out all the consequences of such a death . . . I saw myself despised by unborn generations . . ." (p. 403). Despite his good intentions, he has failed morally: the beacon of judgement is superseded by the gibbet-rope which Orlick slings about his shoulders.

Pip's feelings of guilt, his sense of being haunted, his burning shame are all ramifications of his inability properly to perceive himself and his environment. In many respects, *Great Expectations* is about knowing one's appropriate role. Pip's efforts to disguise Magwitch, for instance, only serve to highlight the convict deeply ingrained: some universal principle, which no human endeavour can alter, has singled him out to be a convict. Neither can Pip simply don the clothes of a gentleman in order to be one: he is painfully aware that Herbert carries off "his rather old clothes" much better than he does his "new suit", as though some inner unease pervades even the clothes he wears. " 'No man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner; . . . the more varnish you put on, the more the grain will express itself' " (p. 169)—so Matthew Pocket is apt to asseverate; and, strangely enough, it is Joe Gar-

gery who corroborates this axiom:

> 'I'm wrong in these clothes. I'm wrong out of the forge, the kitchen or off th' meshes. You won't find half so much fault in me if you think of me in my forge dress, with my hammer in my hand, or even my pipe.' (p. 211)

An honest blacksmith at heart, his honesty and strength diminish in Sunday clothes.

Throughout his narrative Pip encounters people who reflect and enforce the falseness of his own character. Often, like his inability to carry off his new clothes, a particular idiosyncrasy or grotesque mannerism is the tell-tale sign of a character's false perception. Miss Havisham, for example, will not tolerate the naming of the date or the time, her ghastly appearance itself an indication of her refusal to accept her misfortune. Analogously, Jaggers, by dint of extreme presence of mind, parries any information likely to undermine his precarious legal edifice: he can only be "informed" and not "told of" Provis's presence in London and thus he wards off the impossible moral and social implications of his behaviour. Wopsle discovers to his embarrassment that Jaggers employs an extremely interrogative manner of discourse which narrows the argumentative ground of his interlocutor, making it impossible for the latter to reply other than in the former's terms:

> Mr Wopsle was beginning, 'I can only say—' when the stranger stopped him.
>
> 'What? You won't answer the question, yes or no? Now, I'll try you again ... Are you aware, or are you not aware, that none of these witnesses have yet been cross-examined? Come, I only want one word from you. Yes or no?'
>
> Mr Wopsle hesitated, and we all began to conceive rather a poor opinion of him. (p. 126)

Jaggers's control of the discourse overawes the spectators; yet his ostentatiousness and bullying exterior are indications that all is not composed within—as though he has erected extra defences to protect an inner frailty or guilt. He employs strategic mannerisms —portentously folding his handkerchief, biting and throwing out his finger, surrounding himself with the fragrance of scented soap —to bully and subject his opponents. He is utterly incapable of showing any sentiment (which his surreptitious rescue of Estella shows him to possess) in public because he has not undergone the moral struggle of harmonizing his inner resources with his environment.

Even Wemmick is somewhat at odds with himself. Although the Walworth Wemmick is charming and good, he has his uglier

side: "It struck me," writes Pip, "that Wemmick walked among the prisoners, much as a gardener might walk among his plants" (p. 245)—clearly the shoots blossom with "portable property". In his professional life, Wemmick is forever posting himself back to Walworth through his post-office mouth.

Yet neither Wemmick nor Jaggers come to allegorical grief, so to speak, in Pip's narrative, undoubtedly because they are not directly involved in his moral struggle. Their primary role, apart from important functions for the story, is to underline Pip's dishonesty with himself. The feelings that Jaggers keeps firmly in abeyance, for instance, serve to reflect, as well as cause, Pip's own reticence: "What I suffered from, was the incompatibility between his cold presence and my feelings towards Estella—that my feelings should be in the same place with him—*that,* was the agonizing circumstance" (p. 229). Reticence and embarrassment are symptoms of a character's dishonesty, his "self-swindling". It is significant, therefore, that the only character who forthrightly stands up to the "bull-baiting" Jaggers (the master of reticence, the orchestrator of guilt) is Joe—one who, above all others, is accepting of self. It is only later in the narrative, once he has shed his conceitedness, that Pip can speak openly to Jaggers, and everyone else, of his passion for Estella. His "inner wound"—the cut of his dishonesty—can only begin to heal once it has been aired, once he has begun to reconcile his love for Estella with his coarse roots.

