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Mukherjee, Ankhi.

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A N K H I M U K H E R J E E

Missed Encounters: Repetition, Rewriting,
and Contemporary Returns to Charles Dickens's
Great Expectations

I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you—the objet petit a—I mutilate you.

Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*

Julian Barnes's *England, England*, true to its echolalic title, is about doubleness, more specifically the specular dualism of originality and replication. It questions the notion of authenticity as megalopolitan England atrophies and dies when beamed with the *idea* of England, and the image of a theme park named England, England. In his eternal quest for the top dollar and long yen, Jack Pitman—Sir Jack, an entrepreneur of the late-capitalist variety—fabricates England, England on the Isle of Wight, with fifty quintessences of Englishness (Royal Family, Big Ben, Man Utd., Class System, and so forth). The French intellectual hired to hone the philosophical angle of this project sums it up to the coordinating committee as a “*rivalization* of reality.” We prefer the replica to the original because it opens up endless possibilities of differential reproduction: “We must demand the replica, since the reality, the truth, the authenticity of the replica is the one we can possess, colonize, reorder, find *jouissance* in, and, finally, if and when we decide, it is the reality which, since it is our destiny, we may meet, confront and destroy” (35). The nonidentical replica updates and problematizes the original. Representation, according to the Frenchman, is “an ironization and summation” of the thing represented: “A monochrome world has become Technicolor, a single croaking speaker has become wraparound sound” (55).

Sir Jack rewards such Platonic musings by paying the man in dollars instead of pounds, the dollar being the replica, the pound the prototype. Jack Pitman takes the discussion further. In offering a mediated image of England, he claims, "We are offering *the thing itself*" (59). A reservoir becomes a lake when it is built and positioned as a lake, and natural and man-made objects adopt it as such—it becomes *the thing itself*. In the novel, it becomes difficult to say what preexists repetition. Dr. Max, Official Historian of the project, observes, "There is no prime moment," adding indignantly, "It is like saying that . . . a gibbon suddenly wrote Gibbon" (132). Replication in this sense does not follow the law of recurrence or the logic of compulsive returns but is a mode of inventiveness that, through its reiterative structure, mobilizes narrative instead of arresting it.

This article looks at rewritings of a well-made Victorian multiplot novel completed in 1861, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, to explore the dynamic between precursor and latecomer in terms of narrative operation. I am particularly interested in the remembering and reinterpretation of the literary canon, in acts of generative citation that bring the (Eurocentric) literary past to recurring life. The first section looks briefly at Kathy Acker's and Sue Roe's extrapolations of the classic and at Alfonso Cuarón's 1998 film. The second section is a reading of Peter Carey's brilliant Dickensian pastiche *Jack Maggs*. What unites the late twentieth-century novels I discuss is a project of denaturalizing, defamiliarizing, and problematizing "natural givens" in a master text. The constructedness of the literary artifact is seen, in these second comings, as analogous to the constructedness of identity categories and cultural formations: the work of rewriting, then, is to look awry at virtual pasts, interrupt collective identities and the habitual coherence of cultural experience, and confront the social discourse informing memorable acts of literature.

Is repetition a mode of recuperating loss, a ritual of control to cope with the reality principle, as Freud suggested? Is it, as Lacan elaborates, a quest for lost pleasure through symbolic substitution, and a necessary condition of being in language? This essay erects an opposition between Freud's and Lacan's differing notions of repetition (mastery versus alienation). The point where their readings

come together is on the grounds of death, failure, or breakage. Repetition can only ever produce a certain kind of undoing. It is undeniable that rewriting is to writing what writing is to speech—a supplement to a circumscribed entity, which demonstrates the latter's incompleteness and indeterminacy. While my examples are specific to particular novels, my thesis speaks, in a larger way, to the problem and anxiety of all modern literature: are all writers constrained to rework influence? If all writing is, in a Derridean sense, rewriting, then what more is there left to say?

It is also my claim that repetition subscribes to the ethics of hysteria, which can be described as an ethics of deprivation and dispossession. The hysteric rejects a symbolic system dominated by the paternal metaphor and sustains his or her radical alienation through a refusal of representation. As subject, the hysteric is divided and decentered, while as object he or she is the lack or nothing of desire, a flashing question mark, an ontological tease. As a mode of literary or aesthetic reception, hysteria prepares us for a series of departures from text and textuality to an alterity altogether uninhabitable by the materiality of the letter. While a (re)writing machine cannot be glibly equated to the pathological repetition manifested in symptoms, dreams, and parapraxes, it can be (approvingly) labeled hysterical in that it demonstrates the insistence and transference of labile, creative desire and the impossibility of exemplification or closure. If the discourse of the hysteric is structured around what Bruce Fink calls "a unique configuration with respect to knowledge" (133), a perverse logic of loving *and* mutilating its epistemic objects, rewriting, too, simultaneously commemorates and disavows the privileged narratives that discursively constitute the canon. However, while hysteria is a useful heuristic for the theoretical questions I am trying to pose, it may not itself be the answer so much as simply another example of the same cultural problem of a repetitive return to the real.

