

Forgeries: The Metallurgy of *Great Expectations*

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All references to *Great Expectations* are to the Penguin edition, ed. Angus Calder (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), by chapter and page-number.

I have come to feel that Dickens, more than almost any other nineteenth-century novelist, is driven by his strong and intimate apprehension of the heft, texture and substance of things, by what I have got into the habit of calling, after Gaston Bachelard, his ‘material imagination’. The moral and social dimensions of *Great Expectations*, along with its narrative and linguistic construction, are rooted in, and in large part directed by a kind of intuitive physics, by a concern with the composition and decomposition of things. In part, what I shall be doing in this essay is looking closely at patterns of image and symbol. But I am convinced that Dickens’s writing is formed, forged even, in a kind of literalism, in which the word is never wholly immaterial, and figure and fiction never mere figments. The work of writing is a palpable work, that encounters, transforms and is itself transformed by bodies and substances, in much the way that Pip’s ideas about his parents are formed by the shape of the letters on their tombstones, ‘square, stout, dark’ in the case of his father, and ‘freckled and sickly’ in the case of his mother. (1.35). In *Great Expectations*, Dickens’s imagination is cast, to borrow from the Prologue to *Henry V*, ‘In the quick forge and working house of thought’ (*Henry V*, Prologue, 22-3). ‘All the iron is in the fire, and I have “only” to beat it out’, Dickens said to Forster in the last stages of writing the novel (Dickens 1997, 403).

Iron and the Soul

William A. Cohen (1993) has analysed in impressive detail the erotic tactility associated with the hand in *Great Expectations*. But he is so focussed on the frissons of desire and shame and absorbed by the intimations of masturbation in the novel that he seems to miss the novel’s intense feel for the touch of *things*, and in particular the many ways in which hardness and softness, coherence and dehiscence, iron, wax, wood, flesh, paper, marsh, mist, meet and multiply. The principal encounter of hard and soft is found in the usually uncomfortable coming together of iron and flesh, for example in the rasping that Pip undergoes at the hands of Mrs Joe when being prepared for his visit to Satis House, drawing from him the comment that ‘I suppose myself to be better acquainted than any living authority, with the ridgy effect of a wedding-ring, passing unsympathetically over the human

countenance' (7.82). This is answered and redeemed at the end of the novel by the 'light pressure of Biddy's wedding-ring, that had a very pretty eloquence in it' (59.490). Iron often gets mixed up with eating, for example in the twinning of file and wittles in Magwitch's requisitions of the young Pip, and in Pip's observation that 'when I handed him the file and he laid it down on the grass, it occurred to me that he would have tried to eat it, if he had not seen my bundle' (1.49). The fact that Mrs Joe's bib is 'stuck full of pins and needles' (2.40) makes her the very embodiment of Melanie Klein's bad breast. Lest we should fail to get the point (unlike Pip), it is driven home in Mrs Joe's method of cutting bread by jamming the loaf hard against her bib 'where it sometimes got a pin into it, and sometimes a needle, which we afterwards got into our mouths' (2.42). How irresistible the opportunity therefore for Dickens to make something of the 'oncommon Bolt' (1.43) by means of which Pip appears to have despatched his food. In secreting about himself the food that Magwitch will indeed later bolt down, he is locking himself into a lifetime of debt and responsibility. The iron enters his soul as the bread enters his trouser-leg. The Pocket baby is also at risk of ferrous ingestion:

Mrs. Pocket was at home, and was in a little difficulty, on account of the baby's having been accommodated with a needle-case to keep him quiet during the unaccountable absence (with a relative in the Foot Guards) of Millers. And more needles were missing than it could be regarded as quite wholesome for a patient of such tender years either to apply externally or to take as a tonic. (33.291)

Herbert's advice to Pip at the table also suggests the dangers arising from the close association of mealtimes and metal: '“in London it is not the custom to put the knife in the mouth – for fear of accidents – and that while the fork is reserved for that use, it is not put further in than necessary”' (22.203). However, not all encounters between flesh and metal are as fraught with peril as this. Joe's natural affinity for metal is suggested by his habit of rubbing his eyes with the round knob on top of the poker (7.77).

