

Stages: theatre and the politics of style in *Great Expectations*

What is happening on the first page of *Great Expectations*? The text gives us at least two answers. This is, of course, the day Pip meets Magwitch, the escaped convict who will later become his secret benefactor. But it is also the day Pip receives what he calls 'my first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things'.¹ Here is how the text concatenates the two events:

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. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard; and that Philip Pirrip, late of this parish, and also Georgiana wife of the above, were dead and buried; and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes; and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea, and the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.

'Hold your noise!' called a terrible voice . . . (pp. 35–6)

So *Great Expectations* begins with a wildly improbable coincidence. The very day on which Pip comes to awareness of himself as an orphan, as a geographically situated existence, and as a name – in other words, as a social being – is also the day on which he meets the benefactor who will give shape to that being. Odder still: Pip grows 'afraid of it all' just *before* Magwitch looms up to threaten him. It is as if Pip has first experienced the fear and then conjured a character who can serve as a container for it, give it a local habitation and a name. The implications of this possibility become stranger when we realise that what Pip has just become frightened of is not only his parentage and his social identity but the very topographical and geographical shape of the world, the marshes and the sea and the horizon itself; as if Pip has produced Magwitch as a substitute for this apprehension of the sheer otherness of the world, its threatening difference from the self.² If Magwitch is simply another name for everything that is not Pip, everything that surrounds him and precedes him and determines him, the text suggests that being afraid of Magwitch is preferable for Pip to being afraid of the world itself.

Because how scary is Magwitch, really? His main verbal tic is a threat to eat little Pip – whose cheeks he compliments for fatness – and he repeatedly swoops Pip onto and off tombstones. The text describes his interrogation as follows: ‘After each question he tilted me over a little more, so as to give me a greater sense of helplessness and danger. “You get me a file.” He tilted me again. “And you get me wittles.” He tilted me again. “You bring ‘em both to me.” He tilted me again. “Or I’ll have your heart and liver out.” He tilted me again’ (p. 37). Off-repeated but never realised threats, a nicely timed sense of incrementally escalated physical play, attentive and detailed questions: Magwitch embodies a fantasy of avuncular playfulness. He is a lot of fun, and the text clearly wants us to have fun with him.

We might be tempted to say that the scene’s presentation is the adult Pip’s, as is the awareness that Magwitch is essentially a benign, if rough, figure. The ambiguity of tone, in which a kind of pleasure seeps through what is also a frightening scene, would here be in the service of characterological realism. But the case is more complex than that, and stranger. There is a peculiar insistence, even a kind of mania, to the fun of this prose, and only some of it seems ascribable to a location in Pip’s psyche. The language throughout the novel often flirts with this kind of excess signification, an excess that can border on the emotionally crass or just exuberantly irrelevant. Poking through the surface of the prose is an energy that has little to do with any possible psychological motivation, any location in Pip’s personality. But of course there’s someone else here: Dickens. It seems clear that it is this someone who accounts in the final analysis for this exuberance: the fun we are having is not really ascribable to Pip at all but to his author. This personage is perhaps the most mysterious yet. He has still to be explained.

Each question I’ve asked so far, then, opens on another. What is happening here? quickly became a question about our narrator’s agency: How in control of his experience is Pip? And this question runs up against the sense that not everything in this text ‘comes from’ Pip, that the comedy and oddity of the scene is referable not to the psychology called Pip but to the writer called Dickens. But this in turn opens on another question, one that seems fantastic but that I mean quite seriously: What is Dickens? What, more specifically, is Dickens’s style, and what does it do to our sense of the meaning of this book?

Great Expectations is Dickens’s most subtle exploration of an individual psychology. It is also a book about the narcissism involved in having a psychology, about the self’s blind reliance on a world whose shape and even whose existence it misrecognises. Criticism has identified various names for this misrecognised world: the working class, the colonial periphery, the criminal underclass.³ If the novel

provides ample evidence for all of these interpretations, it is because its very narrative architecture inscribes the experience of the self's equivocal centrality. As the weirdly magical quality of the opening scene suggests, *Great Expectations* is a meditation on the status of first-person narration as an embodiment of the delusions of personal importance – a meditation, in Alex Woloch's words, on 'the sense of centrality *itself* as it becomes besieged'.⁴ And to the extent that it tells a story of a limited viewpoint becoming aware of itself as such, *Great Expectations* can be taken as an allegory not only of middle-class or imperial perspective, but of the distortions of nineteenth-century realism, so frequently accused in the next century's criticism of mistaking its account of the real for the thing itself. On the evidence of this novel's plot, realism's limitations are among realism's most obsessively rehearsed subjects.⁵

