Early Stream-of-Consciousness Writing: Great Expectations

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Much of the recent criticism of Great Expectations has dealt with the surrealist elements to be found in it. Among others Dorothy Van Ghent, Joseph Hynes, and Harry Stone have made it increasingly clear that the underlying design of Dickens's novel is less simple than had been heretofore recognized. Since the term "surrealism" can be applied to different art forms and can thus have several different meanings, it is curious that stream-of-consciousness, a strictly literary technique related in a general way to the surrealist movement, has from time to time been mentioned in connection with Dickens's writing but never traced in any detail throughout the novels. Great Expectations in particular would seem to have many of the characteristics of the technique, close examination of which not only provides greater insight into the workings of the novel, but into Dickens's general style as well. It may not be the complex novel that twentieth-century readers of Joyce and Woolf have grown to expect, but Dickens's experiments with stream-of-consciousness in Great Expectations may be responsible to some degree for the book's effect on modern readers.

That Dickens should arrive at simple forms of stream-of-consciousness is not surprising, for he was throughout his life a conscious manipulator of readers' emotions both as a writer of novels and as a public reader of them. His pleasure in exciting and controlling his audience frequently led him to indulge in descriptions of violence, arch-villainy, mystery, flights and pursuits, and other

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melodramatic stock-in-trade. Well aware of the attraction of repulsion, Dickens often let his imagination play upon macabre or sadistic situations, leading some critics to suggest that his appeals for sympathy for the sufferings of the underdog at the hands of a brutal and callous society may have been more related to his interest in commercial success than to any artistic purpose. However, as Stone asserts, the lasting success Dickens has enjoyed could have come only to a conscious artist capable of capturing "the evanescent and yet infinite quality of experience." 1 In spite of the restrictions imposed by Victorian society, the phenomenal career of Charles Dickens reveals an equally phenomenal growth of artistic sophistication in the representation of such immediacy of experience in his novels.

As early as 1926 Wyndham Lewis called attention to the similarity between the thoughtstream of Leopold Bloom in Ulysses and the conversations of Jingle in Pickwick Papers, 2 a resemblance which Leon Edel later acknowledged at the same time he denied any similarity in meaning: 3 Melvin Friedman, too, has found the comparisons without significance. 4 In defense of Lewis, however, Harry Levin states that it would be difficult to distinguish between Jingle and Bloom, 5 while Harry Stone points out that although Jingle's speech, in contrast to Bloom's, is coherent and manneristic, the later development of Dickens's style shows him to have been increasingly concerned with the verbal representation of private consciousness. Speaking generally, Stone points to Dickens's frequent use of rambling thought and soliloquy and his growing reliance upon such devices as discontinuity of plot, the flow of sharp images and fleeting associations, and the private quality of experience as it impinges on consciousness. 6 Jean McClure Kelty also notes that Dickens foreshadowed quite clearly the styles of Joyce, Richardson, and Woolf, 7 and Randolph Quirk states that Dickens "anticipates the more recent stream-of-consciousness techniques." 8

2. "Mr. Jingle and Mr. Bloom," The Art of Being Ruled (New York, 1926), pp. 413-16.
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Still another critic, Jacob Isaacs, goes so far as to suggest that Joyce got the idea of stream-of-consciousness from Dickens, "a master of montage and a master of texture," ⁹ a view with which V. S. Pritchett would presumably agree, for he wrote that "There is more of Dickens, to my mind, in James Joyce's Ulysses than in books like Kipps or Tono Bungay." ¹⁰ Though admittedly other writers such as Edouard Dujardin, who was experimenting with direct interior monologue in 1887 in his novel Les lauriers sont coupés, would have to be taken into consideration in any study of sources or influence, there is strong evidence to credit Dickens with a major role in the use and refinement of the technique. In Great Expectations in particular the reader finds a probing interest in the individual consciousness leading to sophisticated use of interior monologue and time and character montages—all characteristic of the techniques used by the stream-of-consciousness writers to follow Dickens.