Prisons of Meaning

Writing of Charles Dickens's haunting of contemporary popular culture, Jay Clayton ascribes to his literary corpus a "grotesque, misshapen afterlife . . . as unsettling as the manias that animate

some of Dickens's own creations: Miss Havisham in her decaying bridal dress, or Pip fantasizing about his great expectations" (147). Clayton's laundry list of maternity shops, dating services, hair salons, restaurants, and even *Saturday Night Live* television skits named after Dickens's *Great Expectations* reinforces his point about the continued imaginative stranglehold of this capacious phrase. Needless to say, the novel itself has suffered a series of opportunistic symbolic appropriations and cinematic second comings. While David Lean adapted *Great Expectations* in the aftermath of World War II to showcase his own brand of "colonial nostalgia" (Clayton 157), where a strong emotional bond between two men (Pip and Magwitch) across the cultural divide momentarily overcomes all socioeconomic differences, Alfonso Cuarón's *Great Expectations* incapacitates the dated center-periphery dialectic in favor of his protagonist's avowedly cosmopolitan epiphanies around the New York art scene. Cuarón moves the action from Victorian England to the Gulf Coast of America. Many of the characters of the Dickens original are renamed: Miss Havisham is Nora Dinsmoor (played by Anne Bancroft), Pip is Finn (Ethan Hawke plays him as an adult), and Magwitch is Lustig (Robert De Niro). "I am not gonna tell the story the way that it happened," draws the voice-over, "I am gonna tell the way I remembered"—an ethos that well describes the project of "writing back" against a great English novel. What we get, however, is not so much a medium's awareness of its literary or cinematic past, or a palimpsest laid compulsively, mnemonically, on the original. Cuarón's re-creation seems to have no motive beyond the fact that it takes advantage of technology to cinematically rethink Dickens's powerful narrative in MTV format. The plot rifles through fungible and forgettable contexts and characters, frequently losing itself in lush visuals. The bare bones of the Dickensian masterplot are retained: the chance encounter with a convict; the summons to an overgrown Gothic palazzo; an impossible and unamiable love object in Estella; Pip/Finn's traumatic yet exhilarating transition from country to city, here New York. The sun-dappled opening scene in Sarasota Bay, however, sets the mood for a cheerier tale: the critical reversal (the climax of Magwitch's discovery and recapture in the original) takes place not in the murky Thames estuary, but in a preternaturally gleaming New York

subway. Nora Dinsmoor has given up her melancholic wedding dress for vivid green ensembles and has altogether “moved on.” The huge masonry pile of “Paradiso Perduto” does not come to signify a complex of desire and fear for Finn—it provides instead a camp setting for Nora Dinsmoor’s unremitting vulgarisms and Finn’s and Estella’s dance to the tune of “Besame Mucho.” Finn is untroubled by his repugnance toward his benefactor or about reinventing himself as an angst-filled artist in Soho by fabricating a genealogy that does little justice to his surrogate parent. The romance plot, unmoored by the irresolvable social problems posed by the original, shows artistic enervation or laziness at its worst. The ending is faithful to Dickens’s second, more populist one for the novel. Cuarón does not look awry at literary and cinematic tradition: he simple-mindedly sees through it.

Kathy Acker’s *Great Expectations* (1982), by contrast, is a controlled chaos of genres, a parody *and* pastiche of the representational forms of (autobiographical) narrative, fiction, drama, the epistolary novel, history, criticism, and poetry. The novel is a neurotic shape-shifter which cannibalizes older, mostly canonical texts: Dickens’s novel by the same title, a pornographic novel, a Harlequin romance, excerpts of Greek history, a line from a Keats letter. The narrator is identifiable as Pip, a woman, Rimbaud, Pasolini, O., or even Virginia Woolf’s Orlando. As in her novel *Don Quixote*, Acker borrows the language, not the themes, of the precursor texts, to create—Acker’s favored verb is “make”—something radical and novel out of agonistic textual encounters. To quote Acker from “A Few Notes on Two of My Books,”

[T]he world is always making itself. When you make fiction, you dip into this process. But no one, writer or politician, is more powerful than the world: you can make, but you don’t create. Only the incredible egotism that resulted from a belief in phallic centrism could have come up with the notion of creativity.

(33–34)

Acker goes on to claim that plagiarism helps her do “what gives me most pleasure: write” (34). Her technique of pseudoplagiarism is random and free-associative, and also, contradictorily, strategic: she is interested in copying something without any reason

("Conversation" 12), but the plagiarism is also an attempt, she says in an interview, "to find writers who describe the particular place I want to get to" (17). Acker's plagiarism serves to emphasize the derivativeness and mediatedness of all fiction; her technique of quotation and cross-quotation undermines the authenticity of the cloying confessional. The intent to damage the form and content of its originals, however, is somewhat diminished by the glib knowingness of the narrative voice: "one text must subvert (the meaning of) another text" (*Great Expectations* 15).

The traumatic *punctum* of Acker's heteroglossic *Great Expectations* is the author's mother's suicide. It is not mourned or memorialized but experienced as a frame, within which the past is not over but *is*, and time is circular. This breakdown of temporality, or the temporal unification of past and future with one's present—an unmistakable symptom of (Acker's purchase on) the postmodern condition—leads to a breakdown of personal identity. The novel begins with the ending of the mother's life and returns to it compulsively, unproductively. As the narrator says repetitively in the "Beginnings of Romance" section, "I realize that all my life is endings. Not endings, those are just events; but holes. For instance when my mother died, the 'I' I had always known dropped out. All my history went away" (64). The mother's suicide can be considered a logical copula that holds together various (unrelated) scenarios of oppression and victimization. The mother herself is interchangeably the object of courtly love and a victim of misogyny. Acker masterfully uses the mother's carnality—excessive, desired, tabooed—to recount real or fictional events. Her body, a splayed and violable female body, is both a site of resistance and out of control, schizophrenic, oppressive. Around her, humans are always becoming animal: a cabby shoves his fist into a goat's face; females lullaby kids at their tits. The mother, "the most beautiful woman in the world" (9), is evoked after a graphic and lengthy description of rape and pillage. She is the "most disgusting thing in this world" (24) for being dispossessed and pitifully weak. In a sudden (and senseless) role reversal, the narrator's passive father becomes a rapist, the mother his prey. A violent primal scene plays out before the traumatized narrator:

My father never beats my mother up.

The father grabs a candle, the curly brownhaired soldier his red mouth rolling around the black meat takes out his knife . . . jerks the sleepy young girl's thighs to him . . . the sweat dripping off his bare strong chest wakes the young girl up, I walked into my parents' bedroom . . . I'm shocked[.]