In tackling these questions, this essay starts from the peculiar fact that *Great Expectations* relates the story of its protagonist's discovery of his lack of centrality in a style that loudly asserts its scene-stealing centrality. If Dickens's style sits at an oblique angle to the events it narrates, the central interpretive challenge the novel poses is to work out the relation between this story and the unique mode in which it comes to us. One of the most astute critics of that mode is Robert Garis, whose 1965 book *The Dickens Theatre* remains crucial for its attention to the sheer peculiarity of this writer. Garis argues that the extravagance of Dickens's manner interposes itself between the reader and the narrated action: 'Whenever Dickens is at his best,' Garis writes, 'this odd thing happens: all the landscapes, all the dramatic scenes come to us in a voice in which we hear an infectious delight in what it, itself, is doing . . . The primary object of attention as we read is the great theatrical artist himself, who clearly wants his presence to be felt, who overtly and audibly performs before us some brilliant routines and contrivances in order to command attention and applause.'⁶

As his title indicates, Garis's claim is that Dickens's art is fundamentally theatrical: unabashedly showy and self-regarding, unconcerned to hide its contrivance and worked-up quality behind a pretence of plain-speaking or representational transparency. This prose, Garis insists, is performing for us, and as much as Dickens wants us to care about what he's talking about he also wants us see how good he is at making us care about it. If we take Garis's analysis seriously, we have to confront the tension – perhaps the contradiction – embedded in the fact that this novel about the discovery of the delusions of the self's expansiveness is told by an exuberantly expansive narrative voice, that this tale of the limitations of agency is on another level a hymn to the boundlessness of agency; understood this way, Dickens's unmissable,

self-delighting style becomes an inverted shadow image of Pip's chastened self-understanding.

This is not, I think, the only way to understand the theatricality of Dickens's work. My claim here is that theatricality can be understood not only as Dickens's way of asserting his authorial presence but also as a way, on occasion, of extinguishing it. I think it is Dickens's theatricality that gives rise to two contradictory things we instinctively feel about his work: a sense that this writing speaks profoundly of the personality of one particular creative intelligence, and the sense that this is writing of teeming democratic potential – the sense that anyone might find shelter in this representational universe. If *Great Expectations* is the most profound meditation on these questions in Dickens's work, this is paradoxically because of its interest in the psychological development and the limited perspective of its narrator. *Great Expectations's* intense preoccupation with the limitations of point of view also make it into a meditation on the address of literature – an investigation, that is, of the presumptive privacy of the reading subject, the narrating subject, and of the exclusivity of their relation to one other. Theatricality in *Great Expectations* does at least two things: it pulls against the novel's unparalleled sense of intimacy by suggesting that the private narrating self is a window onto a burgeoning public; and in some of the novel's strangest and most powerful moments the theatre exerts a pull not only away from the centrality of the narrating 'I' but also away from the pyrotechnics of Dickensian style itself. A theatre is a space for performance: for applause, showing off, star turns. But it is also a space in which stories get told but where no one owns the telling, a space where fictions occur but where, as Henry James puts it, no character or narrator 'has a *usurping* consciousness'.⁷ In a play, even the hero has to take his turn with all the other agents in the story, no matter how small. Both of these qualities, the assertive scene-stealing and the radically democratic imagination, are central to Dickensian theatricality.

Dickens's ambiguous centrality to Victorian aesthetics can perhaps best be grasped in terms of the thoroughgoing theatricality of his narrative universe. Like virtually every other Western society scrutinised in Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, the Victorians had an intense suspicion of performance, a suspicion Barish traces to Romanticism's 'cult of inwardness and privacy' and its 'puritanical distrust of qualities like mimicry, ostentation, and spectacle'.⁸ A host of commentators in Barish's wake have found in the Victorian novel's celebration of domesticity and self-consistency a natural aversion to the theatrical. The reality is of course more complex than this, and nowhere more so than in Dickens's work – which *as writing* abounds in precisely the qualities of 'mimicry, ostentation, and spectacle' Barish claims are

inimical to the period. And, of course – as Barish also points out – the Victorian mistrust of theatre coincided with an unusually vibrant theatrical culture. Indeed, Dickens's importance can best be understood in these generic terms: at a moment when the theatre was both vehemently alive and loudly disparaged, at a time when the cultural stock of the novel was steadily rising, he succeeded better than any of his contemporaries at finding a way to incorporate the energies of Victorian theatrical culture into the fabric of his prose and his characterology.

Dickens's early work establishes the link between representations of theatre and the theatricality of his style; they show that when Dickens is writing about theatre he is also thinking about his own novelistic practice.⁹ The titular hero of *Nicholas Nickleby* spends much of the novel as an actor with a travelling company, and Dickens gets off some of his funniest lines at the expense of these performers: when the troop's leader, Mr Crummles, takes leave of Nicholas, he does so 'to that young gentleman's most profound annoyance, [by] inflicting upon him a rapid succession of stage embraces, which, as everyone knows, are performed by the embracer's laying his or her chin on the shoulder of the object of affection, and looking over it'.¹⁰ But Crummles's overacting, far from indexing some localisable theatricality, comes close to encapsulating the ontology of character in Dickens more generally: the most memorable of his invented people amuse precisely through a scenery-chewing extravagance that suggests their awareness of an audience even when they are alone. In *Oliver Twist* the unscrupulous beadle Mr Bumble comes to court the workhouse matron Mrs Corney; she is called away, and Dickens narrates the scene this way:

