London, Radical Culture, and the Making of the Dickensian Aesthetic

Sen, Sambudha

Published by The Ohio State University Press


Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/23961.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23961

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=898163
Radical Culture, the City, and the Problem of Selfhood

*Great Expectations* and *Pendennis*

This book has focused throughout on the expressive resources that germinated in radical culture and in popular visual representations of the city and on the effect that these expressive resources had on some of the fundamental features of the Dickensian novel: its organization of time and space, its modes of characterization and plot construction, and its representation of the discourses of power, from parliamentary speeches and the unfolding of Chancery procedure to the conversation that circulates in what Mrs. Merdle calls “Society.” *Great Expectations* works with resources from both the radical and the urban aesthetic to engage with a process that lay at the very center of the realistic novel: the gradual and extended unfolding of the protagonist’s inner life. Thus, *Great Expectations* deploys radical expressive strategies not, as in *Bleak House* or *Little Dorrit*, to demystify the language of power but to articulate its hero’s rise to the status of a gentleman in ways that will complicate his sense of himself. Similarly, Dickens works with the dispersive as well as the juxtapositional impulses within the urban aesthetic to, on the one hand, inscribe within Pip’s consciousness the experience of “placelessness” that Michel de Certeau associates with the life of the city, and, on the other, to implicate him in a relationship that will block the possibility of his attaining anything like an integrated social identity.

The radical orientation that underlies the articulation of Pip’s inner life becomes evident in the details with which Thackeray works to produce his gentlemanly subjects. One example could be the kind of play that the genea-
logical details of great families are allowed in a novel like *Pendennis*. As in *Vanity Fair*, aristocratic genealogies circulate all the time in the social world of *Pendennis*. The Major’s advice to Pen just before the latter is about to visit one of London’s great families is typical:

> “Having obtained the entree into Lady Agnes Foker’s house,” he said to Pen with an affectionate solemnity which befitted the importance of the occasion, “it behoves you, my dear boy, to keep it. You must mind and never neglect to call in Grosvenor Street when you come to London. I recommend that you read up carefully, in Debrett, the alliances and genealogy of the Earls of Rosherville and, if you can, to make some trifling allusions to the family, something which you, who have a poetic fancy, can do pretty well.” (vol. 1, 164)

The Major’s obsession with the conventions and the minutiae of genteel society is the subject of a great deal of irony. Unlike *Little Dorrit*, however, in which satirized references to bloodlines merely denote a deferential attitude to lords and ladies, the Major’s advice should be understood as part of a more complex engagement with aristocratic life that unfolds in *Pendennis*. Pen may laugh at his uncle, but he also puts his advice to productive use. Indeed, his uncle’s advice, together with what Pen learns at such institutions as Oxbridge and at the London club, where he is made a member, form a repertoire of references, words, gestures, and attitudes that Pen will deploy all the time as he goes about finding his feet as a gentleman. Of course, Pen is, on two occasions, in the danger of destabilizing his gentlemanly status by falling in love with socially undesirable women. But these dangers are created only so that they may be overcome, since, as we’ll see, the *mésalliance* is never a source of serious expressive possibilities in Thackeray’s work. Rather, the incessant interaction between Pen’s developing consciousness about gentlemanly social practices and the details of the social spaces across which he moves both circumscribes the action of *Pendennis* and generates its most characteristic effects: its realistic representation of the nuances of social behavior in elite interiors, as well as the gradual unfolding of Pen’s own inner life.

Mrs. Pocket in *Great Expectations* shares the Major’s interest in aristocratic genealogies, but in Dickens’s novel this interest is merely symptomatic of Mrs. Pocket’s own “ornamental . . . but perfectly useless” life (189). This bringing together of class consciousness and a genteel but irresponsible and parasitic life is very much a legacy of radical culture. The effects of this
legacy are evident, moreover, not just in the way that Mrs. Pocket is characterized but also in the kind of impact that her knowledge of genealogies is allowed to have in *Great Expectations*. In contrast to what occurs in *Pendennis*, Mrs. Pocket’s knowledge of aristocratic lineages is allowed only the most limited social play. There is only one person in the novel with whom Mrs. Pocket can sustain a positive conversation about baronetcies, and this is the stupid Bentley Drummle, who “in his limited way . . . recognized Mrs. Pocket as a woman and sister” (192). This reduction of a form of social knowledge that is one of the drivers of Pendennis’s career to a conversation confined to two very stupid people points to a larger difference of method between *Pendennis* and *Great Expectations*. One way to throw this shift into clearer relief is by focusing on a more central feature of *Great Expectations*: Dickens’s delineation of Pip’s rise to the status of a gentleman.

A striking feature of Pip’s upwardly mobile career is that it moves across a peculiarly denuded social terrain. Pip has neither family nor clubroom nor university to sustain the process of his socialization. The “genealogical lack,” which Catherine Gallagher sees as integral to Pip’s condition, is inscribed in his very name. A legally binding precondition to his elevation to the status of a gentleman is his benefactor’s instruction that he continue to adhere to the diminutive name Pip and, by implication, to a social identity that proclaims his lack of familial affiliation. Again, the whole social apparatus—made up of Oxbridge, the clubs, and the drawing rooms of London—that produces Pen’s gentlemanliness shrinks in *Great Expectations* to the pedagogical activity of a single tutor who is instructed that Pip need only be trained to “‘hold my own’ with the average of young men in prosperous circumstances” (197). Thus, *Great Expectations* fails to generate precisely those spaces that had sustained Pen’s gentlemanliness. It lacks anything like the elaborately constructed social arena—that network of collateral yet subtly differentiated interiors—in relation to whose details Pen’s gentlemanly personality gradually develops. Instead, the novelistic maneuver by which Pip is abruptly transformed from a “poor labouring boy” to a “London gentleman” aims at representing “gentlemanliness” as a social abstraction: a consolidated social status that will distinguish Pip from social inferiors.

The shift in the way gentlemanliness is treated from Thackeray to Dickens has implications that are evident from Pip’s first encounter with the world of gentlefolk. Instead of unfolding as a gradual and finely calibrated relationship between the aspiring subject and the details that circulate in elite interiors, gentlemanliness in *Great Expectations* reveals itself (in the starkest possible terms) to be embedded in the idea of class difference:
“He calls the knaves, Jacks, this boy!” said Estella with disdain, before our first game was out. “And what coarse hands he has. And what thick boots!”

