Unsolved Problems and Deviant Narrators

THE DECLINE OF THE HERO

The most successful vehicle for Dickens's complex ethical investigations is almost always the individual protagonist – and, with Esther Summerson and Amy Dorrit as partial exceptions, this means the male protagonist. The most elaborated and convincing of these figures is Pip, in Great Expectations.

To be as central to a narrative as Pip is, however, is burdensome. And just as the potentially repellent character of the self-advertisement in Dickens’s previous great, first-person, heavily autobiographical novel, David Copperfield, is undercut by the hero’s immediately obvious self-doubt, so Pip too is an unstable and ironized focus of interest. Very typically for Dickens, the boy’s very name is enlisted against him. Meeting him for the first time, Herbert Pocket declines to call him ‘Philip . . . for it sounds like a moral boy out of the spelling-book’ (GE, 177). Various ironies attach to this. First, Pip is yet another victim of bad educational practices: Pumblechook has burdened him with the idea that ‘a moral boy’, in the sense of a morally good boy, is virtually a contradiction in terms. Then, Pip will come to have his own sense of his moral worth deflated on numerous occasions – until it would be hard to take him as a positive example for anybody. It is as though Dickens were presenting his hero as a would-be paragon, a worthy subject for 59 chapters, and then suggesting that such prominence is unsustainable and absurd. The novelist’s great expectations of Pip as a literary phenomenon, as a product to satisfy the reader, are advanced with self-conscious pathos. As Angus Wilson has it,

There is surely some doubt, in this great novel of self-revaluation, of [Dickens’s] own great genius; above all, in the fierce attack upon those who make puppets of others or mould them into idols (Jaggers, Magwitch, Miss Havisham, Pip’s own treatment
of Estella) there is surely some doubt about that exercise of will which Dickens must have come with all his family trouble to question in himself; with that egotistic will that tore down his wife and children he may surely have come to associate the whole power of shaping real life into fictions.¹

But it is debatable whether these biographical hints are really necessary, or whether Dickens was not becoming more and more sceptical about the epistemological and didactic status of the novel through sheer concentration on the rigours of the form. Oliver Twist always cried out, in a sense, to be rewritten as a kind of Pip. In fact, we could use Pip as a gloss on all the Dickensian heroes that preceded him. They all provoke similar misgivings in the reader; Dickens just becomes progressively more acute in his anticipation and acknowledgement of those misgivings.

Thus, his handling of Pip involves a mixture of intimacy and distance, of warm solicitude and the punishing manipulativeness of an author who views the writing of fiction as a slightly grisly recreation. On the one hand, Pip is an attractively energetic, often ingenuous young person, whose good fortune seems to be held up for our rejoicing, so that he seems, like Oliver, to be Dickens's 'poor child', nurtured by the author and eventually rewarded with what looks like quite a happy future. On the other hand, in the culmination of another process which had also begun with Oliver, Dickens subjects the hero to repeated mortifications. In fact, this second process, by now so well established in Dickens's work, takes on an appearance of ritual inevitability.

Take, in particular, Pip's lonely walk along the High Street of the village, in Book Two, Chapter 11, the very centre of the novel, where he is mercilessly ridiculed by Trabb the tailor's histrionically gifted apprentice:

I had not got as much further down the street as the post-office, when I again beheld Trabb's boy shooting round by a back way. This time, he was entirely changed. He wore the blue bag in the manner of my great-coat, and was strutting along the pavement towards me on the opposite side of the street, attended by a company of delighted young friends to whom he from time to time exclaimed, with a wave of his hand, 'Don't know yah!' Words cannot state the amount of aggravation and injury wreaked upon me by Trabb's boy, when, passing abreast of me, he pulled up his shirt-collar, twined his side-hair, stuck an arm akimbo, and