Mr. Bumble's conduct, on being left to himself, was rather inexplicable. He opened the closet, counted the teaspoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of the genuine metal; and having satisfied his curiosity upon these points, put on his cocked-hat cornerwise, and danced with much gravity four distinct times round the table.¹¹

The narrator's protestations notwithstanding, these actions are eminently explicable (Mr Bumble is evaluating his prospective bride's finances); they are funny because of the lengths to which Bumble goes to render that motive obvious. More to the point, Bumble's meretriciousness points directly to his author's: Dickens's prose will never walk straight past a table if it can dance four distinct times round it.

If *Great Expectations* is the pinnacle of mature Dickens, it is no accident that this maturity is in part heralded by the most extended and apparently hostile treatment of theatrical performance in all of his work.

It is as if in this, his most convincing attempt to achieve the psychological subtlety and tight plotting his work was often accused of lacking, Dickens needed to engage the topic of the theatre. Mr Wopsle's famously awful turn as *Hamlet* is the unavoidable scene here. But this is only one in a series of theatrical scenes that together constitute an extraordinary series of thought-experiments on the project of novel-writing, investigations in particular into novelistic address and novelistic voice. What kind of voice speaks a novel? Dickens is asking in these scenes. More particularly: what kind of voice speaks a novel when that novel is written in a confiding first person by a writer whose imagination so resembles a theatre?

Wopsle's first theatrical indulgence is his prolonged reading of George Lillo's 1731 tragedy *The London Merchant*, and Dickens uses the occasion to imagine a mode of artistic address that confirms the consumer's sense of being the private recipient of an all-important message. In the play the apprentice George Barnwell is sent to the gallows after murdering his uncle – an act he has plotted and executed under the erotic influence of the prostitute Sarah Milwood. The plot is perfectly keyed to Pip's guilty self-understanding, and Wopsle's reading capitalises on this to hint that Pip is somehow in danger of a fate similar to Barnwell's. Wopsle intends to read to Pumblechook, the local cornfactor, but, Dickens writes, 'No sooner did [Wopsle] see me, than he appeared to consider that a special Providence had put a 'prentice in his way to be read at, and he laid hold of me, and insisted on my accompanying him to the Pumblechookian parlour'. The most bizarre effect of the scene is the adults' ability to direct this reading so pointedly at Pip:

What stung me was the identification of the whole affair with my unoffending self. When Barnwell began to go wrong, I declare that I felt positively apologetic, Pumblechook's indignant stare so taxed me with it. Wopsle, too, took pains to present me in the worst light. At once ferocious and maudlin, I was made to murder my uncle with no extenuating circumstances whatever; Milwood put me down in argument, on every occasion; it became sheer monomania in my master's daughter to care a button for me; and all I can say for my gasping and procrastinating conduct on the fatal morning, is, that it was worthy of the general feebleness of my character. Even after I was happily hanged and Wopsle had closed the book, Pumblechook sat staring at me, and shaking his head and saying 'Take warning, boy, take warning' as if it were a well-known fact that I contemplated murdering a near relation, provided I could only induce one to have the weakness to become my benefactor. (p. 145)

Perhaps the most crucial word in the passage is an unobtrusive preposition, 'at': Wopsle feels Pip has been put in his sight expressly in order to be read *at*. Published literary prose, of course, by definition

addresses itself to a multitudinous audience. But the fantasy that it addresses each member of this unthinkable large audience singly is part of the effect of private reading. Part of what is funny about Pip's perception of the episode, then, as well as uncanny, is the way it takes a genre – that is, a play – whose vector of address is overtly public and renders it relentlessly personal. Novelistic narration, the episode suggests, is per se internalising: the tendency of this novelistic narrator is to receive all material, even when conveyed via the resistant medium of drama, as fodder for his private psychodrama.

Lest this seem just a one-off joke, we should recall how thoroughly this structure saturates the novel. Dickens so constantly insinuates an 'at' into the narrated action that we begin to suspect that Pip's most salient psychological characteristic is simply his psychologisation of everything, his ability to convert all phenomenological data into personal data. At Christmas dinner with Wopsle, Pumblechook, and the Hubbles, Pip observes that

they seemed to think the opportunity lost, if they failed to point the conversation *at* me, every now and then, and stick the point *into* me . . . It began the moment we sat down to dinner . . . Mrs. Hubble shook her head, and contemplating me with a mournful presentiment that I should come to no good, asked, 'Why is it that the young are never grateful?' This moral mystery seemed too much for the company until Mr. Hubble tersely solved it by saying, 'Naterally wicious.' Everyone then murmured 'True!' and looked at me in a particularly unpleasant and personal manner. (pp. 56–7; emphasis added)