I had never thought of being ashamed of my hands before; but I began to consider them a very indifferent pair. Her contempt was so strong, that it became infectious, and I caught it. (60)

What Pip suffers here is that experience of social exclusion to which the language of radicalism had been such a powerful political response. However, the radical response to social difference in *Great Expectations* does not take the form of a rhetoric of general opposition to the mystifying public discourses of the elite. Rather, its effects are to be found in Pip’s sense of self-division as it unfolds through the rather unusual self-improvement plot of which he is the protagonist.

The self-improvement plot, as it consolidated through the third quarter of the nineteenth century, was above all celebratory in its orientation. It found in the booming economy of the 1850s and ’60s the justification to project self-improvement as both desirable and easily attainable. Following this paradigm—articulated in its simplest form in the pamphlets of Samuel Smiles but also in Lord Palmerston’s vision of perpetual social and economic advancement by the “steady and energetic exertion” of one’s “moral and intellectual faculties” and in Bagehot’s idea about removable inequalities—novels like *John Halifax Gentleman* (1856) and even Dickens’s own *David Copperfield* (1850) projected upward social mobility as a smooth and easily negotiable process. One way in which they achieved the internal integrity of the improvement plot was by draining the improving hero’s past of any potential that it might possess of intruding into and destabilizing his improved status. Dinah Mulock’s hero ends his career as country gentleman, and clearly the mixture of apprehension and moral righteousness with which he now views the rural poor is uncomplicated by any sense of his own past poverty. Again Dickens bases the more complex story of David’s maturation on a set of self-conscious repressions. For example, the dark, child-laborer phase of David’s past, which might have complicated the stable middle-class identity that he attains, is never allowed to resurface once David is adopted by his aunt Betsy Trotwood. The hero of *Great Expectations*, on the other hand, is given no such immunity. When the gentlemanly Pip runs into the equivalent of Mealy Potatoes, he adopts a “serene and unconscious” attitude to attempt exactly the kind of dissociation that Dickens himself had ensured for David. But the result is disaster: “Suddenly the knees of Trabb’s boy smote together, his hair uprose, his cap fell off, he
trembled violently in every limb, staggered out into the road, and crying to
the populace ‘Hold me! I’m so frightened!’ feigned to be in such a parox-
ysm of terror and contrition, occasioned by the dignity of my appearance”
(245).

This extraordinary scene stages in the gap opened by Dickens’s reorga-
nization of the conventional improvement plot, and especially of the rela-
tionship posited by this plot between the improving hero and his past, yet
another novelistic improvisation with the language of radicalism. More
specifically, Trabb’s boy, drawing also on the expressive repertoire of the
pantomime clown, deploys his body to generate a parodic language that
is comparable to the demystifying discursive maneuvers employed by the
radical publicists. At one level, indeed, Trabb’s boy does to Pip’s postur-
ing exactly what Cobbett had done to Malthus’s learned prose: he seizes
on the connotative, metatextual elements in Pip’s behavior—the serene and
unconscious air he affects, rips them out of the context within which these
operate as signifiers of dignity, and subjects them to a process of hilarious
demystification.

Great Expectations draws on a second figure from the humble world
of Pip’s past both to destabilize Pip’s self-improving career and to sustain
the radical demystification of the genteel language. With his gentle, pacifist,
and somewhat limited personality, Joe may be very far from conforming
to our standard idea of the radical publicist. But it is the very simplicity of
Joe’s personality—his inability to comprehend or respond to elite protocols
of social interaction—that becomes the means by which Dickens is able to
destabilize these protocols. When Pip first introduces Joe to Miss Havisham,
he has an early experience of the disconcerting effect of Joe’s very presence
on social interactions based on hierarchies:

“Oh!” said she [Miss Havisham] to Joe, “You are the husband of the sister
of this boy?”

I could hardly imagine poor old Joe looking so unlike himself or so
like some extraordinary bird; standing as he did, speechless, with his tuft
of feathers ruffled, his mouth open as if he wanted a worm. “You are the
husband,” repeated Miss Havisham, “of the sister of this boy?”

It was very aggravating; but throughout the interview Joe persisted in
answering Me instead of Miss Havisham. (100)

Joe’s inability to answer Miss Havisham directly is not merely an awe-
struck response. Rather, it should be understood as a mode of defamiliar-
izing, as something that wrenches the gentlemanly language out of the ebb and flow of everyday life to self-consciously throw into relief that taken-for-granted instinct toward domination that is encoded in Miss Havisham’s very tone. When Joe meets Pip several years after he was introduced to Miss Havisham, his passive yet uncompromising resistance to the hierarchizing conventions of gentlemanly interaction comically disrupts the set of assumptions, gestures, and modes of address around which Pip himself bases his own social personality:

A ghost-seeing effect in Joe’s own countenance informed me that Herbert had entered the room. So, I presented Joe to Herbert, who held out his hand; but Joe backed from it, and held on by the bird’s nest.

“Your servant, Sir,” said Joe, “which I hope as you and Pip,”—here his eye fell on the Avenger, who was putting some toast on table, and so plainly denoted an intention to make that young gentleman one of the family, that I frowned it down and confused him more—“I meantsay, you two gentlemen—which I hope get your elths in this close spot? For the present may be a wery good inn, according to London conditions,” said Joe confidentially, “. . . but I wouldn’t keep a pig in it myself—not in case that I wished him to fatten wholesome and to eat with a meller flavour to him.” (220–21)

Working not, of course, as a real-life political activist but from within the make-belief world of the novel and in a manner oriented toward sustaining the comic, sentimental, human appeal of Great Expectations, Joe not only exposes and renders nonsensical the arbitrary divisions imposed by the elite in the social domain but also, without intending to, transforms these into self-divisions that will play themselves out as Pip’s inner life.

Joe precipitates an inevitable inner division within Pip because the latter’s exclusionary practices as a gentleman come into direct conflict with his memory of Joe’s benign egalitarianism that he had experienced as a child. Joe had been special for Pip because, unlike every other adult who had inhabited the world of his childhood, Joe’s relationship with Pip had been based not on power but on solidarity. Thus, Joe and Pip have always been, in Joe’s words, “ever the best of friends” and, in Pip’s, “equals” (48). After the reversal in his fortunes, on the other hand, Pip needs to internalize the exclusionary practices that will function as essential markers of his new status; to bring to bear on his relationship with Joe the implications of Estella’s cold injunction: “what was fit company for you once, would be quite unfit
now” (237). Deeply aware of Pip’s anxiety about maintaining social distinctions, Joe can respond only by inserting the language of class into the domain of personal relationships:

“Us two being alone, Sir,”—began Joe.

