

## Notes and Perspectives on Great Expectations

### THE NIGHT SHADOWS

A WONDERFUL fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other. A solemn consideration, when I enter a great city by night, that every one of those darkly clustered houses encloses its own secret; that every room in every one of them encloses its own secret; that every beating heart in the hundreds of thousands of breasts there., is, in some of its imaginings. a secret to the heart nearest it! Something of the Awfulness, even of Death itself, is referable to this. No more can I turn the leaves of this dear book that I loved, and vainly hope in time to read it all. No more can I look into the depths of this unfathomable water, wherein, as momentary lights glanced into it, I have had glimpses of buried treasure and other things submerged. It was appointed that the book should shut with a spring, for ever and for ever, when I had read but a page. It was appointed that the water should be locked in an eternal frost, when the light was playing on its surface, and I stood in ignorance on the shore. . . .It is the inexorable consolidation and perpetuation of the secret that was always in that individuality and which I shall carry in mine to my life's end. In any of the burial-places of this city through which I pass, is there a sleeper more inscrutable than its busy inhabitants are, in their innermost personality, to me, or than I am to them?

from Tale of Two Cities

(chap. 3)

In Great Expectations the dimensions of education are reduced to a single theme, that of learning to read, but the astonishing pervasiveness of that theme carries it far into the heart of the novel. As an abstract proposition it might be said that the act of reading represents an internalizing of experience for the reader, a deepened self-consciousness and at the same time it represents a way to extend the self to others, to form a community even in silence. These functions are diametrically opposed, however: the first of them frees a potentially alienated imagination to retreat within itself, while the second may tempt an individual to action in a world more imagined than real. Pip's career explores these functions one by one and reveals both their comic and tragic possibilities: indeed, the problem of reading correctly, of separating text from fantasy and written from real world, at last comes to serve as one emblem of his disastrous education in the differences between expectations and actuality. At the beginning of his story Pip cannot read, but his efforts to improvise lead him to create fictions, largely about his own forlorn identity, which he foolishly believes. Thereafter, although he learns to read and write in rudimentary fashion in Biddy's school, he falls continually into mistakes of interpretation, so that he launches himself too hastily into a world he has scanned but not yet understood.

Max Byrd, "Reading in Great

Expectations"

It is not properly said that there are three times, past, present, and future. Perhaps it might be said rightly that there are three phases of one time: a time present of things past; a times present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation.

St. Augustine,

Confessions

Creatures of an inferior nature are possess with the present; Man is a future creature.

John Donne, Sermons

Everything [in 19C progressive thinking] hinged on having secure expectations. The fundamental institution of private property was itself only a foundation of expectations. So crucial to liberal man was the sense of secure expectations that ultimately the satisfaction of expectation was identified with justice. In Bentham's jurisprudence justice was defined as the "disappointment—preventing principle," and the whole system of civil law was dedicated to "the exclusion of disappointment." Expectations were deemed fundamental by the liberals not only because they allowed men "to form a general plan of conduct," but because they endowed the individual with an historical identity . . . . Expectations formed the liberal counterpart to the conservative principle of continuity between generations. "It is by means of [expectations] that the successive moments which form the duration of life are not like insulated and independent parts but parts of a continuous whole. Expectation is a chain which unites our present and our future existence and passes beyond us to the generations which follow" {Bentham}.

Sheldon Wolin, Politics and

Vision (329)

Hands may almost be said to speak. Do we not use them to demand, promise, summon, dismiss, threaten, supplicate, express aversion or fear, question or deny.? Do we not use them to indicate joy, sorrow, hesitation, confession, penitence, measure, quantity, number, and time? Have they not the power to excite and prohibit, to express approval, wonder, shame?

Quintillian, Institutio

Oratoria

In my references to repetition and return as a process of "binding," I have had in mind a model of the text suggested by the model of the mental apparatus elaborated by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud's essay takes its departure from the compulsion to repeat that can be noticed in children's games, in literature (the literature of "the uncanny"), in the dreams of traumatic neurotics, which return again and again to the moment of trauma, to relive its pain in apparent contradiction to the wish-fulfillment theory of dreams. Freud is led to postulate that the repetition compulsion constitutes an effort to "bind" mobile energy, to master the flood of stimuli that have breached the shield of the psychic apparatus at the moment of trauma, in order to produce the quiescent cathexis that allows the pleasure principle to assert its dominance in the psychic economy, and to lead energy to orderly and efficient discharge. Repetition as "binding" is, therefore, a primary act, prior to the operations of the pleasure principle and more "primitive": it works to put *affect* into serviceable, controllable form.

Peter Brooks, Reading

for the Plot

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An updated version of Anny Sadrin's chronology for the novel appears in Edgar Rosenberg's Norton Critical Edition of Great Expectations. Her notes refer to Jerome Meckier's 1992 essay in Dickens Studies Annual as the "most exhaustive treatment of the subject."