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## Pip's Sight in *Great Expectations*

Atsuko Yamaguchi

I have previously argued how the theme of “self” and “place” are related in Dickens’s *Great Expectations*, and attributed the protagonist’s mobility, which is a feature of Dickens’s characters more generally, to the author’s projecting the process of securing one’s identity to one’s spatial location. This suggests that Dickens was highly concerned with spatial structure in creating narrative. Here I again consider this problem from the more visual aspect, focusing on the composition of the external world as perceived through Pip’s eyes. In Dickens’s fiction, a visual composition tells as profoundly as a verbal expression.

In first-person narrative, we see the external world through the protagonist’s eyes. With a careful observation of the vision reflected in Pip’s eyes, we notice that Dickens so composed Pip’s vision as to correspond with Pip’s inner condition. Pip’s vision sometimes affects his way of thinking or at other times his inner self is projected onto his vision. One of the most important traits of Pip’s character is that he is a “visionary boy” (345),<sup>1</sup> as Estella calls him. Herbert, Pip’s friend, also describes Pip as “a good fellow, with impetuosity and hesitation, boldness and diffidence, action and dreaming, curiously mixed in him” (234). In fact, Pip’s visionary capability informs in crucial ways in his perception of the external world. So Pip’s understanding of the world is closely involved with the representation of his eyes. It is this trait which helps to explain Pip’s uneasiness over his identity.

The misty marshes in Pip’s native country often appear in both actual

and imaginary form. The marshes represent Pip's original scene and can also be read as signifying the vagueness of Pip's identity. Through the story, Pip identifies the misty marshes with himself. In one sense, Pip's life has been involved with deciphering the misty marshes; near the end of the novel, for example he says, "my great expectations had all dissolved, like our own marsh mists before the sun" (445).

Besides the marshes, Pip has the tendency to try to "read" a phenomenon before him. At the beginning of the novel, the still very young Pip tries to find out the figures of his dead parents from the letters on their tombstones. Here Pip takes his vision as a sign:

As I never saw my father or my mother, and never saw any likeness of either of them (for their days were long before the days of photographs), my first fancies regarding what they were like, were unreasonably derived from their tombstones. The shape of the letters on my father's, gave me an odd idea that he was a square, stout, dark man, with curly black hair. From the character and turn of the inscription, "*Also Georgiana Wife of the Above*," I drew a childish conclusion that my mother was freckled and sickly. (1)

Pip attempts to "see" the figures of his parents whom he had not seen, his origin, with his visual imagination.<sup>2</sup> This tendency of Pip's sometimes makes him run the risk of "misreading" his vision and distances him from reality. When Pip again sees Magwitch in London, who has returned from Australia, Pip feels an excessive abhorrence towards Magwitch at first. Then Pip tries to retrace the signs presaging Magwitch's reappearance in his recent memory:

In every rage of wind and rush of rain, I heard pursuers. Twice, I could have sworn there was a knocking and whispering at the outer

door. With these fears upon me, I began either to imagine or recall that I had had mysterious warnings of this man's approach. That, for weeks gone by, I had passed faces in the streets which I had thought like his. That, these likenesses had grown more numerous, as he, coming over the sea, had drawn nearer. That, his wicked spirit had somehow sent these messengers to mine, and that now on this stormy night he was as good as his word, and with me. (308)

Pip tries to catch the prophetic sign of Magwitch's reappearance by looking into the past. Here we can see again that Pip relies on his own visionary capability to read visual phenomena as "signs and tokens."<sup>3</sup>

Pip's eyes not only create an imaginary world but fix the imaginary in his inner self. In other words, Pip projects a vision inward in the form of a thought. Conversely, Pip sometimes believes his own thoughts are externalised in his vision. In Satis House, he sees his painful emotion towards Estella, whom he loves, as "written" into his sight:

My thoughts passed into the great room across the landing where the table was spread, and I saw it written, as it were, in the falls of the cobwebs from the centrepiece, in the crawlings of the spiders on the cloth, in the tracks of the mice as they betook their little quickened hearts behind the panels, and in the gropings and pausings of the beetles on the floor. (289)

Here Pip senses that his inner self is projected onto his vision of the room. Thus Pip not only internalises his vision in his ideas, but also projects his ideas into his vision. We see the ambiguous border between the external world and his inner self. This ambiguity causes him to misread the vision as he has done with the figures of his parents which he "reads" from the letters on the tombstones.

Next I would like to see how the world outside has been incorporated in the framework of Pip's vision, and in particular one compositional change of his world view resulting from the gain and the loss of his "great expectations."