“Joe,” I interrupted, pettishly, “how can you call me Sir?”

Joe looked at me at for a single instant with something faintly like reproach. Utterly preposterous as his cravat was, I was conscious of a sort of dignity in the look. (222)

The informal egalitarianism, solidarity, and unconditional affection that has always underlain Joe’s relationship with Pip makes Joe’s mode of address unthinkable. But Joe’s jarring “Sir” also exposes as unacceptable the limits of the personality within which Pip has chosen to circumscribe his sense of himself. More specifically, Joe’s faint “reproach” will remain for Pip a troubling reminder that any system of social relations that reduces an individual to a subservient position on the basis of his accent, manners, or a “preposterous . . . cravat” cannot accommodate experiences that Pip knows to be part of himself.⁷

In his representation of Pip’s experience of upward mobility, Dickens draws on the expressive resources of not only the language of radicalism but also the urban aesthetic he had absorbed from a range of visual forms. More specifically, the urban energies that had driven the Lady Dedlock plot in Bleak House—the incessant circulation of people, objects, discourses; the uprootings; the unexpected intersections that this generates—continue to unfold powerfully in Great Expectations. They generate crucial relationships on the basis not of familial or kinship ties, but of random encounters, as well as subjects marked by the experience of rootlessness, mobility, and above all the sense of a contradictory social universe.

In Great Expectations, as in Bleak House, the urban aesthetic works, at one level, to uproot people and to break down the walls that separate their homes from the restless ebb and flow of the city. The London of Great Expectations may be, as Catherine Gallagher has noted, a surprisingly sparse entity compared to the densely detailed metropolis of Bleak House,⁸ but this process of whittling down does not, in any way, weaken the dispersive dynamic of the urban aesthetic as it affects individual citizens. Jaggers is a well-entrenched London character, but nothing in London—not even his home—offers Jaggers a still point where he might “unbend his brows a little.” Rather, like Snagsby’s law stationery shop that extends his home into Cursitor Street, Jaggers’s Gerrard Street residence is part of a continuous,
restless, always mutating field that demands he remain always “guarded and suspicious” (292). Wemmick’s sense of belonging to London is predicated on his knowing, as he tells Pip, “the moves of it” (172), and he is propelled by the legal business that he conducts on Jaggers’s behalf to incessant movement between the dramatically disparate social locations that make up the city. If, unlike Jaggers, Wemmick does manage successfully to carve out a space that will resist the dispersive impulses of the metropolis, it is precisely because this domestic idyll is self-consciously fortified and located outside the city.

The effects of the dispersive impulse within the urban aesthetic are more far-reaching in Magwitch, and they are articulated especially through his changing relationship with London. Paradoxically, Magwitch himself thinks of his return from Australia to London as the culmination of a sustained effort toward what he sees as his social integration. Just as Wemmick designs his Walworth home as an utopian space that will compensate for the scattering, dispersive effects of the city, Magwitch hopes to find in Pip—“a brought up London gentleman” (321) whom he has produced and who is “more to me than any son” (320)—the means of integrating himself with those very social structures whose exclusionary pressures Magwitch has experienced not only in England but in far-flung Australia as well. Magwitch is irresistibly drawn to London, despite being legally debarred from entering the city, because he has transformed it successfully into the ground on which he might build a stable social and even familial identity.

Yet Magwitch is unable to publicly enjoy his status as the “father” of a “brought up London gentleman” because he is a fugitive, liable to suffer the death penalty if arrested. In this way Magwitch, who thinks of his return to London as a homecoming, is persistently denied a home: he is moved incessantly from Pip’s flat near Fleet Street to an obscure riverside location called Mill Pond Bank and then to the pub from where he plans to make his escape. Moreover, the “experience of lacking a place,” which Michel de Certeau describes as characteristic of the urban experience generally, is played out not only in Magwitch’s own incessant movement from one place to another but also in the ambulatory maneuvers by which Herbert and Pip hope to confuse Magwitch’s whereabouts for anyone who might be interested. The two friends demonstrate how the activity of walking might embody the experience of “placelessness”: they take routes that lead nowhere or establish themselves as familiar presences in parts of the city with which they have no connection at all. As they draw on the innumerable and random ambulatory possibilities offered by the city to obscure Magwitch’s whereabouts, Herbert and Pip articulate the urban experience as a
“relation between the place from which [the city walker] proceeds (an origin) and the nowhere it produces.”

We could thus say that Magwitch’s story, after he arrives in London, sustains in an extreme form the dispersive impulse of the urban aesthetic. This impulse moves him from one random location to another and denies him any point to which he might arrive. Finally, the experience of being “nowhere” in which Magwitch becomes implicated impinges on his identity. Wemmick and Jaggers will talk about him only on the condition that he remain anonymous or, rather, that he be referred to by a set of undifferentiated hypothetical names: “Tom, Jack or Richard—whichever it may be” (372). Of course, it is Magwitch’s status as a fugitive that makes Jaggers and Wemmick extracautious. But Wemmick’s mode of referring to the ex-convict also locates the urban aesthetic’s dispersive impulse within the domain of the subjective. The effects of this displacement are brought into focus more centrally in the delineation of Pip’s story after he enters London as a gentleman.

One way to approach the problem of the new urban subjectivity is by comparing the kind of spaces that underpin it in Great Expectations and in Pendennis. Thus, the London of Great Expectations lacks anything like the network of socially contiguous interiors that, in Pendennis, connect the country and the city, and whose details provide the parameters for the development of the protagonist’s character. Instead, the London interiors that Pip inhabits are sparse, precarious, relatively isolated spaces that are always liable to be subsumed within the undifferentiated immensity of London. Pip’s Barnard’s Inn flat, for instance, has about it “a gypsy character” (179). Nothing ever settles in it: like the meals that are often brought in from a neighboring coffee house, everything merely moves through. Pip’s flat is also isolated—connected not to the drawing rooms, colleges, and clubs across which Pen moves but to something vaster and much less differentiated. What Pip and Herbert have about them as they settle down to enjoy their first (typically makeshift meal) is not the details of a stable social setting but “all London” (179).

The city that presses against Pip’s flat, however, differs in many ways from the densely detailed metropolis of Bleak House. The London of Bleak House had been intricately mapped, enabling Dickens to achieve certain powerful effects by moving his figures across a wide range of dramatically disparate locations. In Great Expectations, on the other hand, the internal markers of the metropolis are often erased and the city unfolds as a vast seamless entity that threatens to inundate interiors and obliterate whatever power these have to sustain a sense of belonging in those who inhabit them.
On the day Magwitch returns, for example, Dickens deploys weather conditions and more significantly the darkness of the night to engulf Pip’s Temple home in what he had described elsewhere as the “shadow of the immensity of London.”