(13)

The pronoun reference leaves it unclear whether it is the mother or her young girl who is implicated in this phantasmagoric scene. The language dithers between meaning and the nonmeaning of sights, sounds, the rude materiality of the text:

Under the palmtrees the RIMAS seize and drag a fainted woman under a tent, a flushing-forehead blond soldier burning coals glaze his eyes his piss stops up his sperm grasps this woman in his arms, their hands their lips touch lick the woman's clenched face while the blond soldier's greasy wine-stained arm supports her body, the young girl RECOVERED[.]

(15)

Acker borrows from Dickens's *Great Expectations* the almost exhibitionistic masochism of its hero. As Carol Siegel has observed, Acker's re-authored text "typifies her method of obsessively and starkly anti-erotically dwelling on what is usually suppressed in artistic depictions of sadomasochism, physical realities like infected sores and psychic realities like despair accompanying the certainty that . . . 'there's no hope of realizing what you want'" (9). In Dickens's novel, Pip's exquisite suffering at the hands of Estella metonymically connects her to a series of evil and unnatural dominatrices—Miss Havisham, Mrs. Joe, and Magwitch's wild mistress—who are all eventually beaten into submission or written away as irrelevant. Acker points out the nexus between the idealization of women and vilification of prostitutes in Victorian society. She also seems to rebuke a carceral masochism not sublimated in art. Sexuality is coded, in very Freudian terms, as a kind of self-shattering not unlike masochism.

Pip inexplicably calls himself Peter, though this may have something to do with his conviction that "[the] logic way of talking (perceiving) is wrong." He is benumbed and bereft of language or plot: "I feel I feel I feel I have no language, any emotion for me is a

prison" (24). Character is defined by sexuality in Acker's nineteenth-century knockoff, but by making the gender of the masochistic narrator (who is both Pip and a woman) ambiguous and fluid, Acker "produces" a Victorian sexuality that is also uncannily post-modern. Like Dickens's protagonist, Acker's Pip claims to have great expectations, but unlike him is not obsessed about their origin or consequences and does not need them as imaginative props for his escapist fantasies. Against the nineteenth-century model of developmental change, we have an aphasic subject fading away, sexual encounter after degrading sexual encounter. "There's no possibility that anyone'll love you anymore or that love matters," says he or she. "Because there's no hope of realizing what you want, you're a dead person and you're having sex" (50–51). In Dickens's *Great Expectations*, the hero is systematically stripped of his fortunes and dreams, but as Raymond Williams observes, this deprivation of identity is a kind of liberation "in which the most fantastic and idiosyncratic kinds of growth could come about" (53). Dickens's anti-heroic and common Pip, who for the most part does not write his life story but is written, steps out of the *fictio* of his childhood and youth with the desire to articulate a life story. The autobiographical novel of endless reversals ends with the hope that Pip's belated authorship of his life will mark a rebeginning, not a return. In contrast, the hysterical protagonist of Acker's novel is dissatisfied, disgusted, and sick with desire: he or she ambivalently negotiates a cultural wasteland, where even language has been defeated by that which it could not speak for or of.

Sue Roe's novel *Estella: Her Expectations* (1982) rewrites the relationship of Dickens's Estella and her deranged guardian along the binaries of innocence and experience. If Estella dreams of a world "unstreaked by paint" (8), the dancer is a painted woman, a woman with color, first glimpsed in the novel as a pair of scarlet-tipped feet resting on a window ledge. Estella, who has skated on surfaces so far, and sauntered through life like a *flâneuse*, is seduced by the promise of depth, or depths of decadence, held out by the unseen "interior interiors" of the dancer's decaying house. The dancer, like Miss Havisham, is a woman with a past, but one who seeks to mitigate and sublimate it in her art. Estella likes to visualize the "dancer dancing towards the death wheels of some strain; some

painful memory" (56): in her mind, the fantasy of autonomy is inescapably linked to a repetition of pain. "[T]hat dress," all yellowing lace and thin black threads, with small spiders sewn into it, is a relic of the past, an intractable remainder: "whatever the story you invented for that dress, it would still have a strange and mysterious meaning of its own" (48). The dancer's aberrant relationship with her reference is symbolized by a tarnished mirror: how does she know who she is, wonders Estella, ontologically implicated as she is in a nonreflecting surface and the folds of a dead dress? Even the jewels on the dancer's rings are opaque, nonrepresentational. They become metaphors for Estella's preferred mode of aesthetic representation: "the half light, the scarlet and the damson, the spidery light" (80) of an imaginative vision, innocent, as it were, of meaning.

In Roe's novel, Estella wants to play at being Miss Havisham, caught in the unproductive, undifferentiated repetition of a wounding past. She feels paralyzed to act out her dreams, however, and fails even to transcribe them. Dickens's Pip appears in the novel as archetypal child, prefiguring Estella's playful escapades into art and literature, which are chastised by her friend Mercy: "Look for something outside your wretched mirror. Realize there's a very large framework out there. Take something on" (88). In the Dickens original, Pip's role as paralyzed witness actualizes—in a sublimated narrative form—Miss Havisham's perverse fantasy. In the tale of Estella's expectations, Estella catatonically views scenes of love and perversion before retreating to an underworld adrift from social reality, a fate eerily similar to that of Miss Havisham in the original. Her consciousness is punctuated by fuguelike states, a "hallucinatory no-man's land between sleep and waking" (107). Her dreams immure no positivity, no vision of a viable identity, but circle around a terrible dereliction: "an absence—a space unfilled by any form that might represent Estella" (116). There are echoes of Marguerite Duras's *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* here: Lol (the name a palindrome, like "Pip") is a prototype of the voyeuristic yet unseeing Estella. As in Pip's tradition of courtly love, Lol posits her desire as impossible; unlike Pip, she is ultimately ruined by the absence of love's returning gaze. Roe's ending seems to suggest the failure of sublimation and the subsequent darkening of desire into pathology.

The plague of phantasms, rich grist for art and literature, has become an end in itself: Estella is hooked on formless dreams like the insects in the dancer's wedding dress. The novel ends with Estella in an unnarratable and nonnarrativized state, settling herself to watch the inscrutable objects of her love.