Like the reading of *The London Merchant*, the scene works as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of the fantasy of private readerly address, in which every general principle seems to have its ultimate destination in . . . you. If we take these scenes as meditations on the conventions of novelistic address, we are left with a vision of the novel as a form of claustrophobic intimacy. Pip's position suggests a world in which to read the words 'It was the best of times' is to feel personally congratulated, and to read the words 'It was the worst of times' is to feel intimately attacked. This is a universe fantastically menaced with personal meaning, paranoid in precisely the same measure as it is comical.¹²

Pumblechook and the Hubbles are of course malicious. But we can't explain this structure with reference to that malice, for it recurs in one of the novel's crucial moments – the dreamlike scene, set in a village pub, in which Pip encounters the convict whom Magwitch has sent as a messenger. He is described as 'a secret-looking man' (p. 103), a phrase that sits nicely astride the issue of address. Does it mean the man looks as if he has something to hide, or that he is looking at Pip as if he has

something to tell him? (Does he *look secret*, or is he *looking secretly*; does his secrecy turn inward or outward?) When the man moves to deliver his message, he does so in a particularly unnerving way. 'It was not a verbal remark, but a proceeding in dumb show, and was pointedly addressed to me. He stirred his rum-and-water pointedly at me, and he tasted his rum-and-water pointedly at me' (p. 106). Pip goes on to pinpoint the overtly unusual detail – that the man stirs his rum-and-water not with a spoon but with a file, to indicate his connection to Magwitch – but the moment's uncanniness is already inscribed in the repeated prepositions, in the idea that it is possible to stir a glass *at* someone, or to taste that glass's contents *at* someone.

It is key that these pointed addresses are transmitted through the medium of the crowded public space – in fact a public house – of the tavern known as the Three Jolly Bargemen. As with Wopsle's reading, here again a gesture that should be publicly available becomes imbued with a specific vector of address. The privacy-in-the-midst-of-publicity here is also of course a feature of novelistic address, which similarly seems to speak to us with an intimate whisper even through the promiscuous medium of print. So it is all the more striking that Dickens's phraseology in these scenes was anticipated in one of the century's most intriguing meditations on the nature of theatrical performance. Charles Lamb's much-reprinted 1825 essay 'Stage Illusion' makes the arresting argument that theatrical events 'please by being done under the life, or beside it; not *to the life*'. Lamb elaborates on the claim in a discussion of cowardly characters: the stage coward makes

a perpetual subinsinuation to us, the spectators, even in the extremity of the shaking fit, that he was not half such a coward as we took him for . . . We saw all the common symptoms of the malady upon him; the quivering lip, the cowering knees, the teeth chattering; and could have sworn 'that man was frightened.' But we forgot all the while – or kept it almost a secret to ourselves – that he never once lost his self-possession; that he let out by a thousand droll looks and gestures – meant at *us*, and not at all supposed to be visible to his fellows in the scene, that his confidence in his own resources had not deserted him.¹³

Lamb's language anticipates several of the key terms in the Dickens passages we've been looking at. The actor in Lamb's account could be described as a 'secret-looking man' in precisely the same ambiguous sense as Magwitch's emissary: he directs meaning at us, but he keeps this a secret from the other players, and we in turn 'keep it almost a secret to ourselves' that this is happening. Both Dickens and Lamb describe scenes of secret messages transmitted through a dense social medium – indeed, secret messages whose function is partly to help us

forget that the feeling of intimacy may in fact be a fantasy. And Lamb's most striking phrase makes use of that Dickensian preposition: stage gestures, he claims, are 'meant at us'. What Lamb is registering here is the underlying formal promise of collective awareness heralded by theatrical performance, and his analysis suggests that what specifically defines the phenomenology of the theatre is that this collective awareness, this consciousness of the dense social medium that surrounds and generates all meaning, never totally recedes from view. We might then understand the theatricality of the world of *Great Expectations*, Dickens's habit of drawing our attention to the weirdness of private messages passing through public space, as a way to make us aware of the fictionality of the novel's intimate address – even to expose this fiction as a fiction.

To say this another way: we might recognise Pip as a figure for Dickens's reading public. This will at first sound counterintuitive. The intimacy the reader feels with Pip is palpable and it is intense; *Great Expectations*, we might say, is the most secret-looking of Dickens's books. But as with the secret-looking man, this intimacy points in two ways, both inward and outward. Pip's world, in which everyone seems to be playing *at him*, is a meditation on the peculiar theatricality of Dickensian style, itself always overtly playing to the public that lies right behind Pip, gathered there behind his consciousness, seated at the aperture of his eyes. Recognising Pip as a screen for the reader's relation to Dickensian style depersonalises our sense of Pip's delusions of centrality; it helps us recognise that Pip's sense of being at the mercy of a world that menaces or delights him with secret intention is a figure for the way Dickens's own prose always has us, its vast public, in its sights. 'The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes,' Pip tells us in the novel's third chapter, 'so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me' (p. 48). One answer to the question *What is Dickens?* might be *Dickens is a world that runs at us. Or: Dickens is a kind of writing, a writing at us.*