There are certain points of agreement between surrealistic and stream-of-consciousness writing. Both dwell on the threshold of subconscious mental activity. Where the surrealist uses automatic writing to obtain the suggestions of the subconscious mental states, the stream-of-consciousness writer attempts to re-create the subconscious mental state of a character. The works of the first are, as Georges Lemaitre has observed, products of "a spontaneous creative instinct having its roots at the very bottom of our consciousness," ¹¹ and their bizarre quality is reflective of an order which is entirely different from that perceived by the conscious mind and senses. ¹² The works of the second, the stream-of-consciousness writers, have many of the same characteristics. They, too, are bizarre, superficially chaotic, based on an order not recognized by the conscious mind. Yet they are not produced by a disordered mind; they are the creations of a highly organized intelligence attempting to re-create basic aspects of private consciousness. In this sense it is more accurate to refer to Great Expectations as a stream-of-consciousness novel than as a surrealistic novel.

However, the surrealists' view of children is applicable to Great Expectations. Surrealists tend to assume all young children live

¹². Ibid., p. 207.
mostly in an enchanted, miraculous place halfway between reality and a dream world. Since children live at the intersection of these two existences, they successfully blend fact and fancy, and thus intuitively grasp, in Lemaitre's words, "the elusive, mysterious soul of the universe." 13 For a child there is no clean-cut separation between his imagination and his surroundings. Instead, there is a fusion of the two which is comparable to the fusion by the artist of the individual and the world around him, the internal and the external. In these terms the stream-of-consciousness elements in *Great Expectations* are as evident as the surrealistic ones, for facts (the world, external reality) are seen only in terms of an individual fancy (imagination, internal existence). Thus there is an inevitable blending of the two in an individual consciousness. The two distinct areas of existence do come into conflict, but a resolution of sorts must be effected by the individual if he is to retain his sanity.

Indeed, the stream-of-consciousness novel is distinguished by its subject matter: the consciousness of one or more characters. Robert Humphrey defines it as "a type of fiction in which the basic emphasis is placed on exploration of the prespeech levels of consciousness for the purpose, primarily, of revealing the psychic being of the characters." 14 It is concerned, as Humphrey points out, with a character's mental experiences (sensations, memories, imaginations, conceptions, intuitions) and spiritual experiences (symbolizations, feelings, processes of association). Thus the narrator becomes relatively unimportant, for the major concern of the author is the psychic life of the protagonist. As Stephen Dedalus says, "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." 15 The reader is theoretically brought into contact with life as free from interpretation, propaganda, or editing as the author can make it.

In general Dickens accepted the point of view of the omniscient author. Three times he attempted the first-person narrative: in *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and half of *Bleak House*. Of these *Great Expectations* is generally conceded to be his most careful and successful attempt. First-person narration is important in the latter in this work because Dickens is working primarily

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13. Ibid., p. 194.
with the mental and spiritual experiences of the protagonist. *Great Expectations*, therefore, represents a departure from Dickens's usual practice in its more complex treatment of the private consciousness of the characters.\(^{16}\) In this drama of an individual conscience and its enlightenment, the main character moves from innocence through mock-sophistication to wisdom. Pip is not a static but a developing character who is molded and remolded by the people and experiences he meets. Because the effects of those meetings are seen from inside the protagonist, the entire psychological being is developed. By taking the reader within the hero's mind, as Thomas Connolly points out,\(^{17}\) Dickens presents a full portrait of the man growing from the boy. The reader is not allowed to be just an external observer, but experiences Pip's maturation from the vantage point of his, the reader's, own feelings. Such is, of course, the object of any stream-of-consciousness novel.

According to Robert Humphrey there are four basic techniques for presenting stream-of-consciousness writing: (1) the direct interior monologue, (2) the indirect interior monologue, (3) description by an omniscient author, and (4) the dramatized unconscious. There are also a number of minor techniques which can be used. Three of the principal methods and some of the minor ones are present in *Great Expectations*.

