

## The Economy of Desire in *Great Expectations*

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*Great Expectations* is the story Pip tells about his own dream which possessed him in his early years. He dreams of gaining Estella, who fascinated him with her cold and proud beauty, and dreams of becoming a gentleman so that she may not look down upon him for being a "common labouring-boy" (89).<sup>(1)</sup> All this is indeed Pip's dream; quite interestingly, however, Pip's dream is a dream of a peculiar nature in that it cannot be separated from the desire of others which works upon him. It is true that Pip's dream is motivated by his own desire, by which I mean not only his sexual desire but his desire for money as well; at the same time, however, it is no less determined by the desire of others — by the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham. It is indeed difficult to distinguish Pip's own spontaneous desire from what they desire him to desire. Pip's desire cannot be represented in itself; it can only be represented in terms of the desire of others, and in this sense we may say that Pip's dream constitutes an economy of desire. To some extent this may look like what René Girard calls mimetic desire, which is the desire to imitate the desire of someone else.<sup>(2)</sup> However, Pip's desire differs from Girard's mimetic desire in at least one significant respect: whereas in the case of mimetic desire the subject's desire is essentially originated and conditioned by someone else's desire which precedes it, Pip's desire is at least in part essentially spontaneous, even if it is at the same time determined by the desire of others. In an economy of desire the subject's desire is both spontaneous and not spontaneous. In this paper, I will examine how the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham plays an essential part in shaping Pip's dream of great expectations.



The first thing we should notice about Pip's dream is that, as John Kucich points out,<sup>(3)</sup> the object of his desire is rather vague. Although there is no doubt that his great expectations promise a brilliant future, it seems that his desire is so intense that he is not quite sure what he really wants. He may be vaguely thinking of living a gentlemanly life and marrying Estella, but the phrase "great expectations" seems to suggest something indefinably larger than that, something like boundless possibilities that cannot be reduced to any definite objectives. So indefinitely great is Pip's dream that it even seems that he is unable to control his own desire. There is something in this intense desire of Pip's that is somehow beyond his own control, something indefinably other than what it apparently is, or, in other words, something not quite his own. This portion of Pip's desire which is felt to be uncontrollable and not quite his own, that which is felt to be excessive in it, deserves attention, because it can be interpreted as a symptom of there being someone else's desire involved in it. Pip's desire is felt to be excessive because it is someone else's desire at the same time, for Pip, without knowing that he is doing so, desires the way someone else desires him to desire. When Pip keeps on indulging himself in his passionate love for Estella in spite of her almost maddening heartlessness, he is living not only his own desire but, unconsciously, Miss Havisham's desire as well, for she wants him to be mortally fascinated by Estella's beauty and tormented by her coldness. Pip cannot stop torturing himself by giving himself to his passionate love for Estella even though he cannot give any rational explanation of why she fascinates him so much:

The unqualified truth is, that when I loved Estella with the love of a man, I loved her simply because I

found her irresistible. Once for all; I knew to my sorrow, often and often, if not always, that I loved her against reason, against promise, against peace, against hope, against happiness, against all discouragement that could be. (253-54)

Miss Havisham's desire symptomatically manifests itself as that which Pip finds beyond his own control and simply "irresistible," that which he finds excessive, in his own desire. Similarly, his desire to become a gentleman, which he finds irresistible whenever he thinks of Estella, is not only his own but also Magwitch's, for not only does he himself want to become a gentleman but Magwitch wants him to become one as well. Pip's desire is characterized by a sense of inexplicable irresistibility because it, in this way, unconsciously coincides with the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham and allows itself to be controlled by them. The reason why Pip cannot but desire with almost compulsive intensity even though he is not quite sure what he really desires is that he is not the only subject of the desire. The inexplicable sense of irresistibility Pip finds about his own desire thus points to his loss of autonomous control over his own desire.