Joe's forge suggests the values of solidity; which is to say, of composition, coherence, wholeness, weight and self-evidence – all those things that make a spade a spade, or, in Joe's terms, guarantee that 'a gridiron IS a gridiron' (15.139). By contrast, Pip will encounter many forms of decomposition and dissolution as the novel proceeds. First of all of course, there is the literal decomposition of Miss Havisham's bridal chamber, in which 'every discernible thing... was covered with dust and mould, and dropping to pieces' (11.112-13). The fragility of paper in particular is emphasised in the description of Miss Havisham's person:

she sat, corpse-like, as we played at cards; the frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper. I knew nothing then, of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust. (8.90)

There are many other forms of soft or dissolving matter in the novel. Rust and mould reappear in the description of the ruined garden of Satis House when Pip revisits it in chapter 49 (49.413). Pip is presented at different points with watery, waxy, misty softness or indistinction. In Jaggers's office, for example, there is the 'man with weak eyes, whom Mr. Wemmick presented to me as a smelter who kept his pot always boiling, and who would melt me anything I pleased - and who was in an excessive white-perspiration, as if he had been trying his art on himself' (24.222). The most extreme and conspicuous form of dissolution in the chain of material conditions running from hard to soft in the novel are the mists that surround Pip at different times – often seeming, as many have noticed, to suggest confusion, error and fantasy. At the extreme opposite to iron, which is to say of labour and the ponderable, apparently perdurable forms it imparts to matter, there is evaporation. 'All the uses and scents of the brewery might have evaporated with its last reek of smoke' (8.93), notes Pip of the disused brewery attached to Satis House. The disturbing thing about Wemmick is the fact that he can be seen both as a kind of inflexible mechanism and as something vaporous: walking along Gerrard Street with him, Pip finds 'that I was walking arm in arm with the right twin, and that the wrong twin had evaporated into the evening air' (48.404). As he contemplates death at the hands of Orlick, Pip thinks of 'the lonely marsh and the white vapour creeping over it, into which I should have dissolved' (53.438)

Hard Knocks

The novel offers a graduated repertoire of different kinds of contact to match these states of matter. The world of the forge is characterised by invigorating blows and buffets, as reflections of Joe's robust and trusty hammering. The drubbing that Pip, the inheritor of Joe's muscular arm, gives to Herbert is a reduplication of this. Knowledge often comes to Pip from the school of hard knocks, as in the fierce wind and rain that dashes against his house to signal Magwitch's imminent return (39.331). It is no surprise that when Pip first comes upon Compeyson out on the marshes, the convict is able to deliver only a 'round weak blow that missed me and almost knocked himself down' (3.49). Although Miss Havisham has 'the

appearance of having dropped body and soul, within and without, under the weight of a crushing blow' (8.91), there is no shaping vigour in this impact. At a loss for what to sing at her request, Pip gives her a rendition of the concussive anthem of the smith:

It was a song that imitated the measure of beating upon iron, and was a mere lyrical excuse for the introduction of Old Clem's respected name. Thus, you were to hammer boys round - Old Clem! With a thump and a sound - Old Clem! Beat it out, beat it out - Old Clem! With a clink for the stout - Old Clem! Blow the fire, blow the fire - Old Clem! Roaring dryer, soaring higher - Old Clem! (12.123-4)

When Miss Havisham and Estella grotesquely appropriate the song, it is thinned to an appalling, spectral whisper: 'the whole strain was so subdued, even when there were three of us, that it made less noise in the grim old house than the lightest breath of wind' (12.124). In Satis House, the purposive blows of hammer on iron are both matched and mocked by the shifts and drifts of air. ' "What wind blows you here?" enquires Miss Havisham of Pip (44.372).