Mistah Dickens—He Dead

In his 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*, Peter Carey borrows the character of Abel Magwitch from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*. *Jack Maggs* is a harking back, not just to Dickens's work, but also to the life of Dickens or the life of Dickens as a (biographical) text. Carey's novel is best described as a departure from its putative origin—not a return *to* (the past), or a return *of* (the repressed), but a return *from* the London and the social order pickled in Dickens's novel, with a desire to make real its substantial but un-lived-out life.

In Dickens's text, Magwitch is associated with a shameful, hypertrophic past that the hero of the mobility narrative is trying to flee from. It is a past, however, that is dynamically interconnected with the present and, in a curious way, facilitates the conditions of that flight. In his earliest conception of the novel, Dickens intended that *Great Expectations* would revolve around Pip's relationship with Magwitch, and it does so structurally.¹ If, in the novel's imaginary, Miss Havisham moves in a bizarre, self-enclosed circling around arrested time, Magwitch stands for the regenerative cycle and circulation of life which animates its symbolic structure. He is the occasion for Pip's "first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things" (35) in the church graveyard at the beginning of the novel, the scene, as Edward Said elaborates in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, of "Pip's origin as a novelistic character . . . rooted in the death of his parents" (97–98). Magwitch returns to Pip in the thirty-ninth chapter, after an absence of fifteen years, to climactically link past with future, high expectations with low origins, criminality with gentility, the nightmarish marshes with the nightmarish metropolis. His reappearance in the last third of the novel

1. See John Forster's account of Dickens's plotting of *Great Expectations* (355–56).

triggers off a chain of events that revises the terms of Pip's bildungsroman: he turns out to be Pip's benefactor, Molly's lover, Estella's father, and the ex-partner of Compeyson, the man who was Miss Havisham's fiancé.

"My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name being Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So, I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip" (35)—these are the famous first lines of Dickens's novel. Pip's incipient subjectivity is tied up with language, but language threatens to constitute him as a void to be filled with phantasms and false signs. "The tracing of the name—which he 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," states Peter Brooks. This is a novel of "[l]oss of origin, misreading, and the problematic of identity," he cautions (115–16). Pip's identity is grounded in unstable foundations, the loss of family, and an act of unwilling charity toward the convict. Pip shores up byzantine mental constructions that help him to entail affiliation with Satis House—the source, he thinks, of his great expectations: "She reserved it for me to restore the desolate house, admit the sunshine into the dark rooms, set the clocks a going and the cold hearths a blazing, tear down the cobwebs, destroy the vermin—in short do all the shining deeds of the young Knight of romance. . . . Estella was the inspiration of it, and the heart of it, of course" (253). Pip's compromise with reality is paralleled, in this novel, in Wemmick's castle at Walworth, complete with fake battlements and a drawbridge, and the poisoned interiority of Miss Havisham's Satis House—monuments to solipsism and self-enclosed fantasy, from which only Pip is lucky enough to escape. This free improvisation of his genealogy meets its first resistance in Miss Havisham. She tweaks desire in Pip through Estella only to take delight in its subsequent frustration. Pip enters fuguelike states and hallucinates about Miss Havisham hanging by the neck (93–94). He is beside himself in appetency and terror, in appetency born of terror: "I at first ran from it, and then ran towards it" (94). In a bizarre wish fulfillment—in the tremendous fire scene—Pip gets to forgive Miss Havisham and aid the full-scale conflagration of her repressed affect. Miss Havisham goes up in the

ecstasy of emotional recognition, even as Pip literally saves her from the flames. She succumbs to “nervous shock” and not actual burns (435) in an expiatory death: the cake is destroyed, the old wedding dress burnt to ashes, the rotting chamber cleansed by fire.

Pip’s “ecstasy of unhappiness” reaches a crescendo with Estella:

You are part of my existence, part of myself. You have been in every line I have ever read. . . . You have been in every prospect I have ever seen. . . . Estella, to the last hour of my life, you cannot choose but remain part of my character, part of the little good in me, part of the evil.

(378)

We suddenly see Estella for what she is: “the embodiment of every graceful fancy” (378), woman-manipulated-as-sign, a linguistic object projected on the text by the sweeping “you are part of my existence.” Pip as controlling subject has introjected the apostrophized object: “you cannot choose but remain part of my character.” He hunts down Estella’s lowly parentage, and the power/knowledge of the purloined story of her birth affects his remarkable self-possession in the revised ending of the novel. Estella’s secret does not involve her at all; it is part of the discourse that first inscribes and then reads her. In the ending Dickens decided to publish, we have in her chastised and impoverished body a moral ending for Pip’s story, a trope that unites self and sign with “no shadow of another parting” (493).

Lacan sees language as a signifying chain—“rings of a necklace that is a ring in another necklace made of rings” (*Écrits* 153). “Pause you who read this,” Pip says, “and think for a moment of 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” (101). Magwitch is the first link of the serial articulations of Pip’s tale. He is what Lacan calls “the past in its real form,” “not the physical past whose existence is abolished, nor the epic past as it has become perfected in the work of memory, nor the historic past in which man finds the guarantor of his future, but the past which reveals itself reversed in repetition” (*Écrits* 103). Pip is afflicted by this past, which refuses to be petrified as memory, or superseded and subsumed in the future. The early encounter with Magwitch gives rise to “inexplicable feeling[s]” (403) and phantasmagoric

delusions in Pip: it accounts for his acute disconcertment when he visits Newgate; Estella, boasting of not having “a heart to be stabbed in or shot in” (259), makes him associate her with the criminal nexus of Newgate-Molly-Magwitch; the death masks of two hanged convicts in Jaggers’s office hold his gaze; Miss Havisham, touching her hands to her chest, evokes the memory of Magwitch’s terrifying story of a young man who fed on the hearts and livers of small boys. The “dead hare hanging by the heels” (13) in Mrs. Joe’s kitchen and the hanging visions of Miss Havisham are both displacements of his early imagining of Magwitch hanging from a gibbet. Pip’s final reconciliation with Magwitch—and his idea of Magwitch—follows a regime of disillusionments: his acknowledgment of Magwitch’s connections with Miss Havisham and Estella, his arrest for debt, delirious illness, and reunion with his childhood companions Joe Gargery and Biddy. Pip becomes a benefactor and makes Herbert a gentleman: he has exploded the self-enclosed self to participate in an economy of circulation. Pip’s “smart without a name, that needed counteraction” (92) can finally be elaborated, named, and shared: it becomes the novel Dickens has him narrate.