On that night, Pip’s flat seems dysfunctional as an interior that might, in conjunction with other interiors, provide the spatial parameters for the unfolding of inner life. Rather, it is rattled by the violent storm, engulfed in darkness, and drawn into the urban nightscape outside by the persistent movement of the narrative across the passages leading out of it. Indeed, Pip feels like he is inside a “storm beaten lighthouse” (313), utterly isolated, of course, but also stranded in a dark, unmarked terrain that offers no point on which he might anchor a memory or a hope.

The “rudimentarity of the social” in *Great Expectations*, then, becomes the condition for the production of a new novelistic “chronotope”: the urban nightscape as a site where the dissociation between consciousness and its social moorings can be most effectively articulated. In “Night Walks,” an 1860 essay whose very title suggests its enormous relevance for the later chapters of *Great Expectations*, Dickens picks on “the interminable tangle” of empty night streets as the ground on which he can articulate a form of urban subjectivity that he describes as “Houselessness.” As with Dickens’s persona in “Night Walks,” Pip’s experience of “houselessness” unfurls across the London nightscape, but *Great Expectations* also draws on the greater range of expressive resources available to the novel form to saturate this condition with other forms of inner experience. The sequence in *Great Expectations* that begins with Estella finally rejecting Pip and ends with Pip spending the night in the Hummums shows exactly how this happens.

Estella’s rejection has important implications for Pip. Estella, Pip says, has been inseparable from the way in which he has been constituted, from the sights that surrounded him when young—“the river . . . the sails of the ships . . . the marshes . . . the clouds”—and from “every graceful fancy that my mind has ever become acquainted with” (364). The most devastating consequence of Estella’s absolute and irreversible withdrawal from Pip’s life, thus, is the impact that it has on those memories and aspirations that sustained his sense of selfhood.

It is precisely this process of inner disintegration that is, in *Great Expectations*, articulated in relation to the urban nightscape. More specifically, Pip’s collapsing sense of selfhood is imaged in the long, purposeless walk to London that he undertakes after Estella’s rejection. Pip first hides himself “among some lanes and bypaths” of his native village and then, after
crossing London Bridge “past midnight” (365), branches off with the vague intention of going to a home to which he is denied access. Pip’s aimless walk that is not even allowed a destination is itself symptomatic of an urban experience that Michel de Certeau has described as “the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper.” Moreover, the interiors that Pip does inhabit in the third part of the book seem like extensions of the streets: they are temporary shelters, mere passages. Indeed, they help to link the disintegration of Pip’s sense of selfhood to the dispersive effects of the city and, in this way, to locate the experience of “Houselessness” deep within Pip’s subjectivity. For example, the physical and mental exhaustion that Pip experiences after he is denied access to his home by Wemmick’s mysterious note finds no relief in the “inhospitable” vaultlike room where he is forced to spend the night. Here, indeed, Wemmick’s injunction—“Don’t go home”—becomes inseparable from Pip’s sense of selfhood. It not only plait itself into his consciousness “as a bodily pain would have done” but also penetrates into the depths of his mind—invades his sleep and dreams:

Even when I thought of Estella, and how we parted that day for ever, and when I recalled all the circumstances of our parting, and all her looks and tones, and the action of her fingers while she knitted—even then I was pursuing, here and there and everywhere the caution “Don’t go home.” When at last I dozed, in sheer exhaustion of mind and body, it became a vast shadowy verb which I had to conjugate. Imperative mood, present tense: Do not thou go home . . . potentially: I may not, cannot go home, and I might not, could not, would not and should not go home; until I felt I was going distracted, and rolled over on the pillow. (367)

Wemmick’s note and its effect on Pip, then, exemplify the urban aesthetic’s propensity to powerfully articulate the dispersive impulses inseparable from the urban experience. The sense of homelessness that is inscribed into the depths of Pip’s consciousness as he lies awake at the Hummums is also the defining condition of his existence in the city. Pip’s “lonely home—if it deserved the name” merely provides temporary shelter to heterogeneous people before dispersing them across the vast, undifferentiated city outside. It is constituted as a “tenancy” that Pip plans to further “underlet” (461)—a part of that conglomerate made up of disconnected people of whom Michel de Certeau has written:

The moving about that the city multiplies and concentrates makes the city itself an immense social experience of lacking a place—an experience that
is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations (displacements and walks), compensated for by relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately the place, but is only a name, the City. The identity furnished by this place is all the more symbolic (named) because, in spite of the inequality of its citizens’ positions and profits, there is only a pullulation of passers-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic, a shuffling among pretences of the proper, a universe of rented spaces haunted by a nowhere or by dreamed-of places.¹⁶

This passage from The Practice of Everyday Life is important because it registers the dispersive impulses of the city: the “countless tiny deportations” that it seems to affect every day but also the “intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric.” Bleak House, as the previous chapter showed, had drawn on the city’s numerous impersonal transactions to generate a plot based on unexpected intersections between the most unconnected lives. In Pendennis, too, Thackeray speaks of the “curious volume” that may have resulted if some enterprising author decided to track the divergent activities of an unconnected group of people who happen to occupy apartments in the same inner city building: “If we could but get the history of a single day as it passed in any of those four storied houses in the dingy court where our friends Pen and Warrington dwelt, some Temple Asmodeus might furnish us with a queer volume” (vol. 1, 295). Yet, if Thackeray invokes “one of those four storied houses in the dingy courts” of London as a chronotope that might generate intersections between unrelated people who have moved to the city, it is in order to throw into relief the very different principles of organization that underlay his own novel. To be sure, Thackeray does expose his hero to the heterogeneous forms of social life that flourishes in the metropolis. Like the protagonists of Life in London, Pen becomes interested in “seeing life” and going into “a hundred queer London haunts” (vol. 1, 303). However, with one important exception (which I will discuss) Pen’s encounters with “coal heavers in their tap-rooms; boxers in their inn parlours; honest citizens disporting in the suburbs or on the river” (vol. 1, 303) are not allowed to generate any significant lines of action within the novel. These lines of action are, on the contrary, aligned far more closely to the Major’s ideas about what constitutes proper relationships among gentlefolk. The Major may be the object of relentless authorial irony, but his opposition to mésalliances also embodies the social orientation of a novel which declares, early on, its skepticism about fiction
that makes unrealistic plot connections between “a ruffian . . . in St. Giles’s” and “a young lady from Belgravia.”