The most significant but latent conception connected with Pip's vision is the dualism of upper and lower built into notions of the perpendicular. In several crucial episodes, Dickens undertakes a perpendicular structuring of character and event, the composition emphasising the upper and the lower position. In the following passage, Pip relates the upper and the lower position to a conception of good and bad, in ways that follow a conventional Christian figuring of upper and lower:

At the time when I stood in the churchyard, reading the family tombstones, I had just enough learning to be able to spell them out. My construction even of their simple meaning was not very correct, for I read "wife of the Above" as a complimentary reference to my father's exaltation to a better world; and if any one of my deceased relations had been referred to as "Below," I have no doubt I should have formed the worst opinions of that member of the family. (39)

Learning to read is also the start of misreading for Pip. Here he combines the word "Above" which originally means "mentioned above" with good, and "Below" with bad. Pip grasps the idea of good and bad, high and low, upper-class and lower-class in the upper and the lower components of his visual composition. In other words, Pip "reads" the conception of good and bad in terms of position within a visual field. In the scene of the first dramatic encounter between Pip and Magwitch in the graveyard, Magwitch appears from below before Pip:

"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!" (1-2)

In their second encounter in Pip's chambers in London, Magwitch comes up from downstairs, and Pip takes Magwitch's footsteps for those of his dead sister:

Remembering then that the staircase lights were blown out, I took up my reading-lamp and went out to the stair-head. Whoever was below had stopped on seeing my lamp, for all was quiet.

"There is some one down there, is there not?" I called out, looking down.

"Yes, " said a voice from the darkness beneath.

"What floor do you want?"

"The top. Mr. Pip."

"That is my name. —There is nothing the matter?"

"Nothing the matter," returned the voice. And the man came on. (299)

In contrast to Magwitch, Estella is located above in Pip's sight. She appears over Pip from upstairs like a star: "her light came along the dark passage like a star" (54), or walks on the casks and disappears into the sky in Pip's imaginary vision:

But she seemed to be everywhere. For, when I yielded to the temptation presented by the casks, and began to walk on them, I saw *her* walking on them at the end of the yard of casks. She had her back towards me, and held her pretty brown hair spread out in her two hands, and never looked round, and passed out of my view directly. So, in the brewery itself—by which I mean the large paved lofty place in which they used to make the beer, and where the brewing utensils

still were. When I first went into it, and, rather oppressed by its gloom, stood near the door looking about me, I saw her pass among the extinguished fires, and ascend some light iron stairs, and go out by a gallery high overhead, as if she were going out into the sky. (58-59)

Dickens arranges the composition with Estella in the upper position in the process of Pip's mystifying and adoring her. This composition becomes simultaneously the very projection of Pip's inner world. Pip fantasizes that Estella ascends into the sky just like "exaltation to a better world" which Pip imagined from the letters on his dead father's tombstone. In both cases Pip takes the upper as a signifier of good. Thus Pip's perception of the upper and the lower position within his field of vision constitutes a dualistic iconography of high and low, a system for ranking human-beings or determining superficial good and bad. At the same time, positing the upper and the lower in his inner scene projected by the world outside, Pip tries to seek the centre as his own position. This "centring" of self is how Pip seeks to find his lost identity and fill his empty self. Pip tries to construct his own order by the facility of his eyes.

This tendency towards a perpendicular ordering of experience is also the embodiment of rigid artificial order.<sup>4</sup> In the scene of the first encounter with Magwitch in the graveyard, Pip is picked up and turned upside down by Magwitch who searches in Pip's pocket:

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself—for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet—when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread raven-

ously. (2)

About this scene, Nancy K. Hill suggests “Pip’s maturation involves learning about inversions, that things are not always what they seem, that the solutions to perplexing situations must be sought in himself rather than the world outside.”<sup>5</sup> I would like to add that the perpendicular of the figure of a church is the symbol of the dualistic idea of good and bad. By the swift inversion of the upper and the lower of a church through Pip’s eyes, the world outside suddenly loses sense. Here we can regard the existence of the church as one example of artificial moral order in the novel. The sight of the inverted steeple under Pip’s legs gives him a shock. This scene reminds us of another shocking experience which Dickens himself experienced when he was a child:

The coffee-shops to which I most resorted were, one in Maiden Lane; one in a court (non-existent now) close to Hungerford Market; and one in St. Martin’s Lane, of which I only recollect that it stood near the church, and that in the door there was an oval glass plate, with COFFEE-ROOM painted on it, addressed towards the street. If I ever find myself in a very different kind of coffee-room now, but where there is such an inscription on glass, and read it backward on the wrong side MOOR-EEFFOC (as I often used to do then, in a dismal reverie), a shock goes through my blood.<sup>6</sup>

Letters written in correct sequence can be regarded as one visual order. The shocks both Pip and Dickens received are caused by the deconstruction of order and sense which their eyes are normally used to seeing. One of the meanings of sense is the direction of a vector, and Dickens uses an upward-directed vector in his scenic composition to show the process of Pip’s acquiring rigid sense and order. The inverted steeple of the church



becomes nonsense like the reversed letters, MOOR-EEFFOC. The order constructed by optical composition is deconstructed by optical composition itself. This process of deconstruction is totally in the opposite direction of the process in which the letter D for young Pip becomes an alphabet from a design for a buckle: “a large old English D. . . which I supposed, until she [Biddy] told me what it was, to be a design for a buckle” (69). The inverted world which little Pip sees is the suggestion that the world from one point of view can be quite a different one from another point of view. It is, however, equally what it is. In this way, Dickens warns us against seeing the world from only one viewpoint.

A gibbet in the marshes is manipulated as the cruellest symbol of the perpendicular in the novel. At the end of Chapter I, Magwitch goes back in the direction of a gibbet after ordering little Pip to fetch him food and a file:

The marshes were just a long black horizontal line then, as I stopped to look after him; and the river was just another horizontal line, not nearly so broad nor yet so black; and the sky was just a row of long angry red lines and dense black lines intermixed. 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—like an unhooped cask upon a pole—an ugly thing when you were near it; the other a gibbet, with some chains hanging to it which had once held a pirate. The man was limping on towards this latter, as if he were the pirate come to life, and come down, and going back to hook himself up again. (4-5)

The gibbet, as one perpendicular structure, stands against the horizontal river and the marshes. Those who are sentenced under the name of law and order are hanged from the perpendicular. The most horrifying per-

pendicular in Dickens's fiction is "La Guillotine" in *A Tale of Two Cities*. A man is judged by the law of the perpendicular sense in this world. Dickens frequently describes a villain's dying in the form of falling. In *Oliver Twist*, Bill Sikes, who is pursued to the roof of the building, falls off with a noose around his neck as if he were hanged. Similarly Quilp in *The Old Curiosity Shop* drowns in the river and is carried to the pirates' gibbet. When Pip is attacked by Orlick in a hut near the limekiln, Pip is bound to the perpendicular ladder:

He lighted the candle from the flaring match with great deliberation, and dropped the match, and trod it out. Then, he put the candle away from him on the table, so that he could see me, and sat with his arms folded on the table and looked at me. I made out that I was fastened to a stout perpendicular ladder a few inches from the wall—a fixture there—the means of ascent to the loft above. (402)

Those perpendiculars—a gibbet, a guillotine, hanging, binding to a ladder—are connected with images of crime and control. Old Bill Barley, who is Clara's bedridden father, threatens the people downstairs by his growling and swearing from upstairs. His name reminds us of the Old Bailey which means the London Central Criminal Court. Old Barley keeps food and serves out a little to his daughter. Old Barley seems for Pip "truculent Ogre" (356), and poor Clara, a "captive fairy" (356). Herbert says to Pip: "He [Old Barley] persists, too, in keeping all the provisions up-stairs in his room, and serving them out. He keeps them on shelves over his head, and *will* weigh them all. His room must be like a chandler's shop" (355). The word "weigh" is a symbol of the court. The uncanny existence of invisible Old Barley upstairs can be regarded as a symbol of merciless order and control.

Pip's social ascension is also represented as an upward vector along the

perpendicular. However, it is not a stable rise. On his first day in London, Pip is guided to Herbert's shabby lodgings by Wemmick:

He led me into a corner and conducted me up a flight of stairs—which appeared to me to be slowly collapsing into sawdust, so that one of those days the upper lodgers would look out at their doors and find themselves without the means of coming down—to a set of chambers on the top floor. (163)

This is one example where Dickens expresses Pip's unsubstantial social rise with an architectural description. When Pip's dream is destroyed with the reappearance of Magwitch, Pip thinks that "the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me" (297). The shift from the idea of the perpendicular to that of the horizontal in Pip's mind is conveyed in terms of a process of collapse. The collapse of the edifice can be regarded as the levelling of the perpendicular.