The direct interior monologue aims at representing the contents and processes of the mind as they exist at prespeech levels. Harry Stone defines the interior monologue as a literary attempt to "render in written words that semistructured and evanescent aspect of private consciousness which is composed of disorganized and yet meaningfully associated speech-thought."\(^ {18}\) In the direct interior monologue the narrator is invisible and "paring his nails." Stone recognizes that in his later novels Dickens was capable of representing consciousness by the interior monologue technique, and asserts that in some of his lesser-known short pieces he came close to the interior monologues of the twentieth century.\(^ {19}\) However, in

\(^{16}\) See the discussions by Edmund Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow* (Cambridge, 1941), p. 65; Robert G. Stange, "Expectations Well Lost," *GE* 16 (1954): 9-17; and Thomas E. Connolly, "Technique in *Great Expectations*," *Philological Quarterly* 34 (1955): 52; all note the deepening psychological interest of *Great Expectations* over Dickens's earlier novels.

\(^{17}\) P. 52.

\(^{18}\) Pp. 52-53.

\(^{19}\) P. 56.
Great Expectations, certainly not a "lesser-known short piece," Dickens skillfully renders an individual consciousness. A major portion of the novel is concerned with the presentation not of external action but of the drama taking place in Pip's mind as he assesses the world and tries to find his place in it. Dickens does strive to maintain a degree of narrative coherence while depicting the images and associations of Pip's mind, but the qualities of rambling thought, discontinuity, and private associations are strongly evident. For example, the book begins not with the depiction of some grand action, but with a young boy staring at five graves and indulging in two aspects of mental activity: memory and imagination.

My 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 Alexander, Bartholomew, Abraham, Tobias, and Roger, the infant children of the aforesaid, were also 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 that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip.20

A short time later the convict forces the reader upside down along with Pip:

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 ravenously. (2)

In both excerpts there is a freedom and fluidity of syntax which correspond to the darting impressions within the frightened child's mind.

The indirect monologue differs from the direct only because it less intensely reflects the inner workings of the mind of the protagonist. The reader is more aware of the author's presence, for though unspoken material is still presented as if it were directly

from the consciousness of a character, there is a wider use of descriptive and expository techniques. Scenes can be more dramatized, or the point of view can shift to third person. In other words, the reader goes in and out of the character's mind; he is not strictly imprisoned within it. Thus, the indirect monologue fulfills its function as Humphrey defines it by creating in the reader "a sense of the author's continuous presence." 21 The arrival of Magwitch at Pip's London abode late at night is such a scene. The reader is led into it by following the impressions and reflections of Pip as he sits alone. When a footstep is heard on the stair, the reader is drawn out of Pip's consciousness and into a scene which is partly dramatized and partly mental.

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.

I stood with my lamp held out over the stair rail, and he came slowly within its light. It was a shaded lamp, to shine upon a book, and its circle of light was very contracted; so that he was in it for a mere instant, and then out of it. In the instant I had seen a face that was strange to me, looking up with an incomprehensible air of being touched and pleased by the sight of me. (319)

The scene continues to alternate between dialogue and the private thoughts of Pip. The dialogue carries the action forward, but Pip's thoughts set the atmosphere of mystery, dismay, and confusion. The reader is still looking through Pip's eyes, though with less intensity than in the direct interior monologue quoted earlier.

While the use of the dramatized unconscious as found in the Circe episode of Ulysses is a far more complex instance than one finds in Great Expectations, Dickens often uses analogous techniques. Indeed, Miss Havisham spends her life dramatizing what is only a painful memory. Her house, her dress, her wedding cake, her refusal to allow the passage of time—all are external objectifi-

cations of what exists in her mind. At one point she speculates upon the future, dramatizing what she imagines will happen.

"When the ruin is complete," said she, with a ghastly look, "and when they lay me dead, in my bride's dress on the bride's table—which shall be done, and which will be the finished curse upon him—so much the better if it is done on this day!"