We have seen how scenes of theatre occasion reflection on the intensely personalising vector of novelistic address. But the recognition that Dickens's style is also constantly theatricalising this address – that is, rendering its public medium evident – prompts us to take account of other energies at work in this text. A short while before we see Mr Wopsle actually take the stage, Dickens recounts an evening at the Jolly Bargemen in which the former clerk entertains the company with a dramatic reading of a newspaper account of 'a highly popular murder'. Wopsle is startlingly effective at materialising the details of the crime – Dickens writes that 'Mr. Wopsle was imbrued in blood to the eyebrows' – and even more so at inhabiting a range of voices and characters.

He identified himself with every witness at the Inquest. He faintly moaned 'I am done for,' as the victim, and he barbarously bellowed, 'I'll serve you out,' as the murderer. He gave the medical testimony, in pointed imitation of our local practitioner; and he piped and shook, as the aged turn-pike keeper who had heard blows . . . He enjoyed himself thoroughly, and we all enjoyed ourselves, and were delightfully comfortable. (p. 160)

The first thing to notice about this scene is that it pivots the vector of address a full 180 degrees from the reading of *The London Merchant*. Where all the meanings of that earlier piece converged into an accusation directed at Pip, here Wopsle's performance achieves a redistribution of identity and of guilt – a strange socialisation or repopulation of a narrative whose point would seem to be to isolate one particular criminal (and would, one would think, work even better than *The London Merchant* to make Pip feel accused). The second thing to notice is how closely this description of Wopsle approximates those of Dickens at the massively popular readings of his work he had begun performing a few years before he wrote *Great Expectations*. Like Wopsle imbrued in gore, Dickens's staged readings came to their climax with a bloodcurdling enactment of Bill Sikes's murder of Nancy from *Oliver Twist*; more notably, the alterations Dickens made to his texts for the public readings mostly consisted in striking out large chunks of his own narration, so that the novels took on the look of playtexts, with Dickens recreating each character's speech with Wopsle-like virtuosity. To look at a page of Dickens's own heavily edited prompt-book for 'Sikes and Nancy: A Reading' is to be confronted with a spectacle of diegetic violence seconded by textual violence, as the masochistic striking-through of his own textual body literally creates the conditions for him to inhabit both the murderous body of Sikes and the bludgeoned body of Nancy. And, as the legendary anecdotes – the scores of fainting women, Dickens's dangerously raised pulse – make clear, these forms of fantasmatic violence abutted more visceral forms of harm to self and others. 'I shall tear myself to pieces,' was his repeated comment on the readings.¹⁴ In the theatre of Dickensian style, aggressive self-display doubles a masochistic will to disappear.

The ethical and political valences of this fact begin to emerge in the most extended piece of represented theatre in Dickens's work, the episode in which Pip attends Wopsle's performance of *Hamlet*. The novel records every awful detail of Wopsle's costume, delivery, and posture. But even here, in what Nina Auerbach has judged 'one of the most excoriating antitheatrical passages in the English novel',¹⁵ the point is less to ridicule theatre than to exploit its definitional underlining of the social space of reception, the confusion of ontological registers that is theatrical performance's power and fragility. We tend to associate the

theatrical with the transcendence or cancellation of the physical space in which it occurs, the ability to replace a close and crowded room with a fairy kingdom or the Forest of Arden. But the theatre here returns us with comical abruptness to the physical contours of the real. Virtually all of the jokes in the *Hamlet* sequence turn on various kinds of spatial proximity – of the audience to the stage, of onstage to offstage. Of the ghost of Hamlet's father, Dickens writes, 'It was . . . to be noted of this majestic spirit that whereas it always appeared with an air of having been out a long time and walked an immense distance, it perceptibly came from a closely contiguous wall' (p. 274); meanwhile the audience expresses its disapproval by asserting its spatial contiguity to the action: its 'general indignation tak[es] the form of nuts' (p. 274). Wopsle's performance itself is one long occasion for Dickens to remind us of the audience's collective proximity to the action – as when a 'Debating Society' arises in the audience during the 'To be or not to be' soliloquy, or when someone in the gallery yells 'Wai-ter!' when Wopsle daintily wipes his fingers after handling Yorick's skull, or when Laertes and Hamlet are said to be wrestling 'on the brink of the orchestra and the grave' (pp. 275–6). A similarly insistent reference to the literal space of the theatre features in the novel's final glimpse of Wopsle's actorly career, in a downmarket riverside theatre specialising in bad melodrama and Christmas pantomime. Wopsle spends the majority of his time on stage 'staring in [Pip's] direction as if he were lost in amazement' (p. 397). After the show he informs Pip that he has recognised the other convict – we and Pip know him to be referring to Magwitch's nemesis, Compeyson – seated right behind him, 'like', Wopsle, insists, 'a ghost' (p. 398).