The hardness of iron means of course that it is employed to effect restraint, confinement, segregation and sequestration. However, in the form of the chain, iron also maintains affinities and links. Dickens focusses vigorously and variously on these two forms of bondage - alternatives that are themselves aptly alloyed in Joe's reference to 'partings welded together' (27.246); Iron makes the things it holds apart a part of each other, enabling the ironed leg of Magwitch to exert its ghostly traction on Pip from being to end. Severances form solidarity. Hence the recourse to iron and metal to suggest links, affinities and connections throughout the novel – all the things in fact that turn marshes into 'meshes'. The most important chains are the temporal chains of consequence which Pip evokes as several points in the novel, for example in the reference to 'the long chain of iron or gold, of thorns or flowers, that would never have bound you, but for the formation of the first link on one memorable day' (9.101) In the metallurgic scheme of this novel, even blows can be chains: 'in an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me' (38. 330). Pip often longs for release from these bonds. During one of his many periods of delirium, he imagines 'I was a steel beam of a vast engine, clashing and whirling over a gulf, and yet that I implored in my own person to have the engine stopped, and my part in it hammered off' (57.471-2). The blow that bends and buckles may also be the force from which a new shape is wrought, as suggested by Estella's late, rather implausible words: "I have been bent and broken, but – as I hope – into a better shape" ' (59.493). This may help explain the strange bond of compulsion that grows up between

Mrs Joe and her attacker Orlick, instituted by the hieroglyphic hammer with which she first summons him to her presence, she driven to conciliate him and he compelled to indulge her.

Artifice in Iron

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the blacksmith had become proverbial as the aristocrat of working-class tradesman and the representative of the dignity of honest labour. He was typified by Ebenezer Elliott, who spent his early years working in his father's iron foundry in Rotherham and published his *Corn-Law Rhymes* in 1832, meeting with praise from Carlyle, who wrote 'Here is a voice coming from the deep Cyclopean forges, where Labour, in real soot and sweat, beats with his thousand hammers "the red son of the furnace"...it need be no miracle that here also is a man who can handle both pen and hammer like a man' (Carlyle 1899, 28.138, 139). The American Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier drew together the themes of poetic composition and the smith's working of iron in his poem 'Elliott'

On these pale lips, the smothered thought
Which England's millions feel,
A fierce and fearful splendour caught,
As from his forge the steel.
Strong-armed as Thor, - and a shower of fire
His smitten anvil flung.
God's curse, Earth's wrong, dumb Hunger's ire,
He gave them all a tongue! (Whittier 1894, 4.60)

Great Expectations has its own version of this wordsmithing. Writing and wrighting are separated only by a couple of letters, and the laborious way in which letters are often wrought in the novel maintains this materiality. Words are struck out letter by letter, as though being cast, or scored or branded, rather than looped or woven out over a surface. The language of the forge is made, like Joe's couplet on his father, 'in a moment...like striking out a horseshoe complete, in a single blow' (7.77). Later on, Joe is shown settling down to the labour of writing by 'first choosing a pen from the pen-tray as if it were a chest of large tools, and tucking up his sleeves as if he were going to wield a crow-bar or sledgehammer' (57.473-4). Dickens resists the temptation to have Magwitch physically marked by the iron, despite the fact that transportees were well-known to beguile the three-month passage to Australia by making their own tattoos. However, he is said to live 'a branded life among men', and his head to be 'tattooed with deep wrinkles' (40.353).

Certain letters have a particular salience in the novel. The extent of Joe's literacy is the ability to fall delightedly upon the Js and Os in Pip's writing. Reflecting on the form of address by which Pip's apprenticeship premium is conveyed to 'Mrs J. Gargery', Joe reflects that ' "She mayn't have know'd... whether it were Joe, or Jorge" '(13.131), thus soldering together the letter J and the word 'forge' – indeed, Dickens's original name for Joe was 'George Thunder' (Paroissien 2000, 35). But the letter J is not always so amiable. Pip records, in connection with Orlick's oath that he will be 'jiggered if I don't see you home!', his 'general belief that if he had jiggered me personally, he would have done it with a sharp and twisted hook' (17.158). This twists two ways, backwards to Magwitch's threats about the young gentleman of his acquaintance with his 'secret way pecooliar to himself, of getting at a boy, and at his heart, and at his liver' (1.38), and forward to the presence of Jaggers, who, despite all his assiduous softsoaping and his legal jiggerpokery, presents a harshly serrated profile to the world.