Compared with the perpendicular which signifies the superficial dualism of good and bad, class-consciousness, crime, control, and order, the horizontal denotes equality, generosity, and chaos. So horizontal objects are signs of the dissolution of the dualism of "the high" and "the low" in the social body. They sometimes appears in the form of nature against the artificiality of the perpendicular. The marshes and the Thames typify the horizontal. Pip and Magwitch escape from the law on the Thames. The river is a typical symbol of the horizontal in Dickens. The river gives Pip a new hope after the deconstruction of the "false gentleman": "The crisp air, the sunlight, the movement on the river, and the moving river itself—the road that ran with us, seeming to sympathise with us, animate us, and encourage us on—freshened me with new hope" (412). Dickens sometimes uses a river as a metaphor of eternity above the temporal secular world in his fiction. In *Little Dorrit*, Dickens makes a river a moral focus thus:

Young or old, passionate or tranquil, chafing or content, you, thus runs the current always. Let the heart swell into what discord it will, thus plays the rippling water on the prow of the ferry-boat ever the same tune. Year after year, so much allowance for the drifting of the boat, so many miles an hour the flowing of the stream, here the rushes, there the lilies, nothing uncertain or unquiet, upon this road that steadily runs away; while you, upon your flowing road of time, are so capricious and distracted.<sup>7</sup>

Here a river exists as a symbol of unchangeable nature against the mundane human affairs of the world. In Pip's eyes, the river overlaps with another horizontal, the marshes:

It was like my own marsh country, flat and monotonous, and with a dim horizon. (416)

The marshes represent Pip's deprived identity. So this overlap of the river and the marshes suggests that Pip must reestablish his identity from the start, not as a false gentleman but as himself.

Pip's plan to help Magwitch escape fails, but Compeyson fights with Magwitch and falls from the boat and drowns. Dickens, however, does not give Magwitch a death by drowning in the river or by hanging on the gibbet like other villains. When Magwitch is put on trial in the court, Pip sees the horizon created by the sunlight from the windows of the court:

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. (434)

Pip sees equality among human-beings in the sunlight. J. Hillis Miller reads this scene religiously: "There is a true religious motif here."<sup>8</sup> I would also add that this scene also indicates the shift from the perpendicular to the horizontal in Pip's mind. Here the horizontal effect operates utmost in the novel. From "signs and tokens" in his vision, Pip discovers the fact that Magwitch and Estella are father and daughter. This fact affects nobody but Pip, though Pip's confession that he loves Magwitch's daughter delights Magwitch. This is very rare in Dickens's novels where the revelations of secret blood relationships are usually centred in the plot. We can read that the disclosure of the parent-child relationship between Magwitch and Estella is significant only for Pip. The combination of Estella who is representative of the upper and Magwitch who is representative of the lower denotes the dissolution of Pip's dualism. At the end of the novel, after returning from abroad, Pip finds Satis House destroyed. He realises that Satis House is not a castle in a fairy-tale world as reflected in his eyes, but the edifice which taught him the dualism of high and low in society. Pip's journey from falsehood to reality is simultaneous with the transformation from the perpendicular-oriented sense to the horizontal in his inner composition.

## Notes

1. Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1953; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 345. All page references to the novel are to this edition.
2. Some critics have given attention to the scene of Pip's decipherment of the tombstone. Murray Baumgarten says, "Here writing has an ideographic quality; it is pictorial rather than or in addition to phonetic writing. In the child's eye, its calligraphic qualities release secrets which the printed world of books conceals.

- The letters of his parents' names serve as visual cues and clues." Murray Baumgarten, "Calligraphy and Code: Writing in *Great Expectations*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 11 (1983): 62. Peter Brooks points out that "the tracing of the name—which he [Pip] has already distorted in its application to self—involves a misguided attempt to remotivate the graphic symbol, to make it directly mimetic, mimetic specifically of origin." Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 115-116.
3. "Signs and tokens" are the words used by Dickens himself as the title of a chapter in *Bleak House*.
  4. Nikolaus Pevsner points out that the perpendicular is a sign of conservatism and the perpendicular preference of the English in his discussion on the Englishness in the perpendicular style of ecclesiastical architecture. Nikolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (1956; London: Penguin, 1993) 90-127.
  5. Nancy K. Hill, *A Reformer's Art: Dickens' Picturesque and Grotesque Imagery* (Athens: Ohio UP, 1981) 124.
  6. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*. vol.1 ed. A. J. Hoppé (1966; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1969) 25.
  7. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1953; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996) 191.
  8. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1969) 277.