If on one level the moment seems to confirm Pip's paranoia – a paranoia that is of course the obverse of his narcissism – it is crucial to note that Pip is in fact not the object of interest here. More than a confirmation of his importance, then, the scene offers a spatial epitome of the novel's overarching project of decentring Pip: the privatisation of this theatre is more than a mistake, it is, Dickens hints, an impossibility. A theatre is etymologically a 'space for seeing' – and while we usually assume that what is to be seen is the spotlighted space of the stage, Dickens gets maximum mileage out of the fact that the spatial closure of the theatre, its conjoining of a public and a troupe in the same place, means that the sightlines can run in all directions. A theatre in this sense is a container for uncentred seeing, a space where both sight and subjectivity are universally distributed. 'I saw that you saw me' – Pip's words to Wopsle after the performance – might be the phenomenological law undergirding this space. This theatre thus brings to its conclusion the trajectory traced by the novel's various

representations of performance: from a world in which every art object finds its destination in one lonely recipient – a world, that is, in which every art object partakes of the fantasy of novelistic address – to a world in which the location and destination of address is radically decentred.

If I am tempted to say that *Great Expectations* reaches a kind of closure in this scene, I should be clear that I do not use the term in the customary way.¹⁶ We tend both in criticism and in casual conversation to take closure as a temporal concept: we get closure when we feel the story is over. But it is worth recalling that the term derives from a spatial metaphor. Closure in this original sense refers not to what happens to individual characters but to the more elementary fact of their co-presence, their shared containment in the space of the work. An awareness of a literary work as a kind of social container can be central even to the experience of a temporally articulated form like the novel. Indeed, this is an experience to which we pay colloquial homage when we say (for example) that *Great Expectations* has a frozen-in-time spinster, a blacksmith with a heart of gold, and an eerily professional lawyer ‘in’ it – even if we can’t recall these characters’ relations to one another or what happens to any of them. Dickens’s constant references to theatrical space remind us that a theatre can never pretend not to be a place, a space for an imagined social congregation that is the ground of whatever fiction transpires there.

As the novel’s title indicates, Pip’s delusions have an importantly temporal dimension – are even perhaps constituted by a temporalising way of looking at the world, embedded in his very posture of expectation, his sense that the universe’s message will be revealed to him in time. But the novel is about the inability of time to insulate Pip from the spaces he believes himself to have left behind: Compeyson, and all he represents, is literally in the room with him. For many readers, I suspect, the experience of completing *Great Expectations* is one of radical closure in precisely this sense: the sensation that a world we thought was mysteriously large is in fact interconnected in startling, even claustrophobic ways. Not only does Satis House not lead Pip away from his boyhood traumas, it is overtly contiguous with them. Not only does Estella not get Pip very far from the marshes, she is directly descended from them. These facts make *Great Expectations* perhaps the paradigmatic example of what Jonathan Grossman has characterised as Dickens’s obsession with the ‘small world problem’, the uneasy realisation that, despite the increased abstraction of social connection in modernity, the global totality exerts an obscure but determining force; as Grossman puts it, ‘what happens over there affects what will happen here, and vice versa’.¹⁷ The evidence of *Great Expectations* suggests that the definitional smallness of theatrical space, its engagement with apprehension at

necessarily close quarters, makes the theatre – perhaps the nineteenth century's most robust aesthetic technology for thinking uncomfortable intimacy – the ultimate fantasmatic ground of the small-world problem of Dickensian modernity.

Earlier in the scene at the riverside theatre, Dickens has made what seems an offhand joke at Wopsle's expense: we have already seen the ex-clerk appear as several characters in the pantomime when, Dickens writes, an 'Enchanter . . . coming up from the antipodes rather unsteadily, after an apparently violent journey, proved to be Mr Wopsle in a high-crowned hat, with a necromantic work in one volume under his arm' (p. 397). The remark gets off a crack at the Victorian theatrical practice of economising on actors by doubling up roles. But in the process, of course, it reminds us of Magwitch, that other character who has made a difficult journey from the antipodes – and connects him to the ghost of Hamlet's father, whom we think of as coming from some ontologically distinct realm but who has evidently travelled just a few feet. Dickens's mild joke takes on ethico-political point precisely by linking the project of correcting Pip's delusions to the spatial closure of the theatre: the antipodes are nearer than we think, and our ghosts are contiguous with us.