Like the dissolute Arthur Havisham, the novel is also susceptible to DTs. Pip starts his own quest for literacy by copying out 'a large old English D which she had imitated from the heading of some newspaper, and which I supposed, until she told me what it was, to be a design for a buckle' (10.103). It is Biddy who realises that the 'T'-shape repeatedly made by the aphonic Mrs Joe is not an initial letter, standing for tar, or toast or tub, but an ideogram, signifying Orlick's hammer.

The strenuous, if awkward, travail of this mode of writing contrasts with the lighter and thus less trustworthy forms which writing assumes in the wider world. In particular, there is the inflated theatricality of the newspaper, from which Mr Wopsle reads so histrionically in the *Three Jolly Bargeman* (ch. 18), and as exemplified in the pretentious, overblown terms in which Pip's own story is rendered in the local newspaper, as 'the recent romantic rise in fortune of a young artificer in iron of this neighbourhood'. It seems grimly appropriate that this farrago, presumably ghosted by Pumblechook himself, should represent Pip's presumptive father as the 'founder' of his fortunes. (28.252). It is the discovery of another folded piece of paper, the playbill left by Joe, which sends Pip to the play to see Wopsle's performance of *Hamlet* in London. Paper provides false security, as in the preparations that Pip and Herbert make for their evasive listing of debts, a routine known to every blocked writer and graduate student: 'we produced a bundle of pens, a copious supply of ink, and a goodly show of writing and blotting paper. For there was something very comfortable in having plenty of stationery' (34.295).

Paper is associated not just with unreliability, but also with adulteration. If the word takes the form of ironmongery in the forge, it can also take on

more decayed forms, like the Bibles which Bidly distributes, which are 'more illegibly printed at the best than any curiosities of literature I have since met with, speckled all over with ironmould, and having various specimens of the insect world smashed between their leaves' (10.102). A similar impurity is evidenced in the reading matter with which Pip furnishes himself while trying to pretend not to notice Bentley Drummle: 'a smeary newspaper long out of date, which had nothing half so legible in its local news, as the foreign matter of coffee, pickles, fish sauces, gravy, melted butter, and wine with which it was sprinkled all over, as if it had taken the measles in a highly irregular form' (43.369).

Interchange of Flimseys

The two modes of writing, weighty and flighty, are compounded in a single word, which encompasses on the one hand, truth, dependability, continuity and, on the other, deceit, illusion, fiction, fabrication. The word is 'forging' and, its tricky next-of-kin, 'forgery'. 'Forging' is one of those uncanny words, which, like the word 'uncanny' itself, as Freud notes at the beginning of his essay on the subject, is parasited by its own contrary (Freud 1955, 17.222-6). To forge something (ultimately from Latin *fabricare*) is to make it, with the suggestion that it is made authentically and durably. But to forge something is also to pretend to make it. *Great Expectations* is held together by the different senses that are opportunely welded together in this term.

From at least the fourteenth century, the word 'forgery' has designated more particularly the action of counterfeiting (literally 'counter-faction') and confidence-trick. Dickens draws our attention to forging and forgers of the second kind, especially of documents and money, throughout the novel. Pip learns that ' "[p]eople are put in the Hulks because they murder, and because they rob, and forge, and do all sorts of bad' (2.46). Wemmick describes the occupation of one of the casts in Jaggers's office (the one whose look, 'as if one nostril was caught up with a horse-hair and a little fish-hook', recalls Orlick's slit nostril after his fisticuffs with Joe, 15.143): ' "He forged wills, this blade did, if he didn't also put the supposed testators to sleep too" ' (24.221). Magwitch describes Compeyson's business as ' "swindling, handwriting forging, stolen bank-note passing, and such-like' (42.362). Orlick's graduation from one school of forging to another is confirmed in the scene in the lime-kiln: ' "I've took up with new companions, and new masters. Some of 'em writes my letters when I wants 'em wrote - do you mind? - writes my letters, wolf! They writes fifty hands; they're not like sneaking you, as writes but one" ' (53.438).