She stood looking at the table as if she stood looking at her own figure lying there. I remained quiet. Estella returned, and she too remained quiet. It seemed to me that we continued thus a long time. In the heavy air of the room, and the heavy darkness that brooded in its remoter corners, I even had an alarming fancy that Estella and I might presently begin to decay. (89)

A still more unusual use of the dramatic, though in this instance the dramatic conscious rather than unconscious, is the portrayal of Mrs. Joe when she suffers the attack from Orlick; losing her power of speech, she is forced to communicate solely by charades. Wemmick's Aged Parent also must dramatically externalize his wishes and his reflections.

The communication, or lack of it, in Great Expectations has been the subject of some debate. Much of what has been said is relevant to the discussion of stream-of-consciousness in the novel. V. S. Pritchett states, "The people and the things of Dickens are all out of touch and out of hearing of each other, each conducting its own inner monologue, grandiloquent or dismaying." 22 Dorothy Van Ghent also claims that "a fantastic private language... unadapted to mutual understanding" 23 is created for various characters, and goes on to point out four specific instances in which communication between people breaks down. These include Joe's interview with Mr. Jaggers, Miss Havisham's interview with Joe on Pip's wages, Pip's lack of progress in the school of Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, and Joe's pleasure in reading J's and O's. Such soliloquizing suggests to Miss Van Ghent a "world of isolated integers, terrifyingly alone and unrelated." 24 George Levine would seem to agree, for he says of the novel's characters, "Communication, in a sense that would have been meaningful in any ordered society, is beginning to fail them." 25

24. Ibid., p. 127.
25. "Communication in Great Expectations," NCF 18 (1963): 181. It should be noted that Ruth Vande Kleef disagrees with the argument that there is a failure in com-
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The characters' lack of rapport and exchange is described by Pritchett, Miss Van Ghent, and Levine as having only social ramifications, reflecting a world made lonely and cold by social abuse and industrial automation. Equally fascinating, however, is the development of literary technique evident in the communications failure in Great Expectations. Each character in the novel is dramatizing his unconscious, for each is acting on the limited and isolated bits of memory, sense impressions, and imagination which belong to him. Dickens's interest lay in the internal action of individual consciousness rather than in the interactions of the characters. Only Joe is involved to any degree with the fortunes of another. Magwitch, of course, desires to make Pip into a gentleman, but he acts from intensely personal motives and in ignorance of what he is doing to Pip. Except for Joe, and perhaps Biddy, all the characters of Great Expectations collide when they meet each other and exist in separate, incohesive worlds.

The montage, another device used in many stream-of-consciousness novels, is also present in Great Expectations. D. W. Griffith, who introduced montage into motion pictures, says that he developed the technique after studying Dickens's Oliver Twist and for the purpose of depicting the multiplicity and simultaneity of life.26 As Robert Humphrey observes, the use of montage suspends ordinary or conventional rules of time, space, or personality, making possible the shifting and intermingling of what are usually conceived to be opposites.27

Two types of montage are clearly present in Great Expectations. The first is the time montage in which the subject remains fixed in space, while time (or his consciousness) moves over him. Miss Havisham insists on excluding time from her life. In her world not even sunlight is allowed to intrude and remind her of its passage. She insists on blending past and future into the present, and she remains fixed in Satis House, her spot of seclusion in which time is not allowed to exist while her memories float around her. The second montage is one of character. Dorothy Van Ghent points out that Dickens often superimposes flat characters upon each other to form representative human complexity. Sometimes extremes of spiritual possibilities are blended in the creation of a third commun-

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27. P. 49.
plex "rounded" character. For example, Joe, representative of love, and Orlick, representative of hate, are extremes which Pip can become. Single characters frequently are montages within themselves. Magwitch can be seen to be part of the best and the worst in Pip—both corrupter and savior. His very name, Abel and witch, represents his discordant qualities. Miss Havisham turns out to be a witch instead of a godmother. Estella, not a star at all, is a siren offspring of a convict and a murderess. Orlick is simultaneously the devil and alter ego to Pip. The more central the character, the more developed is his montage. Thus is Dickens able to show multiple aspects of human life and to suggest the fluid, nonstatic nature of existence, certainly a fundamental aim of the stream-of-consciousness writer. By the use of character montage the reader is made aware of the co-existent internal and external realities of the characters. By the use of time montage he is made aware of past, present, and imagined future blended into a total reality free of the false limits of time.