It is impossible not to see, in Pip’s projections, Dickens’s childhood trauma—“the secret agony of my soul” (qtd. in Forster 2:26), the abjection of the debtor’s prison and the blacking factory—and his subsequent invention of a comfortable middle-class childhood for himself. Peter Ackroyd, his biographer, sees *Great Expectations* as a study in self-knowledge: “It is in any event a book of great psychological accuracy and observation, as if Dickens were secretly examining himself as he writes, analysing the nature of passion, of hypocrisy, of psychological meanness, all those things ‘low and small’ of which Pip eventually realizes himself to be guilty” (899). And who is Magwitch but Dickens’s Muse, whom he followed from hospital to warehouse to morgue, and in night patrols with the police to the dens of criminals and prostitutes?² Dickens was in pain almost constantly while writing this novel, suffering from what he

2. For Dickens’s journalism around the time he wrote *Great Expectations*, see Michael Slater and John Drew’s edition, which wonderfully brings out the two facets of Dickens’s authorial persona: eminent Victorian, crusading for social reform, and morbid fantasist, goaded in his literary pursuits by prurient curiosity and a wicked sense of humor.

termed "facial neuralgia," which vanished the day he finished his work (Ackroyd 900).

Peter Brooks reads *Great Expectations* with Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, using Freud's theorization of repetition to understand the functioning of the novel. Freud identifies the compulsion to repeat as the expression of a death instinct: "The impulse to work over in the mind some overpowering experience so as to make oneself master of it," he states, becomes "a compulsion to repeat—something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it over-rides" (16, 23). Freud begins with the child's *fort-da* game of wresting control over privation and then moves to a discussion of primary processes where energy seeks instant gratification. Repetition is what binds and rations energy and postpones its discharge: mastery springs from this postponement. As Brooks points out, repetition, compulsion, and the death instinct ultimately service the pleasure principle, though they are more primitive: the eschewal of immediate pleasure ensures "that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete" (101–2).

Freud's "masterplot" for organic life, according to Brooks, is an energetic model for narrative plot. We are all moving toward death, just as the elaboration of plot is end-driven. Repetition links the origin with the end and is a deviance, detour, and delay of fulfillment: "We emerge from reading *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* with a dynamic model that structures ends (death, quiescence, nonnarratability) against beginnings (Eros, stimulation into tension, the desire of narrative) in a manner that necessitates the middle as detour, as struggle toward the end under the compulsion of imposed delay, as arabesque in the dilatory space of the text" (107–8). In Brooks's reading, *Great Expectations* dramatizes the ambiguities of repetition: is repetition sameness or difference? Is it a return to or a return of? Pip's returns *to* origins (to Satis House, for example) and the returns *of* the repressed (as in the repetition of the convict material) seem to attest to Freud's insight that we cannot but repeat the unmastered past until we have incorporated the end in relation to the beginning: "We are condemned to repetition, re-reading, in the knowledge that what we discover will always be that there was nothing to be discovered" (Brooks 142).

Freud's model of repetition as a symbolic enactment of unconscious material from the past cannot easily be applied to the phenomenon of rewriting and revisiting canonical works. *Great Expectations* is an unlikely cause of childhood trauma, and the superior artistic production that is *Jack Maggs* makes it difficult to treat it as a symptom, an inscrutable kernel of enjoyment that mocks the absolutism of the signifier. However, we can read literary rewriting as an *intentional* act of wish fulfillment that emphasizes the retroactivity of meaning. The logic of this deferred action is well-captured in the temporal insights of Lacanian psychoanalysis. As Slavoj Žižek states, "instead of the linear, immanent, necessary progression according to which meaning unfolds itself from some initial kernel, we have a radically contingent process of retroactive production of meaning" (*Sublime Object* 102). The forms and content literary rewritings seek to find, or re-find, are often phantasmic in nature. They look back in anger or longing for objects always already lost.

Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*, like Dickens's *Great Expectations*, is about the writing of a novel. The author in question, Tobias Oates, is not the narrator, nor is the novel "The Death of Maggs" written by the end of *Jack Maggs*, the narrative we read. The plot is an elaborate mediation between Dickens's *Great Expectations* and Oates's "Death of Maggs," letting us glimpse the "real" life of Maggs which fiction must lie, falsify, and invent around in order to reveal. Oates is Dickens himself: Cockney, flamboyant, ambitious, obsessive, impatient to mire lived experience in unhysterical detail and the wordy and unreal brilliance of his art. And Maggs is Magwitch, the recalcitrant object of Dickens's/Oates's aesthetic and, as we shall see later, what survives its maltreatment.

Carey's novel begins with Jack Maggs's return to London to meet his surrogate English "son" whose great expectations he has funded with wealth gained in the colonies. Like Pip's convict, he is "whipped and worried and drove" (Dickens 360) into criminality and deported to Australia, where, after his conditional pardon, he makes a fortune from clay. He arrives at Mr. Henry Phipps's residence at 27 Great Queen Street to find no one home "but draughts and mice" (8) and decides to accept gainful employment as a footman in Mr. Percy Buckle's house next door. Mr. Buckle, a Clerkenwell grocer, has come into money late in life and enjoys its

sweets: the complete set of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, distinguished company, and the saucy kitchen maid, Mercy Larkin. It is in this household that Maggs meets Tobias Oates, the increasingly popular author of comic tales and creator of Captain Crumley and Mrs. Morefallen.