There are two kinds of forgery alluded to throughout *Great Expectations*. One is the fabrication of fictions and fantasies, most notably through the exercise of writing. The other is the counterfeiting of currency. Of course, Pip brings

these two meanings together when he muses on the forgery he has effected on himself: ‘That I should innocently take a bad half-crown of somebody else's manufacture is reasonable enough; but that I should knowingly reckon the spurious coin of my own make as good money!’ (28.247). (Such self-deceit can be brought about only through the exercise of ‘forgetting’ a word that is in the vicinity of forgery throughout the novel.) These different modes of forgery have their correlatives in the material imagination of hard and soft substances in the novel – notably coins and paper-money. of which the most important representative is Magwitch’s shilling ‘folded in some crumpled paper’ which turns out to be ‘two fat sweltering one-pound notes that seemed to have been on terms of the warmest intimacy with all the cattle-markets in the county’ (10.107).

These one-pound notes help us to date the novel with some precision. The period in which *Great Expectations* is set saw one of the worst and most sustained outbreaks of forgery in this country’s history. This was initiated in 1797 when, following a run on its stocks of bullion as a result of the uncertainties of the French war, the Bank of England decided to stop issuing gold and issue £1 and £2 notes instead. This created two new conditions which encouraged forgery. First of all, notes were easier and cheaper to simulate than coins. Secondly, the unfamiliarity of the new notes made it easy to put them into circulation – or ‘utter’ them. As W.H. Wills and Dickens explain, in an article they wrote for *Household Words* in 1850, the bank notes issued up to this point had been for relatively large denominations, which meant that ‘all the Bank paper then in use passed through the hands and under the eyes of the affluent and educated, who could more readily distinguish the false from the true’ (Wills and Dickens 1850, 615). We are reminded of this perhaps when, on the morning of his majority, Pip sees Wemmick rubbing the side of his nose ‘with a folded piece of tissue-paper that I liked the look of’ (36.305). When the paper is unfolded later in the chapter, it proves to be a bank-note for five hundred pounds (the equivalent of £20,000). The fact that the note is described as ‘tissue-paper’ suggests the flimsiness of Pip’s illusions, as well as the giddy gap that finance capitalism had begun to open up between substance and value. In fact, a ‘flimsey’ was a common slang term for a banknote in the early nineteenth century; Wills and Dickens refers to the circulation of forged bank-notes as ‘the interchange of false “flimseys.” ’ (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616).

The trade in forged notes boomed. Wills and Dickens estimate that ‘from the first of January 1812, to the 10th April 1818, one hundred and thirty-one thousand, three hundred and thirty-one pieces of paper were ornamented by the Bank officers with the word “Forged” ’ (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616).

The seriousness of the issue was underlined by the Bank of England solicitor, who wrote in 1809:

The fabrication and circulation of forged bank notes has lately become so systematic a matter of business that the security of the circulating medium of the country is seriously menaced and unless prompt and active measures are taken to detect and punish the offenders, the most serious consequences may be the result. (Quoted McGowen 2005, 89).

The Bank of England was correspondingly vigorous in its investigations and prosecutions, both of the originators of the currency and ‘the lesser rogues who undertook the issue department...the fraternity and sisterhood of the utterers’ (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616). (After he takes up with Compeyson, Orlick may have been one of this fraternity.) According to Wills and Dickens, there were 870 prosecutions between the years of 1797 and 1817 (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616). This did nothing to stem the tide; in the next three years, up until 1821, when the Bank rescued the situation by withdrawing the £1 and £2 notes and restoring the supply of sovereigns, there were a further 1131 prosecutions (McGowen 2005, 87).

Dickens is sometimes criticised for making so much of his plot turn on the threat of execution for a returned transportee, when, at the time when Magwitch returns, during the late 1820s, this penalty was very unlikely to be imposed. But Dickens is recalling very exactly the threat of execution for forgery during the period covered by the novel. Forgery had been considered a form of high treason in English law throughout the eighteenth century. Women forgers and coiners were subject to particularly severe punishment, their bodies often being publically burned after being hanged. This fate was suffered by Phoebe Harris as late as June 1786 after her conviction for coining silver (Gatrell 1994, 337). Judicial incineration was abolished in 1790, but hangings for this aptly-named capital offence continued to increase. The 870 prosecutions mentioned by Wills and Dickens resulted in over 300 executions, 32 taking place in 1818 alone. The association of hanging with forgery is made clear in the case of the prisoner whom Wemmick describes to Pip as ‘ “A Coiner, a very good workman. The Recorder's report is made to-day, and he is sure to be executed on Monday.” ’ (32.282). George Cruikshank claimed that, as a young man, in around 1817 or 1818, he was so horrified by seeing two women hanging from a gibbet opposite Newgate and discovering that it was for the offence of passing forged one-pound notes, that he set himself to design a ‘Bank-note not to be imitated’.