From this arises a sense of destabilized selfhood, a certain doubt about the presumed autonomy of the self. Pip's belief in the autonomy of his own self is symbolically indicated by his act of naming of himself which he mentions at the beginning of the novel: "I called myself Pip" (35). Such a belief is now under threat. For if one's own desire is already determined by someone else's desire and therefore not quite his own, he must have real difficulty in finding a true, spontaneous self that has absolutely nothing in it that does not derive from itself. Symptomatically, one might then become unsure of himself on every occasion. When Jaggers brings the news of great expectations to Pip, the peaceful sleep of his childhood becomes from thenceforth uneasy: "I put my light out, and crept into bed; and it was an uneasy bed now, and I never slept the old sound sleep in it any more"(172). This sense of uneasiness may well derive from the guilt he feels for being "so ready to leave and so unthankful to" (168) Joe; however, it can

also be interpreted as a consequence of entering a world where one has to desire as someone else desires him to desire without knowing it, leaving the self-sufficient world of the forge where Joe and Biddy, who are contented with life as it is and never desire too much, lead an almost idyllic life. When one's own desire coincides with someone else's desire and it becomes difficult to distinguish between the two, the unity of selfhood comes to be radically threatened with subversion, and this moment of the crisis of spontaneous selfhood is experienced as a sense of uneasiness, a sense of the loss of the spiritual peacefulness that has been. Thus, the disturbing sense of uneasiness Pip experiences is inseparable from the irresistibility that he finds in his own desire. It implicitly indicates that his desire is affected by the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham, and that he is irresistibly captivated by the dream of great expectations.

The enormous fascination the dream of great expectations exercises upon Pip is all the more intensified by his deeply held suspicion that he cannot but essentially remain a common labouring-boy as Estella called him, that he might never be able to become a genuine gentleman, no matter how much varnish may be put upon him through gentlemanly education. Whenever he is reminded of his inevitable commonness, his aspiration for a brilliant future life becomes very much intensified. Pip is so much ashamed of his commonness that in contrast to it the future life promised by his great expectations appears to him to be full of brilliant light. Ever since he first met Estella and was mortally humiliated by her, Pip has not ceased to feel ashamed of his commonness and has not failed to feel a sort of claustrophobic repulsion for his own home, as if it were a kind of prison. For example, Pip is afraid of being imprisoned in the forge as it were, by the contemptuous eyes of Estella:

What I dreaded was, that in some unlucky hour I, being at my grimmest and commonest, should lift up my eyes and see Estella looking in at one of the wooden windows of the forge. I was haunted by the fear that she would, sooner or later, find me out, with a black face and hands, doing the coarsest part

of my work, and would exult over me and despise me. (136)

The ugliness of the life of the forge to which he is bound, as contrasted with Estella's almost celestial beauty, is so unbearable to Pip that it almost seems as if his desire to liberate himself from it anyway were the central motivation of his dream. The true value of the great expectations for Pip consists in the abstract hope that they will make possible everything that would be absolutely impossible if he were to continue to live with Joe at the forge, that is, in the infinite possibilities they symbolize, rather than in the actual contents of what may come true. So it would be irrelevant to explain Pip's dream primarily in terms of what has been seen by some critics as a "snob's progress."<sup>6</sup> There is a famous scene, just before, significantly, Pip visits Satis House for the first time, in which he identifies himself with the flower-seeds and bulbs that are comfortably imprisoned in the drawers in Pumblechook's shop:

It appeared to me that he must be a very happy man indeed, to have so many little drawers in his shop; and I wondered when I peeped into one or two on the lower tiers, and saw the tied-up brown paper packets inside, whether the flower-seeds and bulbs ever wanted of a fine day to break out of those jails, and bloom. (83)

Pip, whose name means a seed, is imagining himself to be a seed that is comfortably imprisoned in its own home. Joe's forge is imagined as a kind of comfortable prison. As John Carey suggests,<sup>6</sup> Pip realizes here that a comfortable home can also become a prison. An imprisoned seed is a particularly good metaphor for Pip, because it is more suggestive of the very infinity of its future possibility than of the particular flower into which it will transform itself in due time. Whenever he is reminded that he may always remain a common labouring-boy in the essential part of his being, Pip, like an imprisoned seed, cannot help reading infinite possibilities in his dream. The more he is reminded of his miserable commonness, the more brilliant will his dream appear

to him. Pip's obsessive sense of his own commonness compels him to find Estella all the more beautiful. In one scene Pip is struck by Estella's beauty in a significant way. Estella has just come back from France, where she has been educated as a lady:

But she was so much changed, was so much more beautiful, so much more womanly, in all things winning admiration had made such wonderful advance, that I seemed to have made none. I fancied, as I looked at her, that I slipped hopelessly back into the coarse and common boy again. O the sense of distance and disparity that came upon me, and the inaccessibility that came about her! (256)

Estella appears to Pip to be inaccessible, to belong to an imaginary celestial world (as her name suggests) which he can never reach, precisely because he feels that he has not changed at all since the unforgettable day when she called him a common labouring-boy and perhaps will never change, either.

Quite significantly, Magwitch and Miss Havisham, the hidden subjects of Pip's desire, in a symbolic manner remind Pip of the constancy of his commonness and thereby make his dream appear to him all the more brilliant and attractive. When Magwitch orders Pip that he should "always bear the name of Pip"(165) if he is to accept great expectations, he is, in effect, in a symbolic manner, excessively binding Pip to what he already is and has always been, thereby causing him to find his dream of great expectations all the more brilliant by contrast. Not only Magwitch but Miss Havisham also tells Pip never to change his name. When, just before he leaves for London, Pip visits Miss Havisham to say good-bye to her, she tells him always to "keep the name of Pip"(184). Thus both Magwitch and Miss Havisham prevent him from breaking out of the jail of Joe's forge; they force him to remain a seed, a pip, which can do nothing but dream of the day when it will bloom, a day that may never come. Here again we find that Magwitch and Miss Havisham are both in control of Pip's dream.

Magwitch and Miss Havisham are alike, in that they are both deprived of love, though the kinds of

love they are in need of are different. Magwitch is deprived of social love, while Miss Havisham is sexually deprived of love. Both attempt to satisfy the desire which they have come to cherish as a result of their deprivation of love, through an adopted child. Magwitch, who virtually adopts Pip when he takes it on himself to become his financial benefactor and later actually calls himself his "second father"(337), desires to make Pip a gentleman because he is a social outcast and will never be able to become a gentleman himself. Although it is Magwitch who desires that Pip should be a gentleman, it is Pip himself who actually lives out that desire of Magwitch's. As a result, Pip tends to mistake Magwitch's desire for his own spontaneous desire. When Pip desires to become a gentleman, he is living Magwitch's desire, believing all the while that it is his own desire. Thus, Pip's desire for gentility can be represented only in terms of Magwitch's desire to make him a gentleman, of which he is unconscious; that is, what appears to be Pip's desire is really a representational effect of an economy of desire in which he is unconsciously involved.

Concerning the nature of this economy of desire, it should be noticed that it is only so long as Magwitch does not reveal himself as the hidden, true subject of Pip's desire that he can make Pip live his desire vicariously. Magwitch can effect the economy of desire and enable Pip to enjoy the dream of great expectations only insofar as he keeps sending money anonymously from Australia. Here the intermediary presence of Jaggers the lawyer deserves attention; for he mediates not only money but also desire along with it, at the same time ensuring the anonymity of the source of both. Just when he obscures the source of money, effecting a kind of capitalist economy, he obscures the source of desire and effects an economy of desire at the same time. Only through the medium of Jaggers can Magwitch control Pip's desire. If he wanted to keep Pip dreaming of becoming a gentleman, Magwitch ought not to have come back from Australia to see him. Nevertheless, in order to satisfy his desire completely, he does come back to see with his own eyes the genuine gentleman he has made by himself, even at the risk of his life. At this moment of Magwitch's perfect satisfaction, Pip suffers an