Tobias Oates lives with his wife and her younger sister, whom he loves, in domestic bliss fringed with anarchic desires. Like Dickens, he scours the wondrous and awful city by foot, from townhouse to rookery to morgue; in one of the pigeonholes in his meticulously neat study is a thief's hand purchased from a shop in Whitechapel, while another holds the death mask of John Sheppard, hanged at Tyburn in 1724: "the Criminal Mind" beckons him to be "its first cartographer" (90). From a chance encounter with Maggs, Oates knows his secret—the flight from New South Wales—and enters into a pact where he will, through mesmerism, ransack Maggs's unconscious and construct stories *post factum*, in exchange for help in locating Henry Phipps. In counterpoint to this ungenerous model of creativity, Maggs embarks on a storytelling of his own, in the form of personal letters to his dear protégé, heartrending tales of shame and terror from his dreary and damaged childhood.

Jack Maggs out-Dickens a Dickensian work. Ma Britten, Captain Constable, and Percy Buckle are urban neurotics: Ma Britten sells miscarriage pills, Captain Constable is a suicidal homosexual, and Percy Buckle alarmingly morphs from a harmless bookworm into a homicidal maniac. The mudflats and scavengers of *Our Mutual Friend*, the protracted and inscrutable legacies of *Bleak House*, the girl prostitutes of *David Copperfield*, the social casualties of the city's orphanages and ghettos and the ubiquitous gallows of *Oliver Twist* all come together like fragments of emotive memory in Carey's novel. Maggs's elaborate quest is plotted against this ghoulish background. In Dickens's novel, Magwitch is redeemed in the end by a contrite Pip, who sees in him "my benefactor, . . . who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years" (456–57). Maggs, however, is shot by a monstrously selfish Phipps and saved by Mercy Larkin, Buckle's maid and onetime lover. He returns to Australia and dies, years later, "in a musty high-ceilinged bedroom above the flood-brown Manning River . . . with his weeping sons and daughters

crowded round his bed" (328). The serialization of "The Death of Maggs" begins three years after his death.

In *Great Expectations*, Magwitch is used as what Joseph A. Hynes calls the "Magwitch motif," a contingency that influences Pip's self-discovery and coming of age.³ In *Jack Maggs*, Carey refuses us the comfort of the oedipal paradigm: there is no castrating father without the guilty son. In Pip's absence—or phantom presence, for he peoples Maggs's nightmares—one can no longer valorize metalanguage over language by turning to the false objectivity of myth, literature, or psychoanalysis. Carey fixes our gaze on Maggs's lash-scarred back in an episode of animal magnetism in Oates's house:

Jack Maggs shed his jacket, then his silk ruff and shirt, and then the coarse wool singlet, and stood before them, naked to the waist. . . . As Lizzie Warriner raised her eyes, she gasped at the sea of pain etched upon the footman's back, a brooding sea of scars, of ripped and tortured skin.

(86)

The objective of the "Mesmeric Exhibition" is to "drag the demons out of Master Maggs" with magnets (80): a Sherlock Holmesian waking consciousness will pick apart the convict's unconscious, read and diligently expound it. Carey is at pains to point out that the material signs of suffering—Maggs's "restless limbs, his twisted mouth," his fear of flogging, blistering sun, thirst, and pain—are analyzed by Oates with all the empathy of, say, a literary critic. However, if Tobias Oates secures the right to be "the archaeologist of this mystery . . . the surgeon of this soul" (54), Maggs does not succumb easily to his shamanistic power. He feels burgled, eviscerated, narrated:

"You are filled with Phantoms, Master Maggs. It is these Phantoms who cause you such distress. Did you know that? Do you know what hobgoblins live inside your head like beetles in a fallen log?"

"But how did you make me speak?" cried the visitor. . . .

"Last night you were a Somnambulist."

"Whatever it is called, it is a terrible thing, Sir, for a man to feel his insides all exposed to public view. . . ."

3. Hynes defines the "Magwitch motif" as the imagery of Pip's first encounter with Magwitch that returns in subsequent scenes (290).

"Would you rather keep the pain?"

"I would have it back ten times over, if my secrets came with it."

(46)

The trauma of Jack Maggs's middle passage between *there, then*, and *here, now*, cannot be commemorated in Oates's literary project.

Maggs chooses to remember and recover his history in epistolary form. He writes in invisible ink—his art is "distrustful" of interpellation (74). It is a "different type of story" (74), the inverse (written right to left) of the one Tobias is plotting, in that "it kept its secrets to itself" (158). The letters narrate his blighted childhood with Ma Britten, purveyor of "belly-ache sausages" and "Dr Britten's Cock Spur Pills for Female Disorders" (209) and a life-denying force; her partner, the thief Silas Smith; her son Tom; and Tom's daughter Sophina. We come to know that the convict's surname, Maggs, is not a patronymic: like Pip, he has a false name, slapped on him by his foster mother Mary Britten, "who believed I talked too much" (75). Sophina and he work hard as burglars and make love at the crime scene: "Twere the sweetest thing in all my life, to go burgling with Sophina and to flirt with the great dangerous web of sleep which came down to claim us afterwards" (216). When Mary Britten discovers Sophina's pregnancy, a home remedy is administered with alacrity. Maggs's autobiography reaches breaking point when he remembers the fetus, damaged and cast out, in the collapsing drain, surrounded by excrement and rotteness: "There lay our son—the poor dead mite was such a tiny thing. I could have held him in my hand. And on his queerly familiar little face, a cruel and dreadful cut. Cannot write more at this time" (241). Later in his life, when he lets Tobias Oates ransack his secrets, Maggs returns to this traumatic scene to address his incomprehension. Oates has magnetized him and is decoding the dialect of his delirium: "With Jack Maggs, there was always an obstacle—a wall, a moat, a bridge—some impediment which must be crossed to enter the castle of the Criminal Mind" (201). Oates wears down the resistance, brick by brick, and the somnambulist releases "a wail, so long and dreadful, that the writer, listening to it, bowed his head and shut his eyes" (202). There, on the other side of the wall, is a little boy lying in a ditch: "My *babe*. My babe is dead" (204).