Cruikshank's 'Bank Note Not to Be Imitated'

His parody banknote was signed for the Bank of England by 'J Ketch'; it was decorated with shackles and skulls, and the £ sign was formed by a noose. In the space where the number of the note should be, there are the words 'ad lib', written over a row of hanged men and women (Gatrell 1994, 187-8).

The mingling of real and spurious in the nation's currency produced some alarming uncertainties. Wills and Dickens report that travellers took to keeping forged notes about them to pay off highwaymen when robbed (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616) and that '[r]espectable persons were constantly taken into custody on a charge of uttering forgeries, imprisoned for days, and then liberated. Close scrutiny, proving that the accusations were made upon genuine paper' (Wills and Dickens 1850, 616). Their article ends with praise of the keen sight and skill of the Bank employees in detecting forgeries and with a long story about an Irishman who buried £87 10s in a stocking in his garden, only to dig it up in a condition resembling 'fragments of mildewed and broken mushrooms' (Wills and Dickens 1850, 619). With infinite pains on the part of the Bank, his bank notes are reconstituted, allowing Wills and Dickens to point up the odd lesson that the 'transcendent forger... is no other than the chief of the Engraving and Engineering department of the Bank of England' (Wills and Dickens 1850, 619)

Forging is both heavy and light. It is encouraged by the emerging conditions in which, as Marx and Engels so famously declared ‘All that is solid melts into air’. Much is staked in *Great Expectations* upon the determining effect of authentic labour, as against the flimsy, light-fingered similitudes of the forger. *Great Expectations* tries to maintain its and its readers’ confidence in its own metallurgic currency, reinforcing the kind of sentiments with which Longfellow concludes his poem ‘The Village Blacksmith’ of 1841: ‘Thus at the flaming forge of life/Our fortunes must be wrought;/Thus on its sounding anvil shaped/Each burning deed and thought’ (Longfellow 1911, 16). Though tying of currencies to precious metals may have the psychological effect of weighing them down (as Magwitch’s pound notes are weighed down by the shilling that is worth so much less than they), the whole of the banking system, as one deputy governor of the Bank of England breezily remarked in a television programme in 1995, is at bottom, and quite literally, ‘a confidence trick’. Nevertheless, its effects, and its often mortal consequences, are of the greatest gravity. The ‘Exclusion Period’, as the years from 1797 to 1821 are known in financial history, is one in which the relations between truth, materiality and value, are beginning to assume the complex configurations of the modern world.

Suspended Sentences

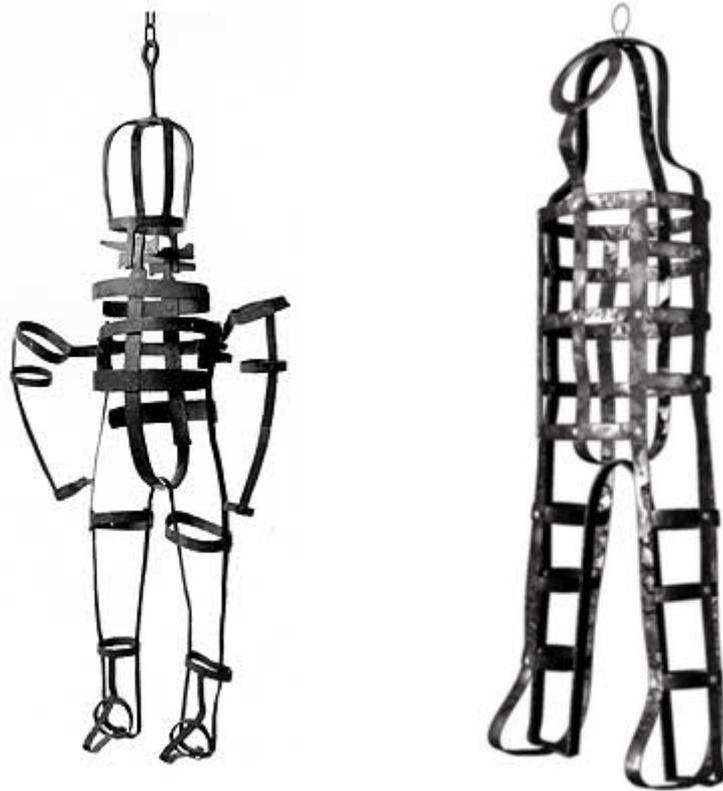
There can be no apter illustration of this strange interrelationship between gravity and unbearable lightness of being than the fate which awaited many convicted forgers in the early nineteenth century, namely hanging, the victim of which dies in a condition that is neither fully of air or of earth. Even this acquires a metallic cast in *Great Expectations*, through evocations of the practice of gibbeting and hanging in chains, by which the young Pip is haunted. Memorably, he associates Magwitch with the ‘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’ (1.39). The rattle of these chains haunts Pip as the sonorous counterpoint to the merry clink of hammer on iron, and is recalled whenever we hear the ring or scrape of metal on metal.