absolute disillusionment. Knowing now who the true benefactor is, knowing whose desire he has lived all along, Pip's dream suddenly collapses. Pip is quite sure that he cannot become a gentleman with Magwitch's money, which appears to him to be tainted with criminality. When the true subject of desire is revealed, all of a sudden the economy of desire, which has enabled him to enjoy the dream of great expectations, fails. Pip has never suspected that the convict whom he happened to meet long ago could be his benefactor. He has believed all along that it must be Miss Havisham, as he has always been preoccupied with the thought of Estella. It is on account of this mistake as to who the benefactor is on the part of Pip that Magwitch can effect the economy of desire and thereby control Pip's desire. This is ironic, for the reason why Pip cannot think of the possibility that the benefactor might be Magwitch is that he has repressed his memory of the fatal encounter that took place in the graveyard. Magwitch is definitely the last person Pip wants to be involved with, and precisely for that reason Pip cannot think of the possibility that he is the benefactor. The mistake Pip makes concerning the identity of his benefactor is thus deeply rooted in his repression and is therefore far from accidental. Through this mistake, it turns out that Pip unwittingly allows himself to be adopted by the very person whom he finds most repulsive. At the same time, however, it must be also said that it is exactly because of this mistake that Pip can enjoy the dream of great expectations.

Miss Havisham cherishes the desire to revenge herself on the male sex, because she suffered the painful experience of being betrayed by the man whom she was going to marry on the very day of the wedding. When she adopted Estella, it was not her intention to bring her up as an instrument of her revenge. But when she found that Estella was going to be a beautiful girl, she began to consider her potentialities as an instrument of revenge. She taught her adopted daughter to be proud and cruel, and turned her heart to ice, making her incapable of love, so that she could vicariously torture the male sex and break their hearts through her young beauty. Pip was simply meant to be a victim of Miss Havisham's revengeful

desire when he was taken to Satis House. Just as Miss Havisham expected, Pip was mortally fascinated by Estella's exquisite beauty, and without knowing that he was living Miss Havisham's desire, he fell desperately in love with her in spite of her coldness and haughtiness. Thus, from the very first, Pip's desire for the beautiful Estella has been shaped and controlled by Miss Havisham's desire. What Pip believes to be his own desire is already Miss Havisham's desire as well. In the sense that Pip's desire for Estella can only be represented in terms of Miss Havisham's desire, we may say that here again an economy of desire is effected.

Interestingly enough, just like the case of Magwitch, Miss Havisham can effect the economy of desire through which she can control Pip's desire, only so long as Pip remains unconscious of the hidden, true subject of his desire. Herbert Pocket tells Pip the story of Miss Havisham's past, and so Pip well knows that she has brought up Estella in order to "wreak revenge on all the male sex"(200). Nevertheless, Pip sticks to the belief that he is an exception, that Miss Havisham will someday give Estella to him:

She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together. She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin — in short, do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance, and marry the Princess. (253)

Pip mistakenly believes that the benefactor is Miss Havisham, although, in fact, there is "[n]ot a particle of evidence"(351), as Jaggers puts it. But once this mistaken belief has taken hold of his mind, he hopefully goes on to substitute for it another mistaken belief — the belief that he is not a victim of Miss Havisham's revenge, that Miss Havisham will allow him to play the role of "the young Knight of romance" and marry Estella. One mistaken belief conceived without a particle of evidence in the first place is displaced in Pip's aspiring mind by another mistaken belief which equally lacks evidence. Deluded thus by

