Great Expectations

CHARLES DICKENS began 'meditating a new book' in August 1860; there was scarcely a time in his life, in fact, when he was not actively concerned with the prospects or the writing of a new novel. Fiction was his life, especially when his mundane life stretched bleakly around him. In the period when he began to consider *Great Expectations*, for example, his favourite daughter had left home for an unsuitable marriage, his brother had died, his mother was in the last stages of senile decay, and he was engaged in his obsessive and apparently hopeless relationship with Ellen Ternan. 'But we must not think of old times as sad times,' he wrote to a friend in this period. '. . . We must all climb steadily up the mountain.' And, just three weeks later, he began *Great Expectations* which looks back at the 'old times' from a new and heightened perspective.

He began writing at the end of September, although in fact the germ of the new story was planted by him in an essay he started to write in his guise as the 'Uncommercial Traveller'. But at the prompting of a friend he decided to write an essay in his 'old' humorous manner – the humour of *David Copperfield* as well as of *The Pickwick Papers* – and then, while preparing it, he was visited by a 'very fine, new, and grotesque idea . . .' This 'idea' was related to the young boy, Pip, and the convict, Magwitch – and to the extraordinary bond which links them together over so many years; no doubt it flashed so vividly before him because it is in one sense a 'grotesque' enlargement of his own relations with his father, John Dickens. At once Dickens saw the possibilities of a 'serial' in it and had every intention of resuming his familiar pattern of

twenty monthly numbers or episodes. But then commercial considerations altered his plans. The problem lay with *All The Year Round*, the sales of which were slipping with the serialisation of a disastrous novel by Charles Lever; Dickens was always aware of his 'pulling' power, and so he decided to step in at once with something of his own to bolster the flagging circulation. Thus was *Great Expectations* born.

He started work at the beginning of October and, since he already knew that these were to be the adventures of 'a boy-child, like David', he read over *David Copperfield* to avoid undue similarities. He hardly needed to have done so, however, since all the experiences of his recent life seem to have resulted in a sea-change in his characterisation of the boy and the young man; where Copperfield had been industrious, energetic and ambitious, Pip is guilty, self-deceived and secretive. Certainly Dickens knew what he wanted to achieve with this novel characterisation of Pip, because he was working quickly and easily upon the narrative. By the end of the month he had in fact written seven chapters – 'I MUST write,' he said, as if it were only in the act of composition that he could find any kind of resolution within his own troubled life. As if in creating Pip he was allaying his own fears by giving them external shape and meaning.

Much of his own childhood (and therefore adult consciousness) is to be found somewhere within these pages. Pip is a very anxious, guilty, apprehensive, sensitive, angry, quick child and many of his anxieties are centred upon the fact that he feels himself to be degraded by his familial situation. 'It is a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home,' he confesses at one point; one may recall how the young Dickens, determined not to reveal the fact that his father was in the Marshalsea Prison, pretended that he lived near Southwark Bridge. And then there is the scene when Pip makes up stories about Miss Havisham and her house, which he explains by saying that 'I knew I was common, and that I wished I was not common, and that the lies had come of it somehow, though I

didn't know how.' In the narrative, it is clear that he made up these lies or stories (and is not fiction itself a lie?) simply because he did not want to reveal his sense of degradation at the hands of Miss Havisham's ward, Estella. So he invents an entirely different scene in which no hurt exists, and thereby comforts himself. Yet this is the paradox: the more he tells fanciful stories, the more dissatisfied he becomes with his humble home and 'common' relatives. It is hard not to remember once more Dickens's own autobiographical fragment here, at that point where he himself tells stories to the 'common men and boys' among whom he worked in the blacking factory by Hungerford Stairs – at a time when he deeply felt his own degradation and that of his family. Perhaps, in his telling lies and stories to protect or console himself, we may see one of the origins of his fiction. Of course that degradation was never mentioned in later years – or, to quote the words of the anxious Pip once again '. . . the secret was such an old one now, had so grown into me and become a part of myself, that I could not tear it away . . .' If Dickens is indeed creating an image of his childhood here, it is in a spirit quite different from that which launched the energetic Copperfield upon the world.

Great Expectations is, in other words, a work of great psychological accuracy and observation. It is almost as if Dickens were examining himself as he wrote, determining the nature of ambition and 'gentility', and scrutinising the nature of a man whose adult life still seemed to owe so much to the horrors of his childhood. The horror – that is what Pip is most aware of, also, and in the first pages of the narrative he declares that '. . . I have often thought that few people know what secrecy there is in the young, under terror.' On more than one occasion he emphasises the 'terror of childhood', and it is through the wide eyes of the frightened child that we first see Miss Havisham and Magwitch. But although these characters have an extraordinary power and presence, like hallucinations made flesh, they derive from Dickens's own nervous

preoccupations: '. . . how strange it was,' Pip says while meditating upon his connection with Magwitch, 'that I should be encompassed by all this taint of prison and crime . . .' This was also the taint which the young Dickens felt when he walked to the Marshalsea each evening to have supper with his family – the young boy still existing within the famous novelist who never tired of visiting prisons and talking to prisoners, of writing about them in his journalism, of recreating them in his fiction.