The turning-point for Pip and those others intimately connected with his chain of experience—Miss Havisham, Estella, Compeyson—comes with the return of Magwitch ("the missing link", as it were). Magwitch serves a dual function in the narrative: on the one hand, he acts as an objective denial of Pip's conceitedness—a reminder of the coarse, grubby origin of the crisp, clean notes Pip fastidiously returns to him; while, on the other, he embodies those falsities in Pip which he also denies. He was born into a situation of pain: "I first become aware of myself, down in Essex, a thieving turnips for my living. Summun had run away from me—a man—a tinker—and he'd took the fire with him, and left me wery cold" (p. 326). The predicament of want and consequent thievery is Magwitch's birthright; it is his existential role. Despite the fact that his lot is "unfair", Dickens no doubt wants to stress that it is nevertheless Magwitch's duty to come to terms with this role which fate or some other universal principle has thrust upon him. His return to London and the

element of revenge in his wish to make Pip a gentleman are indications of his unwillingness wholly to accept his appointed role; they are symptoms of his moral frailty. Consequently the endeavour to spirit him away on the river is allegorically impossible: he has navigated falsely and so falls under the shadow of the gibbet.

The test for Pip on discovering that Magwitch is his benefactor is whether he can recognize the example of self-deception that Magwitch represents; whether, in fact, he is gentleman enough to acknowledge the coarse boy in himself. Allegorically, the gibbet is poised over his decision. Part of the process of undeceiving himself involves retaining the relationship of trust he cemented with Magwitch long ago in the graveyard. The freely acknowledged affection which eventually grows in him for Magwitch is the sign that his long reticence and accompanying arrogance are being harmonized with his environment.

As Magwitch's dark affairs disclose themselves, it is Pip's moral duty, determined long before, to come to terms with it, even though the duty is as burdensome, as constricting as fetters. The resolutions of the plot articulate his moral struggle: mishaps and danger allegorically mime the state of his soul. If Pip is to survive the marshes, he must be able to comprehend and cope with the network of deception which surrounds Magwitch. The individual's maturity is contingent upon the discharging of this moral burden.

All the characters involved with Magwitch's past, almost as though they have imbibed it from each other, possess characteristics of self-deception similar to his resentment and jealousy. His return, however, strikes a chord in Pip which, setting off a chain reaction in the plot, ultimately redresses the shared incidence of dishonesty. Shocked by the reflection of his own self-deception in Magwitch—like Frankenstein's monster "a misshapen creature" (p. 319) of his own creation—Pip returns to Satis House, and suddenly he is capable of identifying his affinity with the corruption of the place: "With all that ruin at my feet and about me, it seemed a natural place for me, that day" (p. 338). The romantic façade he has built around the house finally collapses into the debris of his disappointment; and then, at last, as he recognizes both his own dishonesty and that of others, the emotional block is released "like blood from an inward wound", and he can begin to heal. His honesty and clear perception of self discover Miss Havisham's pretence as completely as the fire which ultimately

consumes the paraphernalia of her self-deception. He airs the corrupted rooms. And, in contrast to Jaggers's superficial hand-washing, Pip's purging of self is dramatically symbolized by the burning of his limbs.