Jack Maggs's letters do not reach the intended addressee. Mercy Larkin saves Maggs from Phipps's fire and rehabilitates him with his real offspring in Australia. While there is no character like Mercy in "The Death of Maggs," it is she who makes possible the publication of Jack Maggs's letters to Henry Phipps. The sliding, and crucial, address, upon which all the unread and unreadable messages converge, is that of the reader. We are enjoined to read this purloined text with caution and unsentimental charity.

Carey's homage to Dickens, in this retelling, bristles with passionate indictment and a vexed author-to-author filiation. The "tormented beast" (325) of *Jack Maggs* is not its eponymous hero but the diminutive Tobias Oates, Carey's predecessor Dickens. To the jaded modern reader, anaesthetized to the shock of conceptual art, whereby a urinal in a New York gallery is called "fountain" and a pickled shark becomes a memento mori, Carey delivers a chilling warning about the exploitative nature of a process in which objects become found objects and works of art. The literary marketplace is Oates's playground. The irresponsibility with which he rifles through the creatures from Jack Maggs's past comes with the territory:

[H]e had a premonition of the true majesty of the work he would one day write. And how did he value this portent? Why, like a pawnbroker. He examined this great novel with his jeweller's glass. He might contrive to sell the copyright of such a work, and sell it entire, today, with not a word yet written.

(198–99)

In yet another perspicacious observation, Carey links the serialization of (Dickens's) novels with the elusiveness of an end story. Tobias himself is desperate enough to reject the traditional media of writing—inspiration and ink—for the bulky apparatus of mesmerism. His long-suffering wife, Mary, is the first to register this loss of nerve: "You never needed magnets before. You used an ink and pen. You made it up, Toby. Lord, look at the people you have made. Mrs Morefallen. Did you need magnets to dream her up?" (118).

From around 1838, Dickens was deeply interested in mesmerism and part of a movement that later influenced hypnotists like

Ambrose Liébeault, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Freud (Kaplan 133). He participated in mesmerist exhibitions and practiced mesmerism himself: trances, fantasies, dreams, and a panoply of conversion disorders lent themselves to the secondary elaboration of language and literature. *Jack Maggs* is about the seductiveness and fallaciousness of this experiment. Psychology is nothing without language, or stylistics, but that also means that its glib diagnostic suppositions are metaphorical, not literal, truths. Tobias Oates sees in *Jack Maggs* “[a] memory I can enter, and leave” (87). The more fathomable *Maggs*’s body is, however, the more indecipherable its mysteries become:

[H]e memorized the hard shine to *Jack Maggs*’s skin as it cleaved close to the bones of his cheek and jaw. He would use those bones, perhaps tomorrow. On the following day he would return for those deeper, more painful items which must still be cut free from the softer tissue of *Jack Maggs*’s memory.

(178)

Maggs’s pain offers ferocious resistance through its intangibility, a particular that defers the whole. Oates “feared he had done something against the natural order, had unleashed demons he had no understanding of, disturbed some dark and dreadful nest of vermin” (203). Language cannot fully capture or kill this alterity:

Tobias reflected on how he was to lay this Phantom to rest for ever. He had by now long forgotten, if he ever knew, that this wraith was his own invention, a personification of pain that he had planted in the other’s mind. He commanded the Somnambulist to describe the figure that haunted him. . . . his purpose was to make his subject concentrate upon the phantom, and then, by some violent strategy he had not yet imagined, to cast him for ever, like swine, into the sea.

(203)

Jack Maggs shares in Hegel’s notion of the imperfect correspondence between the mind and objective reality, meaning and living, and powerfully dramatizes the detrimental consequences of not minding the gap. Tobias’s life becomes a tableau of horrors: his mesmerism kills a man, his illicit love affair ends in pregnancy, abortion, and death, and most unfortunate of all, “the Criminal Mind [becomes] repulsive to his own imagination” (303). At the end of the novel he mourns the premature deaths of his lover Lizzie

(from an overdose of Mrs. Britten's miscarriage pills, procured by Maggs), of the homunculus that would have been their love child, and of the manuscripts from the Maggs project. Stoking the fire that engulfs the pages of his unfinished work and the bloody sheets from his sister-in-law's deathbed, Tobias sees Maggs "flowering, threatening, poisoning" (326) and plots a new novel in revenge. This Jack Maggs—"The Death of Maggs"—"was, of course, a fiction" (326).

Novel Rewritings

At the heart of experience, according to Lacan, is the insistence of the real—that which cannot be symbolized, a "petrified forest of enjoyment," as Žižek states ("Truth" 203), which meaning cannot infiltrate. Lacan links repeating with the limit posed by the opacity of the real:

An adequate thought, *qua* thought, at the level at which we are, always avoids—if only to find itself again later in everything—the same thing. Here, the real is that which always comes back to the same place—to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it.

(*Four Fundamental Concepts* 49)

The unthinkable, unspecularizable real elicits desire but will not be dialecticized or objectified by it. It engenders repetition and a series of misrecognitions. Lacan returns to Freud's celebrated example of repetition, the *fort-da* game, to revise its meaning:

The activity as a whole symbolizes repetition, but not at all that of some need that might demand the return of the mother, and which would be expressed quite simply in a cry. It is the repetition of the mother's departure as cause of a *Spaltung* in the subject—overcome by the alternating game, *fort-da*, which is a *here* or *there*, and whose aim, in its alternation, is simply that of being the *fort* of a *da*, and the *da* of a *fort*. It is aimed at what, essentially, is not there, *qua* represented[.]