Jaggers’s function in Great Expectations is similar to that of the Major in Pendennis. Indeed, Jaggers helps to generate the social boundaries within which the action of Great Expectations will unfold in an even more direct way than the relatively ineffectual Major. But comparing the effects of Jaggers’s intervention with those of the Major uncovers the distinctive way in which the urban aesthetic organizes social space in Great Expectations. In Pendennis the Major embodies a familial link that connects the genteel yet provincial home where Pen grows up and the varied but essentially gentlemanly world that he will inhabit in London. In this sense, Major Pendennis’s presence helps to emphasize the contiguity of the social domains across which Pen moves and to render this movement itself as smooth and easily negotiable, rather than as something that involves any major dislocation. Jaggers, on the other hand, conducts a series of maneuvers that uproots characters from their original habitations and relocates them in radically different social milieus. He transplants the daughter of social outcasts to the weird but elite world that Miss Havisham inhabits, and he facilitates a strange legal transaction by which a poor provincial boy is transformed into a gentleman on the basis of a convict’s money. Indeed, if “the genealogical lack” from which so many of the characters of Great Expectations suffer aborts the development of action based on the bonds of the family or of social contiguity, Jaggers works with the resources of urban modernity (the newspaper, the legal deed that will legitimize a relationship with no basis in tradition or family) to generate a new social configuration: the fabricated family. It is a newspaper insertion that gives Miss Havisham access to Jaggers and to the possibility that she might become Estella’s “Mother by adoption” (304). And the legal document that Magwitch draws up with Jaggers’s help not only appoints the latter as Pip’s “guardian” but also initiates a strange, new relationship which will culminate in Magwitch’s conviction that he is “more than father” to Pip.

Like Bleak House, then, Great Expectations is propelled by the divergent impulses that the urban aesthetic typically generates: on the one hand, by the impulse that disperses, isolates, and renders homeless and, on the other, by the one that is oriented toward precipitating unexpected intersections. Moreover, just as the urban aesthetic’s dispersive impulse is connected with the physical features of the city—with the tangle of empty roads in the night or shelters that are no more than enclosed passages—its propensity to affect unexpected conjunctions, too, reflects the way in which London’s buildings are often configured. For example, very soon after he arrives in London, Pip
finds himself looking at two buildings that exist in close physical proximity but that bear completely different cultural and social connotations:

So I came into Smithfield; and the shameful place, being all asmear with filth and fat and blood and foam, seemed to stick to me. So, I rubbed it off with all possible speed by turning into a street where I saw the great black dome of Saint Paul’s bulging at me from behind a grim stone building which a bystander said was Newgate Prison (165).

This configuration could be read as another example of the technique that, in Bleak House, had precipitated that tense juxtaposition between St. Paul’s Cathedral and Jo (and by implication that unreclaimed social domain that he represents). This reading, however, would only be partially accurate. Unlike Bleak House, where juxtaposed locations generate lines of action that will ultimately intersect, Great Expectations does not work toward literally connecting the radically disparate spaces that make up London. Rather, the absence in Great Expectations of any equivalent of the discursive path that, in Bleak House, connects Lady Dedlock’s town house to the paupers’ graveyard, points to some important transformations in both Dickens’s representation of the city and the working of the urban aesthetic from the earlier to the later novel. In Bleak House London is intricately mapped and the novel achieves its most characteristic effects by plotting intersections between lines of action that originate from its myriad, radically disparate locations. The London of Great Expectations, on the other hand, is relatively sparse in terms of topographical details. Nevertheless, these details generate a method that continues to be closely linked to the city but that also suggests the greater degree of abstraction at which the urban aesthetic works in the later novel.

One way to illustrate this transformation is by focusing on that key moment when Pip suddenly feels that Molly, Jaggers’s nervous but somehow menacing housekeeper, is Estella’s mother. Pip notices “a certain action of her fingers” and recognizes in a flash that he has seen something uncannily similar:

I looked at those hands, I looked at those eyes, I looked at that flowing hair; and I compared them with other hands, other eyes, and other hair that I knew of and with what those might be after twenty years of a brutal husband and a stormy life. I looked again at those hands and eyes of the housekeeper, and thought of the inexplicable feeling that had come over me when I last walked—not alone—in the ruined garden, and through the
deserted brewery. I thought how the same feeling had come back when I saw a face looking at me, and a hand waving at me, from a stage-coach window; and how it had come back again, and had flashed about me like Lightning, when I had passed in a carriage—not alone—through a sudden glare of light in a dark street. (390)

It is the third moment in the series that Pip re-experiences so vividly that is most important for my argument. A certain image of Estella’s fingers is stamped forever on Pip’s brain by a process that is very much part of the urban dynamic: a “sudden glare of light” (269) illuminates Estella’s hands as she and Pip travel in a coach through a dark London street close to Newgate. Yet this random but, at the same time, significant intersection, so symptomatic of the centripetal trajectory within the urban aesthetic, is abstracted from the city itself. Its implications are articulated in relation not to the disparate urban locations across which the novel could be made to move but to a set of unimaginable relationships that the novel will plot. Put another way, the urban aesthetic in Great Expectations works not so much with the details of a densely crowded city as with a more properly literary trope: the mésalliance, in Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense, as indicative of not just a sexual liaison between two socially disparate people but of any dramatically unexpected and destabilizing conjunction.17

I need, at this point, to turn again to Pendennis because this novel engages much more self-consciously than Great Expectations with the status of the mésalliance as a trope of urban literature even as it itself refuses to generate sensational effects by having “a ruffian . . . in St. Giles” visited “constantly by a lady in from Belgravia.” Thus, Thackeray’s delineation of the Pen–Fanny love affair, the most protracted among the several potential mésalliances that the novel depicts, draws self-consciously on the discursive strategies of the city sketches. Pen’s chance encounter with Fanny is a direct result of a maneuver by which Pen is moved, after the termination of the London season, from the clubs, drawing rooms, and offices that he normally inhabits to the streets that he begins to scour for their “infinite varieties” (vol. 2, 81). Significantly, however, what Thackeray takes from the city sketches are strategies that work toward containing tensions generated by the city’s propensity to bring its socially disparate inhabitants into close contact. Indeed, Thackeray deploys these strategies to abort discursive possibilities that actually interested him—for example, the possibility of exploring realistically those sexual urges that are normally repressed in the more respectable forms of novel writing but that, in fact, facilitate a more complex representation of inner life.18 Thus, while Thackeray insists in his
preface that the attraction Pen experiences toward Fanny is a measure of the psychological complexity with which he has been represented, he does not allow Pen’s sexuality enough play to precipitate a *mésalliance* and, in the process, to disrupt the basic expressive orientation of Thackeray’s novel: its nuanced representation of life as it unfolds in upper- and middle-class interiors. When Pen’s passion for Fanny can no longer be contained within the “satiric humour . . . not deprived of sympathy” (vol. 2, 81) with which Pen usually negotiates the street life of London, Thackeray quite literally purges it: “He laughed at himself as he lay on his pillow, thinking of this second cure which had been effected upon him. He did not care in the least about Fanny now: he wondered how he ever should have cared; and according to his custom made an autopsy of that dead passion, and anatomized his own dead sensation for his poor little nurse” (vol. 2, 145).