But the debt is not yet fully paid. Although Pip has clearly repented of his arrogance by this stage, it seems that he has still to suffer for his mistreatment of Joe. The agent of punishment is Orlick. Some critics have tried to suggest that Orlick is an odd, ill-developed character in the novel and have consequently had difficulty deciding on his import, although, as in Robert Garis's case,[4] their arguments have ultimately rested on his narrative function. Dorothy Van Ghent windily denounces Orlick as "the daemonism of sheer external Matter as such; he is pure 'thingness' emerging without warning from the ooze where he has been unconsciously cultivated".[5] While Garis is categorical—"He is absolutely evil, absolutely brutish" (p. 213)—and then goes to great contortions to prove that he is merely "a theatrical handy-man assigned certain tasks in the novel" (p. 214). These views are, I think, misreadings of Orlick and thus the text as a whole. Orlick's associations with the forge are not gratuitous; they are allegorically determined, or summoned, by the dishonesty of Pip and, especially, Mrs Joe. His attack on Mrs Joe (with Mag-witch's leg-iron), his eventual conspiracy with Compeyson against Provis and his tendency to haunt Pip are allegorical symptoms of the falseness of the respective victims. His ostentatious propen-sity to evil becomes a stick with which the universe beats those who try to hide or disclaim their dishonesty. This view is sug-gested by the pains to which Mrs Joe daily goes to propitiate Orlick after he has attacked her: she thereby admits to her guilt in his action, her dishonesty which compelled his attack. Appro-priately he attacks those three members of the village who most of all attempt to put a good face on bad motives: Pip, Mrs Joe and Pumblechook. Indeed his accusations against Pip—"'Wolf!'" and "'O, you enemy!'"—must sound at least partially justified. However, once Orlick has fulfilled his allegorical usefulness—before he harms any innocent people—he winds up in gaol, for his evil, though profitably employed by the forces that be, is nevertheless a manifestation of his own false navigation.

4 R. Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (Oxford University Press, 1965).
5 D. Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), p. 138.

In his encounter with Orlick, Pip sees a mirror-image of his own faults: "I saw myself despised by unborn generations—Estella's children, and their children—while the wretch's words were yet on his lips" (p. 403). He perceives the consequences of his conceitedness. Pip is saved from the wretch, however, by his friend Herbert. Since Herbert has been the financial recipient of Pip's better nature, it is allegorically appropriate that he is Pip's rescuer: where Orlick is an objectification of Pip's dishonesty, Herbert is an objectification of Pip's one clear expression of his "good heart"; he is the Good Angel of Pip's moral being.

Estella's fate matches Pip's. The allegorical agent of her worser nature is Drummle (who reminds Pip at one point of Orlick). Nicknamed "the Spider" by Jaggers, he seems to be adumbrated by the spiders which crawl about Miss Havisham's wedding epergne. The corruption and live filth of Satis House appear to depend upon the false impudence of Estella's beauty—just as the sick rose of William Blake's poem summons the worm's "dark secret love". Estella herself is aware that Drummle is organically necessary to redress her moral imbalance: " 'Moths and all sorts of ugly creatures . . . hover about a lighted candle' " (p. 294). Although she often shows herself to be impatient with Miss Havisham's obsessive love, she does not make a personal attempt of putting Satis House in the correct moral light. When she says to Pip, " 'We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I' " (p. 250), she not only deceives Pip as to the source of his income, she also deceives herself *and* Pip as to the duty of the individual to strive morally. Consequently she summons the spider—or the worm—Drummle.

At first Pip shrinks from Magwitch because of Estella: ironically, of course, he thereby spurns the primary link of the chain which brings him Estella in blood and experience. Pip's communication to the dying Magwitch of his daughter and his feelings for her is expressive of his maturity; it represents the conciliation of his roots and his aspirations.

But he still has some misgivings about the loss of Joe's complete confidence:

> I too had fallen into the old ways, only happy and thankful that he let me. But, imperceptibly, though I held by them fast, Joe's hold upon them began to slacken; and whereas I wondered at this, at first, I soon began to understand that the cause of it was in me and that the fault of it was all mine. (p. 446)

Even though he finally locates responsibility in himself, he is so grieved by the loss of Joe's confidence that he eschews maturity

one last time in his intention to marry Biddy and thus re-establish the old ways. He fails to perceive that, at last, he has attained the makings of a gentleman; the pure outward expression of his long-held private ambition demands, however regrettably, that Joe call him "Sir".

Fortunately Pip's false intention is never revealed, so that his true destiny may be realized. His final union with Estella is the fruition of a coarse boy's wish, the completion of his allegorical journey: he has negotiated the treacherous marshes and so gains "the broad expanse" of the limitless sea.