Hanging in chains, or gibbeting, is particularly associated with pirates and seafaring offenders. It was the tradition that those whose hanged bodies were exhibited on a gibbet at Execution Dock in East Wapping near Globe Wharf, were left until three tides had washed over them. But there were other gibbets all along the Thames, one of which was ornamented for five years, by the body of a Captain James Smith, which hung, increasingly the worse for wear, from 1708 to 1713 (Potter 1965, 61). One nineteenth-century historian of gibbeting records that ‘in the windows of the water-side taverns at Blackwall, “spy- [75-6]-glasses,” or what Robinson Crusoe calls

“perspective glasses,” were fixed for people to enjoy the spectacle; similarly the Greenwich pensioners on the Hill used to exhibit the gibbeted pirates on the opposite side of the river, in the Isle of Dogs, through telescopes’ (Hartshorne 1891, 75-6). Gibbeting was still occasionally ordered by judges delivering sentence of execution in the period of time covered by *Great Expectations*, the last offender to be publically exhibited in this way being one James Cook, who murdered a commercial traveller in Leicester and was hanged on 10 August 1832. This sentence was probably passed because of his own maltreatment of the corpse of his victim, which he had tried to burn in his workshop; a substantial joint of human flesh was discovered roasting on his fire, with two thighs and a leg hanging up waiting their turn to be consumed. Following tradition, Cook’s body was tarred in order to offer some measure of weatherproofing, and was fitted with what was sometimes called his ‘last suit’ (Cook 1926, 5.275-6). It was this which required the attentions of the blacksmith. It enclosed the whole body in hoops of iron, surmounted by a helmet in which was placed a large hook from which the body could be hung. In 1866, the periodical *Once A Week* described and reproduced an example of this grim wardrobe, which had been employed some decades before in the execution of a young female slave sentenced to be hung alive from a tamarind tree for attempting to poison her owner’s family:

Round the knees, hips and waist, under the arms and around the neck, iron hoops were riveted close about the different parts of the body. Iron braces crossed these again, from the hips right over the centre of the head. Iron bars and plates encircled and supported the legs, and at the lower extremities were fixed plates of iron like old-fashioned stirrups, in which the feet might have found rest, had not a finish to the torture, compared to which crucifixion itself must have been mild, been contrived by fixing in each stirrup three sharp pointed spikes to pierce the soles of the victim’s feet.

The only support the body could receive, while strength remained or life endured, was given by a narrow hoop passing from one end of the waist-bar in front between the legs to the bar at the back. Attached to the circular band under the arms, stood out a pair of handcuffs, which prevented the slightest movement in the hands; and on the crossing of the hoops over the head was a strong hook, by which the whole fabric, with the sufferer enclosed, was suspended. (R.B.M. 1866, 583)



Examples of gibbeting cages.

None of those executed for forgery would have been hung in chains; but this mode of execution probably exercises its influence on one moment of childhood anxiety for Pip: ‘Even when I was taken to have a new suit of clothes, the tailor had orders to make them like a kind of Reformatory, and on no account to let me have the free use of my limbs’ (4.54). Hanging is caught up in the paradoxical relations of lightness and weight, substance and false pretence, that are increasingly features both of economic life and of nineteenth-century physics.