Thackeray’s intervention not only aborts Pen’s passion for Fanny the moment it threatens to become socially destabilizing but also marks an interesting displacement: the redeployment in *Pendennis* of Egan’s discursive strategies to contain not the physical dangers that London may pose to those who wish to savor its pleasures but the excesses of Pen’s inner life. More specifically, the camera obscura view of London that Pierce Egan had recommended to his readers, and that is embedded in Pen’s own “anthropologist’s” interest in London’s street scenes, is now reactivated in the domain of inner life. As Pen transforms himself into a sophisticated kind of *flâneur*—a sort of anthropologist of the emotions—he can savor, without pain or involvement, the transformations of inner life in the same way as Pierce Egan and his protagonists had learned to savor urban variety.

The simultaneous emphasis on the urban origins of the *mésalliance* trope and the containment of its potential for social destabilization is achieved even more effectively in the way Thackeray represents Fanny’s involvement with Pen. Thus, in a typically metatextual operation, Thackeray relates to Fanny’s reading habits her propensity to slide into an unviable love affair and, by implication, to push *Pendennis* itself in the direction of those popular novels that its preface had ironically rejected:

... and if we could peep into Fanny’s bed (which she shared in a cupboard, along with those two little sisters to whom we have seen Mr. Costigan administering gingerbread and apples), we should find the poor little maid tossing upon her mattress, to the great disturbance of its other two occupants, and thinking over all the delights and events of that delightful, eventful night, and all the words, looks and actions of Arthur, its splendid hero. Many novels had Fanny read, in secret and at home, in three volumes and
in numbers. Periodical literature had not reached the height which it has attained subsequently, and the girls of Fanny’s generation were not enabled to purchase sixteen pages of excitement for a penny, rich with histories of crime, murder, oppressed virtue, and the heartless seductions of the aristocracy; but she had had the benefit of the circulating library which, in conjunction with her school and a small brandy ball and millinery business, Miss Minifer kept,—and Arthur appeared to her at once as the type and realization of all the heroes of all those darling greasy volumes which the young girl had devoured. (vol. 2, 96)

Thackeray here subsumes the social resonances that the *mésalliance* is always capable of generating within Fanny’s extremely simplistic response. In this way, he reduces the *mésalliance* to its most rudimentary form—to something that belongs to those “darling greasy volumes” which Fanny devours and that works with murders and seductions to generate incessant excitement. Thus, the *mésalliance* toward which Fanny herself moves could be said to express the superficiality of the popular novels and of those who read them. It is exactly by exposing this superficiality in Fanny herself—she is shown to find a new admirer very soon after her breakup with Pen—that Thackeray is able, on the one hand, to eject her without moral complications out of Pen’s life and, on the other, to dissociate his novel from the kinds of effects that the central *mésalliance* of *Great Expectations*—between gentlemanliness and crime—is made to sustain.

Thackeray’s propensity to probe the *mésalliance* but, at the same time, to abort its most powerful expressive effects and indeed to show these effects to be radically incompatible with the demands of “realism,” is evident once again in a strand of *Pendennis* that seems, at first glance, to belong to the class of popular novels that he mocked in his preface. The revelation, late in the novel, that the blackmailing, bigamous, ex-convict Amory is, in fact, the biological father of the sophisticated and aristocratic Blanche is, moreover, particularly relevant for this chapter, because it looks forward uncannily to the relationship between Estella and Magwitch. However, while the disclosure of Magwitch’s relationship with both the ladylike Estella and the gentlemanly Pip is central to the novel’s meaning, Amory’s appearance—and the consequent *mésalliance* in which he implicates Blanche—is part of a paradoxical maneuver. More specifically, Amory’s appearance pushes Blanche beyond the pale of respectability and enables Thackeray to reconstitute as socially unthinkable her relationship with Pen, which he had, in any case, shown to be spiritually and emotionally impoverished. Thus, the *mésalliance*, far from precipitating some central effect in *Pendennis*, func-
tions as a sort of discursive threat, the possibility of which will enable Thackeray to pull Pen out of a bad relationship and in this way to restore not only his hero’s moral integrity but also the true artistic orientation of the novel he was writing. Warrington, whose point of view often echoes that of Thackeray himself, picks precisely on the *mésalliance* as his means of outlining the social threshold beyond which the action of *Pendennis* cannot be allowed to traverse: “No. Our boy can’t meddle with such a wretched intrigue as that. Arthur Pendennis can’t marry a convict’s daughter; and sit in Parliament as Member for the hulks” (vol. 2, 333).

The *mésalliance* between the criminal and the gentleman that Warrington (and Thackeray) rejects so decisively lies, of course, at the heart of *Great Expectations*. Gentlemanliness and criminality become inextricably coupled the moment Pip supplies Magwitch with food and a file in the second chapter of the novel. Magwitch’s gratitude, together with his own need for social compensation, will prompt him to invest his considerable later earnings toward making Pip a gentleman. At the same time, although Pip will not know the identity of his secret benefactor until relatively late in the novel, he will always see himself as complicit in the activities of an escaped convict. The mismatch (between the gentlemanly status that Pip will acquire and the criminality in which this status is always implicated) is, thus, encoded into the very structure of *Great Expectations* in its second chapter and will be made to resurface during several key moments in the novel. I will now focus on some of these moments and especially on the signifiers that produce them, and I will argue that these signifiers are designed (like the broadsheets in *Industry and Idleness* or the newspapers in *Bleak House*) to circulate freely and, in this way, to facilitate those unexpected conjunctions between widely disparate texts, objects, and people that are so characteristic of the urban aesthetic.