Pip is Dickens, but Dickens is not Pip – in other words, only certain characteristics and concerns of the writer are redeployed in the creation of the fictional boy and young man. Certainly we see the presence of the novelist in such details as Pip arriving hours early to greet Estella's coach (Dickens himself was always *too* punctual) and on such occasions as that when Pip reads a book with his watch on the table so that he can stop at precisely eleven o'clock. But it would be wrong to carry the identification too far and assert, for example, that in the strange and troubled relationship between Pip and Estella Dickens was projecting something of his own friendship with Ellen Ternan – and that in the cool, self-possessed, heartless Estella he was portraying the young actress. It is most unlikely. One can only say with confidence that it was highly appropriate he should be dealing with the miseries and mysteries of love at this point in his own life: 'I thought that with her I could have been happy here for life. (I was not at all happy there at the time, observe, and I knew it well.)' Perhaps that is also why the authorial interventions in this novel are not on the same public and social level as they had been in *Little Dorrit* or *Bleak House*; the tone here is more private, sometimes a little fretful, sometimes a little sour, but with a sharp edge of self-communing always present.

It says something about his own state of mind, as well, that he suffered from a variety of neuralgic ailments throughout the writing of this novel in the autumn and winter of 1860: sometimes pain attacked him in the side, sometimes in the

face. It is almost as if he were again becoming the 'sickly' child he once had been, precisely at the time when he was recreating Pip. It was a very cold winter also, and he stayed in London during most of January in order to be close to his doctor. Nevertheless he managed to work quickly on the book, although the need to produce short weekly instalments was proving to be something of a burden. 'As to the planning out from week to week,' he wrote, 'nobody can imagine what the difficulty is, without trying. But, as in all such cases, when it is overcome the pleasure is proportionate . . .' That is the true spirit of Dickens: difficulties are there only to be overcome, troubles fought down, illnesses subdued, anxieties warded off. And so he worked on despite neuralgic ailments and the usual round of public duties and engagements which he could not now avoid.

At the end of May he took a Thames steamer with some friends in order to study the nature of the tides before he described Magwitch's abortive escape towards the end of the narrative; and then, in the following month, he organised all his dates and memoranda in order to arrive at the proper conclusion to the novel – a conclusion in which Pip walks along Piccadilly and there glimpses Estella, realising all at once that 'suffering . . . had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be'. As soon as Dickens had finished the book, his neuralgia vanished. It is a fine ending, but it is not the one which you will usually read. For he was persuaded to change it by his contemporary and fellow novelist, Bulwer Lytton, who believed that it would be too bleakly melancholic for Dickens's readers. Dickens concurred in this judgement – he had, after all, a horror of offending or alienating his public in any way – and so softened the conclusion with the more benign words which you will find at the end of most editions.

No doubt, whatever the ending, the book would have been a success. It was almost immediately issued in a three-volume format, and the newspaper reviewers welcomed it as a return to his old 'humorous' manner after the excesses of *Bleak House*

and *Little Dorrit*. This was Dickens the 'entertainer' once again, and indeed there are certain passages and episodes here which conjure up scenes from his early fiction; the episodes concerning Mr Wopsle and the amateur players, for example, might have come straight out of the pages of *Nicholas Nickleby*. Nevertheless the real comedy of the book is darker and more troubled, just as Miss Havisham and Jaggers are quite different from Mrs Nickleby and the Cheeryble brothers. There is also an undercurrent of violence here, which is linked with the major preoccupations of the story – what is the meaning of the past which imbues the present like a stain, what is the nature of true gentility in a world where aspirations and ambitions can become mere tokens of anxiety and emptiness? It is a book about the nature of passion and the survival of guilt, a book about hypocrisy, meanness, and all those 'low and small' things of which Pip finds himself guilty. Most important of all, it is a book about growing up – and not the least of Dickens's achievements is to have written in *Great Expectations* a story quite different from that of *David Copperfield*.

There is a wonderful scene towards the close of the book; it is what Dickens would have called a 'picture', and there are times in his correspondence and in his working notes when he emphasises the power of such a 'picture' to represent the meaning of the book on a different level from words alone. The scene occurs when Abel Magwitch is condemned to death along with thirty-two other criminals: '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 . . .' This image, of the light uniting the judge and the condemned, is one that comes to the root of Dickens's sense of life in this novel – where he lives within Pip and yet exists outside him, and where the preoccupations of his own life are lent an impersonal power. Amongst all the violence, and the sentimentality, and the melodrama, and the comedy,

there is always here some sense of transcendence, some visionary apprehension which unites all the rich confusion of his fictional world. *Great Expectations* is one of his finest achievements.