This theatre, that is, reveals that the world does indeed have a special message for Pip, just as he has all along suspected. But the message is that his specialness is an illusion. At the thematic level, of course, the demystificatory energy of that message has familiar ideological limits. As Humphry House pointed out in the 1940s (responding sceptically to claims of the novel's proletarian consciousness), Dickens never considers revoking Pip's newly achieved bourgeois status: 'he takes Pip's new class position as established, and whisks him off to the East, where gentlemen grow like mushrooms'.¹⁸ Pip's chastened awareness of his reliance on the unsavoury facts of exploitation is just that, a materially irrelevant state of mind whose painful/pleasurable cultivation we have come to recognise as an indispensable aspect of the bourgeois self's ethical hygiene. And yet: precisely in making it hard to know any longer where to see *from*, the theatricality of Dickensian style evades a firm location in any particular consciousness; it exceeds the psychologisation that allows us to see the text as Pip's story, and then to see that story as an allegory for – or performance of – bourgeois bad faith. It is here, in the Dickens theatre's evacuation not just of personal centrality but of personality and even perspective itself that the democratic quality of the text emerges with most force. This theatre stands as a corrective not only to Pip but to his very status as a novelistic hero, as an 'I' who centres our perception; this theatre is a revelation of the deformations inherent in the very awareness of having a self.

In concluding, let me point to three moments of intense beauty and intense ethical interest that stage variations on what we might mean when we speak of Dickensian theatricality. The first occurs at the end of the novel's first volume, over a series of sentences that are designedly easy to misunderstand. Pip is leaving home and regretting that he has failed to say goodbye properly to Joe.

I deliberated with an aching heart whether I would not get down when we changed horses and walk back, and have another evening at home, and a better parting. We changed, and I had not made up my mind, and still reflected for my comfort that it would be quite practicable to get down and walk back, when we changed again . . . We changed again, and yet again, and it was now too late and too far to go back, and I went on. And the mists had all solemnly risen now, and the world lay spread before me. (p. 186)

Even more than the final Miltonic allusion, it is the passage's distension, the delay it interposes between the description of the horses and the allegorically toned conclusion, that make it easy to lose track of its literal meaning – to lose sight, that is, of the fact that Pip is riding in a stage-coach, and that the changing of which he speaks is the changing of horses as he passes from one stage of his journey to another. The ambiguity is redoubled by what confronts us next on the page. Immediately following the words I have cited is the curious sentence that signals the end of the first volume: 'This is the End of the First Stage of Pip's Expectations' (p. 186). It is important that the word Dickens chooses here to designate his book's parts – 'stage' – indexes both a temporal concept and a spatial one. At the very moment, in other words, that Dickens draws our attention to the tight developmental architecture of this novel, the way it follows Pip through three sharply distinguished temporal stages, he uses a word that suggests not one character's journey but a closed theatrical space where every player will eventually run into every other. And it is less the incantatory rhythm of the passage that moves one than it is the quiet waning of that first-person pronoun, as the text's psychological tightness opens on a composite subject, a subject moving through time collectively and becoming different from itself: 'We changed . . . we changed . . . We changed again, and yet again'.

Second moment: the hinge between chapters 55 and 56. We have been following Pip's attempts to get Magwitch out of England; they have capsized on the Thames, and a recaptured Magwitch lies in prison and close to death, when the proceedings are interrupted for . . . some comedy. Chapter 55 recounts Wemmick's marriage to Miss Skiffins. The episode feels bizarrely discordant, as if in this sudden swerve into domestic coziness the text were structurally mirroring Wemmick's split personality. (Wemmick, of course, is Dickens's famous emblem of the

psychic warping demanded by modern work: rigidly correct in his professional existence as Jaggers's clerk, impossibly open-hearted the minute he steps across the moat surrounding his suburban home in Walworth.) Chapter 55 ends with yet another winking allusion to Wemmick's schizophrenic existence, as Wemmick confides his love for his wife to Pip and hastens to add: 'This is altogether a Walworth sentiment, please . . . Mr. Jaggers may as well not know of it. He might think my brain was softening, or something of the kind' (pp. 464–5). It is impossible not to be amused by the episode and impossible to be more than mildly amused by it, arriving as it does in the midst of the novel's ethical climax. The next words on the page are the heading 'Chapter 56', followed by these astonishing sentences:

He lay in prison very ill, during the whole interval between his committal for trial, and the coming round of the Sessions. He had broken two ribs, they had wounded one of his lungs, and he breathed with great pain and difficulty, which increased daily. It was a consequence of his hurt, that he spoke so low as to be scarcely audible; therefore, he spoke very little. (p. 465)

As in the previous passage, it is a pronoun that here takes on such strange vibrancy: a 'he' not preceded by any proper name. If the novel began in a first person so voracious as to make us suspect that Magwitch was merely an effect of that narrator's need, here that first person recedes into invisibility. As moving as Magwitch's situation here is, it is even more so when we recall that he was originally conjured as a way to apprehend, or deny, the world in its otherness. It is as if, in quietly recording the damage done to this body, this narration has for the first time left behind the limitations of self to witness the world's otherness in its living, indeed dying, distinctiveness.