One of the difficulties encountered by stream-of-consciousness writers is how to convey the privacy and uniqueness of a given consciousness with as little author-intrusion as possible. Humphrey points out two common devices for the simulation of such qualities, the use of standard rhetorical figures and the suggestion of numerous levels of meaning by images and symbols. The use of figurative language piled up to the point of overuse gives an enigmatic tone to a work. It serves to heighten the effect of the privacy of the materials because in its attempt to reproduce the broken, incoherent, disjointed quality of the processes of the individual mind, it must manage to communicate to the reader both the essential inability of the protagonist to communicate and something of the nature of what he is unable to communicate. Much has been made of Dickens's practice in many of his works and especially in Great Expectations of personifying inanimate objects and reducing men to an exaggeration of one part of their appearance or to some non-human attribute; when Pip visits Mr. Jaggers' office for the first time, his observations are dominated by similes, metaphors, and personification:

Mr. Jaggers' room was lighted by a skylight only, and was a most

30. P. 64.
dismal place, the skylight, eccentrically patched like a broken head, and the distorted adjoining houses looking as if they had twisted themselves to peep down at me through it. There were not so many papers about, as I should have expected to see; and there were some odd objects about, that I should not have expected to see—such as an old rusty pistol, a sword in a scabbard, several strange-looking boxes and packages, and two dreadful casts on a shelf, of faces particularly swollen, and twitchy about the nose. Mr. Jaggers' own high-backed chair was of deadly black horse-hair, with rows of brass nails round it like a coffin; and I fancied I could see how he leaned back in it, and bit his forefinger at the clients. The room was but small and the clients seemed to have had a habit of backing up against the wall: the wall, especially opposite to Mr. Jaggers' chair, being greasy with shoulders. I recalled, too, that the one-eyed gentleman had shuffled forth against the wall when I was the innocent cause of his being turned out. (164-65)

Miss Van Ghent believed that the Industrial Revolution and its dehumanizing effects inspired the animism found in the novel; people were becoming things, and things were becoming people. Though undoubtedly Dickens is making a critical social comment in the passage, he would also seem to be trying to express with words a nonverbal intuition, to present a set of values through the private consciousness of Pip, without authorial intrusion. Avoiding the presentation of a set of responses peculiar to only one person, Dickens here relies upon figurative language which subtly reflects both the private response of Pip and the social values of Dickens. His use of grotesque figures and comparisons represents one more point of similarity with later stream-of-consciousness writers.

The second device for obtaining privacy and uniqueness, the use of images and symbols, is also prevalent in Great Expectations. In his extended discussion of the subject Joseph Hynes states that sets of image-symbols operate throughout the book. They include prison and its trapping (representing lack of freedom), ships (freedom and prison both), clocks (time), daylight (reality), candlelight (illusion), gardens (illusion, inhumanity, things unnatural). These sets of special symbols make the novel exist on more than one level by expressing that which is beyond the power of denotative meaning while preserving normal grammatical and rhetorical forms. Also, image-symbols both concentrate and expand meaning. They take on private meanings which reflect the individual consciousness from which they emanate, then take on breadth and

31. P. 128.
scope as they are received by the reader's consciousness. In a fashion which has become familiar to readers of stream-of-consciousness novels, *Great Expectations* uses the processes of the mind (memory, imagination, reflection, perception) as they deal with experience to create private symbolic meanings which contain the novel's meaning.

The importance of the native tradition in the development of the English novel is worth noting. Before Freud, Jung, and the surrealists made their contributions to the tide of knowledge concerning the human psyche, Charles Dickens had developed techniques for conveying some of the drama which takes place in an individual's consciousness. Preeminent Victorian though he was, his narrative innovations point clearly toward the stream-of-consciousness novels soon to follow.