Tempering

It would be possible to represent these material metaphors as simple mirrorings or correlatives to the moral structure of the narrative. When, for example, William H. New writes about the ‘intangible alchemy’ of the process whereby Pip is transmuted from self-deluding lead to precious or at least semi-precious metal, he must assume a simple dichotomy in which the elements of earth and fire are good, and those of water and air are bad (New 1967, 121, 112). Dickens’s involvement with the affinities, resistances and transformations of material substance goes much further than this moralising of matter. Hence, the great instability of the dichotomy of the hard and the soft that I began by invoking. Sometimes, hardness – the dependable brawn of Joe’s forearm, for example, or the poker that is his shadow – is admirable. Sometimes, as in the case of the frigidly bejewelled Estella, or Compeyson, who has ‘no more heart than a iron file’ (42.362), it

is inhuman. It might be replied that this is the sign that these material conditions are governed by patterns of moral evaluation: we know that a soft heart is good, whereas a soft will is bad. But I think that Dickens's thought is led and shaped much more by materiality than this. Dickens's world, like that of nineteenth-century physics, is one of convertible forces and circulating phases. The quality of matter that most arrests and absorbs him is its tendency to form alloys, associations and compounds. His intuitive physics forms what Michel Serres (1995) has called a 'philosophy of mixed bodies'.

The dynamic nature of matter in *Great Expectations* is emphasised in its subjection to time, or time's principal vehicle, temperature. For hardness and softness, solidity and liquidity, are functions of heat, which is itself a matter of movement and energy exchange. Some of the most striking scenes in the book depend upon this exchange of properties, like, for example, the scene in which the demonic Orlick is given space by Joe to regain his temper before the topic of his half-holiday is discussed:

The master refusing to entertain the subject until the journeyman was in a better temper, Orlick plunged at the furnace, drew out a red-hot bar, made at me with it as if he were going to run it through my body, whisked it round my head, laid it on the anvil, hammered it out - as if it were I, I thought, and the sparks were my spiring blood - and finally said, when he had hammered himself hot and the iron cold, and he again leaned on his hammer:

"Now, master!" (15.141)

This episode will lead to Mrs Joe heating herself into a frenzy, and the altercation that will end in Orlick's attack on her. These meetings and exchanges of heating and cooling are to be found throughout the novel, most suggestively, perhaps in the vision of the torches thrown into the water as Magwitch is taken up into the convict ship: 'the end of the torches were flung hissing into the water, and went out, as if it were all over with him' (5.71). It appears as though it is all over, but this is only the end of the beginning: in fact, as when a sword or other hot metal is cooled, this marks the moment, not of Magwitch's quenching, but the forging of his purpose. And yet, although Magwitch arrives with 'long iron-grey hair' and 'browned and hardened by exposure to weather' (39.332), duration and durability are at odds, and erosion and corrosion are as much in evidence as forging. Like other characters in the novel, Magwitch undergoes a conspicuous process of softening, appropriate to one who 'wore out my good share of key-metal' (42.362). Even Estella recognises that 'constant dropping will wear away a stone' (33.287). These movements and transformations of matter come

about because of meetings and mingling in time, ‘partings welded together’. If we are to grasp their structure, we will need to imagine a more dynamic repertoire of possibilities than is provided by the simple, two-dimensional counterposing of properties, hard and soft, base and precious, forging and forgery: something, perhaps, like the permutative possibilities of the game of scissors-paper-stone (or, as it might be in the case of *Great Expectations*, file, shilling and banknote). Such a structure cannot be compressed into or comprehended at a single stroke, since it enacts the mutative susceptibilities and powers of resistance, severance, envelopment and liquidity. Always subject to temperature, the action of the fire that Heraclitus in his wise mistake designated the master-element or primal stuff of the cosmos, matter becomes tempered, bearing and bearing out the shaping force of time. The immanence of time means that all matter is, in Hopkins’s words from ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, ‘Fast, but mined with a motion’. It is this principle of fluctuating temper that fills even iron with irony.

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