One example of how signifiers often function in *Great Expectations* is to be found in the tenth chapter of the novel. Here a stranger invites Pip and Joe for a drink at Three Jolly Bargemen. The stranger then gifts Pip a certain sum of money, but he also silently draws Pip’s attention to the file that he uses to stir his drink. The stranger’s file in conjunction with the money that he gifts to Pip, thus, work to bring into focus once again the novel’s central *mésalliance*. What is more, the file draws attention to its own status as a signifier when it reappears in the nightmare that Pip experiences soon after his meeting with the stranger:

I had a sadly broken sleep when I got to bed . . . I was haunted by the file too. A dread possessed me that when I least expected it, the file would
reappear. I coaxed myself to sleep by thinking of Miss Havisham’s, next Wednesday; and in my sleep I saw the file coming at me out of a door, without seeing who held it, and I screamed myself awake. (79)

Dissociated from any specific location or even person, driven by an energy whose source is invisible, the file becomes a free-floating signifier capable of turning up anywhere. It is this irresistible mobility that the file acquires in Pip’s dream that distinguishes it from the way signifiers function in the realistically constructed interiors of a novel like *Pendennis*. In the latter, to adapt the terms of Roland Barthes’s classic exposition, the “effect of the real” is created by the surreptitious orchestration of connotations that ensures that the minute, apparently arbitrary bits of information that adhere to signifiers over and above what they denote are brought together in “operations of solidarity.” Signifiers, in a realistically constructed scene, therefore, “stick.” In contrast, the file in Pip’s nightmare refuses the responsibility of being part of a semiotic consensus, of entering into operations of solidarity with an accompanying set of signifiers to project an internally integrated, realistic scene. Rather, it draws its signifying potential from its mobility: its ability to disengage itself from the situation that it originally helped to articulate and to turn up anywhere regardless of the requirements of verisimilitude.

The file of Pip’s nightmare may be thought of as a characteristic urban signifier because in its unimpeded mobility it is oriented toward registering not the continuities of domestic realism but the unexpected, often unthinkable intersection of images, people, and goods that circulate all the time in the city. This is why it finds in the big city a site where it can proliferate and—through a process of incessant mutation—continue to force on Pip’s consciousness the radical disjunction between his acquired status as a London gentleman and his early association with crime. For example, the social category signified by the file in Pip’s nightmare takes a more elaborate form in the two convicts, whose bodies are deeply marked by the signs of their status and whom London throws up in an outbound coach as Pip’s traveling companions. Anxious to preserve the integrity of his status as gentleman, Pip seeks to displace the convicts to the domain of the social and even biological “other.” With their “coarse, mangy, ungainly, outer surfaces,” they have for him the appearance of “lower animals.” Yet, like the phantom file that comes rushing at Pip, the urban aesthetic that underlies *Great Expectations* as a whole is oriented toward effecting the unthinkable fusion: “It is impossible to express with what acuteness I felt the convict’s breathing, not only on the back of my head, but all along my spine. The sensation was like
being touched in the marrow with some pungent and searching acid, and it set my very teeth on edge” (228).

Pip will repeatedly be exposed to experiences like these in London. Pip’s early association with a convict will now find signifiers not in some single tangible objects such as a file or a leg iron, but in something as diffuse and pervasive as the atmosphere of London itself. If the London of Bleak House is enveloped in a fog that is both an attribute of the city’s weather conditions and a metaphor for the Chancery’s obfuscations, the metropolis in Great Expectations is permeated by grit that originates in Newgate but seems to stick everywhere: in the jail official’s mildewed clothes “bought cheap,” as Pip believes, “of the executioner” (166); in patches that Jaggers’s office gets from “the greasy shoulders” (199) of his clients; and, above all, on Pip’s person no matter how far he wants to get away from any suggestion of criminality. As Pip waits for Estella at the coach station, he is deeply conscious of his own status as a gentleman and of Estella’s “proud and refined” personality. But he also finds it impossible to escape from the “taint of the prison” (264).

The circulatory impulse that carries the prison dust to Pip’s clothes, his breath, and his lungs suggests certain continuities in the unfolding of the urban aesthetic from Bleak House to Great Expectations. To be sure, Great Expectations does not allow the circulatory dynamic of the urban aesthetic the kind of space that is available to it in Bleak House. It reduces to a single, extended mésalliance the many relationships between socially disparate people and locations that are plotted in Bleak House, and the densely detailed metropolis mapped in the earlier novel shrinks, in Great Expectations, to a narrow field circumscribed more or less by Newgate, on the one hand, and, on the other, to those spaces of respectability inhabited by Pip, Jaggers, and Wemmick. But this narrowing of field suggests that Dickens was deploying the circulatory dynamic of the urban aesthetic to focus on a single theme: the incessant traffic of people, goods, and money that goes on all the time between respectable London and its criminal “other.” The concluding part of this chapter will deal in more detail with this traffic between respectability and criminality that goes on independently of the mismatch inscribed across Pip’s career, to explore what it says about the urban aesthetic and especially about its capacity to articulate extra-individualistic, objective social problems.

Great Expectations has, of course, provoked several readings that relate its preoccupation with criminals, prisons, and lawyers to the larger discourses on crime and its management that circulated in nineteenth-century England. The most interesting among these readings is Jeremy Tambling’s
essay “Prison-bound: Dickens, Foucault and *Great Expectations*” which—according to the title—seems to draw a great deal from the work of Michel Foucault and especially from his *Discipline and Punish*. For Tambling the world of *Great Expectations* represents a full-blown “Panopticon society” where the “sense of being looked at is pervasive.” Moreover, drawing on a strand of thought that belongs more to the *History of Sexuality*, volume 1, than to *Discipline and Punish*, Tambling argues that surveillance in *Great Expectations* also deploys technologies of subjection that penetrate into the deepest layers of subjectivity and urge the individual to incessantly engage in the twin processes of introspection and confession. In *Great Expectations* the effects of this technology of subjection are manifest in the relentless guilt that dogs Pip and in the autobiographical, even confessional mode in which his story unfolds.