It does not seem to me an accident that Pip's surrender of narrative centrality coincides with the muting of Dickensian comic energy, almost as if this narration is tired of its own routines. The sentences I have just cited achieve their beauty through an unexpected plain-spokenness, and I take that plain-spokenness as evidence of the will of this comic stylist of overwhelming gifts to surrender, momentarily, his personality. Along with Pip's 'I', what disappears briefly in both passages is a familiar Dickensian 'magic' – a disappearance that in the process makes way for a seeing whose impersonal witnessing we can only call austere, modest, reticent. Is this too a Dickensian theatre, a theatre of a wholly other kind? 'He' and 'we': pronouns, respectively, of externality and collectivity. Pronouns, that is, that condition the phenomenology of the theatre, where no one's 'I' can focalise our understanding of events, where every individual can be seen, and must only be seen, from the outside, and

where we can only witness the action, or imagine entering it, under conditions of radical collectivity.

Third and final moment, from a few pages later in Chapter 56: Magwitch's sentencing.

A great gallery full of people – a large theatrical audience – looked on . . . The sun was striking in at the great windows of the court, through the glittering drops of rain upon the glass, and it made a broad shaft of light between the two-and-thirty and the judge, linking both together, and perhaps reminding some among the audience, how both were passing on, with absolute equality, to the greater judgment that knoweth all things and cannot err. (pp. 466–7)

Conjoined in this extraordinary passage are not just the accused and the law, but also the audience that bears witness to their conjunction and in the process is included in that merger. The light that joins these beings here is overtly theological. But it should make us think not only of the Christian God but of the author of these fictional creatures. This is explicitly a scene of theatre – the only scene so labelled in the novel that does not occur in an actual performance space – and in it we see a God-like virtuosity aspire to become nothing more than the illumination for the beings it has made. If this is of course also a moment of Dickensian stylistic brilliance, it is crucial that this virtuosity here is imagining its own disappearance. This is the strangest affordance of Dickensian theatricality, the fantasy that this voice – perhaps the most distinctive in the history of the English novel – might evaporate into the lighting for a stage of 'absolute equality'.

Notes

- 1 Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1860–61; Hardmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 35. Hereafter cited parenthetically in text.
- 2 Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth's claim that 'the novel begins with the birth of perspective. Self-consciousness begins for Pip with the psychic division brought on by complicity with the nameless convict' nicely captures the proximity of the two events here but misreads their causal sequencing in the text, which suggests not that Magwitch precipitates self-consciousness but that self-consciousness conjures Magwitch. (Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 183).
- 3 One compelling recent argument in this line is Elaine Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), which argues that British imperial trade, and the genocidal policies on which it partly depended, are inscribed in the so-called 'negro-head tobacco' Magwitch smokes in the novel. The

originality of Freedgood's argument derives from her claim that novelistic objects function according to the logic of the fetish; they are less containers of repressed content than oddly obvious but under-read registers of oppression: 'the bad news of history can risk representation, since it will probably be left encoded' (p. 107). Freedgood's research into the movement of nineteenth-century commodities reveals the proximity of entities the metropolitan subject would like to keep at a safe cognitive distance, and the considerable charge of her argument derives from the revelation of the omnipresence of the evidence of disturbing social facts. It is perhaps one of the ironies of critical history that this move – for good reasons one of favoured gestures of ideology critique – finds its classic narrative articulation in *Great Expectations*, whose plot turns on just such a revelation.

- 4 Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 178; emphasis in original.
- 5 This is one of the arguments made by Fredric Jameson in 'The Experiments of Time: Providence and Realism', in *The Novel*, vol. 2, *Forms and Themes*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 95–127), which claims that the realist novel is traversed at the level of form by the intimations of collective destiny its character-centred thematics seem to deny.
- 6 Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 16, 191.
- 7 Henry James, *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces* (New York: Scribner, 1934), 90; emphasis in original.
- 8 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 299.
- 9 This paragraph is adapted from my essay 'Theatricality and the Novel', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, vol. 3, *The Nineteenth Century Novel, 1820–1880*, ed. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 311.
- 10 Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–9; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 478.
- 11 Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist, or, The Parish Boy's Progress* (1837–9; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002), 192.
- 12 Realism's intimately accusative address – the example is of course Dickens – is canonically elaborated in D. A. Miller, 'Open Subjects, Open Secrets', in *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 192–220.
- 13 Charles Lamb, 'Stage Illusion', in Lamb, *The Essays of Elia* (1823; London: Walter Scott, n.d.), 289–90.
- 14 Malcolm Andrews, *Charles Dickens and His Performing Selves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 260. Andrews's book is the best introduction to the public readings, which he terms at one point 'a public experiment in a kind of self-annihilation' (p. 260). For facsimiles of the prompt-books, see Andrews's frontispiece and p. 86.

- 15 Nina Auerbach, 'Before the Curtain', in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre*, ed. Kerry Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 8.
- 16 This paragraph is adapted from my *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 20.
- 17 Jonathan Grossman, *Charles Dickens' Networks: Public Transport and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 195, 176.
- 18 Humphry House, *The Dickens World*, (1941; 2nd edn, London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 156.