the belief that someday Estella will be given to him, Pip is unwittingly made to live Miss Havisham's desire. So long as this delusion persists, Pip has to keep on loving Estella desperately in spite of her indifferent coldness. In other words, so long as Pip remains unconscious of the true subject of his desire, Miss Havisham can effect an economy of desire, through which she can satisfy her revengeful desire. This economy of desire fails when Pip finds out that he has desired all along just the way Miss Havisham has desired him to desire, that is to say, when he knows that his benefactor is Magwitch and therefore that he is not meant for Estella's husband after all. Soon after the truth is revealed to Pip by the appearance of the benefactor himself, he goes to Satis House, looking for Estella, and finding her there, makes his last, agonizingly fervent yet hopeless declaration of love to her. This scene is the climax of the novel. After that, Pip seems to be liberated from the passionate love for Estella which had formerly filled his whole being so fervently. Not that he does not care for Estella any longer; his desire for her, or rather that part of it which is spontaneous, still persists. However, the extraordinary intensity which used to be characteristic of his love for her, the intensity which used to defy all reasonable judgments, is now surely nowhere to be observed about him at all. In former times, his desire was so intense that he used to find it almost out of his own control, but now all this febrile intensity seems to have gone. Pip's desire has now become paralyzed as it were. It falls into a state of paralysis when its true subject is revealed to him.

Indeed, toward the end of the novel, Pip is found to enter a relationship with Estella in which he cannot love her, or more precisely, in which he is prohibited from loving her. For the discovery Pip makes that Magwitch and Estella are father and daughter turns out to define his love for Estella as quasi-incestuous. Since Magwitch has financially given birth to Pip as it were and has become a second father to him, it turns out that Pip and Estella metaphorically share the same father and therefore stand in the relationship of brother and sister. Pip's love for Estella has become a prohibited and perpetually deferred love: it has fallen

into a state of paralysis. Not that Pip's love is gone exactly; but he finds himself in a position in relation to Estella which structurally denies him any possibility of sexual love. So it is surprisingly appropriate that, in the second ending of the novel which Dickens wrote on Bulwer-Lytton's suggestion, Estella should propose that they should always be friends ever after:

"Be as considerate and good to me as you were, and tell me we are friends."

"We are friends," said I, rising and bending over her, as she rose from the bench.

"And will continue friends apart," said Estella.

I took her hand in mine, and we went out of the ruined place; and, as the morning mists had risen long ago when I first left the forge, so, the evening mists were rising now, and in all the broad expanse of tranquil light they showed to me, I saw no shadow of another parting from her. (493)

Friendship here would suggest that the two will never be separated from each other and yet any possibility of sexual love between them is totally excluded nevertheless. Therefore it would be a mistake to think that Pip speaks of "no shadow of another parting from her" in the sense that they are finally united in love, as, for example, J. Hillis Miller does.<sup>69</sup> Pip and Estella will never part again precisely because they have now entered a relationship which prohibits sexual love. The novel thus ends in a way that emphasizes that Pip's desire has become paralyzed.



We have seen how Pip ceases to live the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham when he knows the true subject of his desire. The most interesting thing about the economy of desire in which Pip is involved is that, when it is at last revealed to him that he has always lived someone else's desire without knowing it, his own desire itself somehow falls into a state of paralysis. At the very moment when Pip is at last enabled to free himself from the control of the desire of Magwitch and Miss Havisham, he finds that he cannot have any desire whatsoever. Pip seems to be

disillusioned not just at unconsciously living the desire of someone else but also at cherishing any desire at all. It seems as if Pip could not have his own desire or any desire at all except when he is living the desire of someone else at the same time. Pip's desire seems to manifest itself solely in the process of being involved in an economy of desire, of which he is unconscious. Therefore, we may say that Pip's dream, or his "expectations," is not only his own desire but also necessarily constitutes an economy of desire at the same time. The moment when the economy of desire fails is the moment when Pip's dream comes to an end.

### Notes

This is a revised version of a paper read at the British Council English Literature Seminar for Postgraduate Students, October 1991.

- (1) Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 89. All page references to the novel are to this edition.
- (2) René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966), pp. 1-52.
- (3) John Kucich, "Action in the Dickens Ending: *Bleak House* and *Great Expectations*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33 (1978), 102: "Pip's love for Estella compels him to pursue an identity that is displaced from himself and his situation, but what Pip 'expects' is vague; it is only something that others seem to have, that he does not."
- (4) Humphry House, *The Dickens World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 156.
- (5) John Carey, *The Violent Effigy: A Study of Dickens' Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 45-46.
- (6) J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (1958; rept. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), pp. 277-78.