(62–63)

The cause of repetition, I repeat, is a lost cause. Repetition is repetition of what is missed (cognitively). The function of the child's exercise with the small bobbin "refers to an alienation, and not to some

supposed mastery”: repetition is endless, says Lacan, and reveals “the radical vacillation of the subject” (239). Lacan situates our relation to the real not as a simple matter of seeing or knowing it, but as an urgent responsibility, or what he describes as an ethical relation to the real. The real functions as an encounter, “insofar as it may be missed, insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter” (55). The missing of the real is also an encounter, in fact the only ethical encounter with the real: a feeling of radical destitution transmits the otherness of the real and the estranged encounter with that otherness.

In Freudian analysis, repetition is linked to incomprehension. We return to the past to address what we haven’t understood, and we overwrite through representation what seems heterogeneous and unassimilable otherwise. Repetition characterizes the drives that engineer life, pertaining both to the pleasure principle and to what is beyond it. The aim of organic life, Freud observes, is not evolution but regression and return to the inorganic: the outcome of life is death. Lacan’s view of the repetitive structure of the symbolic is similarly dire. According to him, repetition is in fact the signifier’s repeated failure to designate itself. Lacan identifies as the “real” an order of effects that resist symbolization and remain as a counterpoint, breaking the chains of signification. The impossibility of signifying the real is matched, in Lacan’s conception of language, with repeated attempts to see it transversely through language, or at least to inscribe its impossibility. As Jean-François Lyotard says of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, it is all about an odyssey of consciousness: the mind acquires “its final identity, its self-knowledge, by exposing itself . . . to the risk of losing itself” (126). The game is repeated endlessly with the hope, but without the certainty, of grasping that which eludes it. Each reworking of the literary and linguistic investiture of Dickens’s novel takes on the real insofar as the real is an impossible, nonnarrativized, unrealized potential in the narrative that generates a series of failed encounters.

The novels by Carey, Acker, and Roe discussed here playfully blur the boundary between new and old, tradition and individual talent, and the Derridean categories of inventiveness and programmability. They renew old pleasures and reopen old wounds by their deliberate affiliation with familiar texts. This form of narrative

mimicry pries open what D. A. Miller identifies as the inexhaustible “narratable” element of well-concluded novels, “the various incitements to narrative, as well as the dynamic ensuing from such incitements” (ix). The narratable is never quite used up in the inexorable movement of plot toward expedient endings. Rewritings pit the narrated against traces of the narratable, brushing aside an immanent and linear production of meaning for one that is contingent and retroactively thrust upon the text. Freud states in the *Three Essays on Sexuality* that “[t]he finding of an object is in fact a refinding of it” (145), alluding to an interminable psychic process of (re)enacting forever lost scenarios like the illicit mother-child dyad. With reference to literary rewritings, we could say that the refinding of an object is in fact a finding of it: it has the brio and paranoid optimism of an act of invention.

In the psychoanalytic scene, one repeats in order to remember, but what one seeks to recover never *was*. Since the lost object is phantasmic and hypothetical in nature, its true meaning can never correspond with approximations in language: something escapes literalization and disturbingly returns. Lacan calls this remainder “*objet a*”; Bruce Fink describes it succinctly as “the leftover of that process of constituting an object, the scrap that evades the grasp of symbolization” (94). Lacan links *objet a* to love, which is not just a sum of the parts of the loved object. We love in the other something that exceeds his gifts and qualities—the belated effect of a statement, the lingering of a voice, “something more” and self-alienating in him. And we disfigure beloved objects to make them intelligible, to activate transference, to simply connect. For the hysteric, *objet a* is the truth: the hysteric’s discourse engages with that preponderant, objectal “thingness” in the subject, which resists representation. The hysteric is a belligerent subject, forever questioning the mandate that locates her in the network of intersubjective relations. Žižek calls hysteria “the effect and testimony of a failed interpellation” (*Sublime Object* 113), the failure of the subject to identify with the symbolic order. The hysteric’s desire exceeds her demand, and her utterance falls short of her enunciation: to quote Žižek again, the hysteric position can be articulated as, “I’m demanding this of you, but what I’m really demanding of you is to refute my demand because this is not it!” (112). The hysteric is after the phantasmic

surplus-object, the *objet a*, the real of *jouissance* which language cannot pin down. (Re)writing replicates this pattern of desire in that it, too, strains toward a traumatic impossibility, something that has to be addressed if not symbolized, repeated if not recuperated in transcendental categories.

Rewriting as re-creation dislocates the hierarchical relationship between the original and the replica, the donor and the receiver of forms. Since it is not merely imitation but a transformative and transgressive reimagining, postmodern rewriting, to borrow Else Ribeiro Pires Viera's astute observation on the poetics of (postcolonial) translation, "unleashes the epistemological challenge of discontinuity but reunites threads into a new fabric; a translation project which murders the father, means in his absence yet reveres him by creating a continued existence for him in a different corporeality" (97). Working with inherited material, the rewritings of *Great Expectations* are also unwritings, which worry their precursor's critical engagement with the place and claims of marginalized alterity. They unfailingly raise and sometimes replicate the problem of representation, where the aesthetic object is explicated in a conceptual framework. Each takes literature to a new breaking point as it strains harder to achieve shared language or dialogue between different peoples, rationalities, and modalities. Lacan insists that the subject must come to *be* amid foreignness, battling an out-of-joint reality. As Carey demonstrates in his sympathetic portrayal of Dickens's outlaw Magwitch, the artist too must engage with unending responsibility with an outside or otherness that rudely provokes art but will not be usurped by it. Lacan's term for unconscious repetition is "acephalic," or "headless" (*Seminar* 167). In these rewritings we have an "acting out" of unconscious and repressed material in the precursor texts, a repetition that is headless to some extent, but largely a cognitive and emotional intervention that seeks to recover lost memory by writing it backwards and to constitute the past through deferred action. This *mise-en-scène* of postmodern rewriting demonstrates hysteria's anomie or, more positively, its naughty secret: there is nowhere to return to, and nothing to remember, for what it "repeats" compulsively is that which was never experienced.

Wadham College
University of Oxford

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