It would seem, then, that Tambling deploys Foucault’s idea of surveillance to explain Pip’s guilt and even the autobiographical/confessional mode in which *Great Expectations* is written. Yet Foucault’s shifting interest from the institutionally driven operations of power to what he describes as “technologies of the self” has as its focus the problem of sexuality: something that is not really the object of surveillance in *Great Expectations*. Moreover, in *Discipline and Punish* (as indeed in *Great Expectations*) surveillance does not only operate as a technology that makes visible and brings everything, even one’s secret thoughts, under the scrutiny of an all-seeing eye. In fact, it is also exercised through procedures hidden in the details of the penal apparatus: procedures that are, as Michel de Certeau has shown, “without discursive legitimacy, techniques foreign to the Enlightenment.” Following de Certeau’s reading of surveillance as it operates in *Discipline and Punish*, it now becomes necessary to focus on the microprocedures by which the law in *Great Expectations* isolates the criminal milieu, creates differentiations within it, and penetrates and continuously appropriates and deploys its resources. To do this would be to turn again to the circulatory dynamic within the urban aesthetic and to explain why the central *mésalliances* that it helps to plot also articulates a more objective social relationship: that between criminality and everything that derives its social identity in opposition against criminality.

*Great Expectations* is, of course, self-consciously concerned with how a legally sanctified social domain is constituted by a whole system of signs and representations dissociating it from the everyday processes of society and, more specifically, with how this domain is dependent on the arbitrating operations of a legal machinery always capable of isolating criminality.
The two convicts who travel with Pip during his journey to Kent compel and receive attention not because they have committed heinous offences, but because they are an “Exhibition,” “their ironed legs,” their “coarse, mangy, ungainly outer surfaces” (226, 227) marking them off socially, culturally, and even biologically from the respectable members of society.

One way to track both the effects and the function of such penal branding is by focusing on the figure of Magwitch. Magwitch’s body is, of course, marked through and through with the signs of his criminal status. “The very grain of the man,” as Pip puts it, proclaims a “Prisoner, Felon, Bondman, plain as plain could be” (338). Moreover, Magwitch is closely associated with Australia—the “thief colony” whose dystopian cultural connotations have been detailed in Robert Hughes’s *The Fatal Shore*. Separated from England by a wall “14,000 miles thick,” inhabited by her “excrementious mass,” and “spinning forever at the outer rim of the world, in ever worsening moral darkness,” Australia was, in the Victorian imagination, “a chloaca, invisible, its contents filthy and unnamable.”

In this sense, quite irrespective of the crimes that he may have actually committed, Magwitch is constituted as somebody in whose being every fantasy about criminality can be contained. It is this status that Magwitch acquires as the absolute “other” of Victorian respectability—as someone capable of committing, as Pip says, “all the crimes in the Calendar” (338)—that points to one of the functions that a figure like him serves for a discourse dedicated to isolating criminality and, in this way, distinguishing it sharply from respectability. By focusing on a figure like Magwitch, holding him up as an “Exhibition,” symbolically summing up in his pathologized figure all forms of illegalities, official society in *Great Expectations* can claim to have displaced criminality as a whole to the realm of the degraded “other.” In fact, however, it leaves in the shade those illegalities that it wishes to tolerate. Thus, for example, Pip can, for a large part of the novel, claim for himself the status of a respectable gentleman, “genetically” different from the likes of Magwitch even as he tolerates and, indeed, participates in the shady activities of Jaggers and Wemmick.

The interesting thing, of course, is that Magwitch’s public status as a criminal capable of committing every offence is discursively constituted: it is not, in fact, borne out by the details of his career. These details are supplied by Magwitch himself in his long account of his early life to Pip:

“I was took up, took up, took up, to that extent I reg’ larly growed up took up.”
“This was the way it was when I was a ragged little creetur as much to be pitied as I ever see... I got the name of being hardened...”

“Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes, when I could—though that warn’t as often as you might think, till you put the question would you ha’ been overready to give me work yourselves—a bit of a poacher, a bit of a labourer, a bit of a waggoner, a bit of a haymaker, a bit of a labourer, a bit of a most things that don’t pay and lead to trouble, I got to be a man.” (346–47)

What is important here is not the seriousness of Magwitch’s offences—these, before he falls into the clutches of the gentlemanly Compeyson, do not, in fact, extend beyond the occasional theft—but that Magwitch is the inevitable target of punishment. Born in the lowest stratum of society, exposed constantly to prison terms, and driven consequently into the circuits of delinquency—“Tramping, begging, thieving, working sometimes,” Magwitch illustrates how penal techniques in Great Expectations aim not at eliminating crime but at encouraging recidivism. Magwitch himself sums up his life in “a mouthful of English”: “In jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail, in jail and out of jail” (346).

Thus, Dickens’s account of Magwitch’s early life can be read as an indictment of a penal system that is unenlightened and unimaginative. But, as Michel Foucault has argued, the official encouragement of large-scale recidivism is crucial to its management of crime. More specifically, Foucault demonstrates how the legal machinery in France worked consciously to perpetuate “a closed milieu of delinquency” so that it could then pressurize it, place it under surveillance, penetrate it, and constantly use it for its own purposes.25

In Great Expectations the process by which criminality is legally identified and segregated itself involves the use and the exploitation of the criminal milieu. To be sure, the law is publicly constituted as a strictly objective system of arbitration: the accused is given certain rights, she/he is convicted only by trial in court, and arguments are evaluated in court according to whether or not they adhere, in Jaggers’s phrase, “to the strict line of fact” (336). Yet in practice Jaggers’s own spectacular successes in court depend not only on his ability to manipulate, repress, and confuse facts but even more crucially on his access to Newgate. Newgate is, in Wemmick’s phrase, the “next thing” (259) to Jaggers’s office and Jaggers himself, as Pip tells Estella, “has the reputation of being more in the secrets of that dismal place than any man in London” (269). It is not merely that Jaggers can make
enormous and effective use of “Newgate intelligence” in court. More crucially, it is precisely by penetrating the criminal milieu, by exploiting the precarious situation of the individual delinquent, and alternatively bribing and threatening her/him, that Jaggers can use a whole range of illegalities to fight a case while keeping himself on the right of the law.

Jaggers’s methods of fighting a case, his actual success in court, suggest that criminality is far from being a solid, easily identifiable mass of activities that exist outside respectable society. It is, in fact, something that is far more ambiguous—something that constantly circulates through the fine underground channels that connect Newgate to the High Court. In *Great Expectations* the most palpable symbol of this constant traffic between criminality and respectability is the wealth that is generated in the criminal milieu but recycled back into respectable society. Jaggers himself does not even attempt to conceal the criminal origins of his wealth. The starting point of Jaggers’s career as a lawyer is his successful defense of a murderer, and the most noticeable objects in Jaggers’s office are the villainous-looking casts, made to the likeness of two hardened offenders who have been, in Wemmick’s words, “Famous clients of ours that got us a world of credit” (200). In fact, Jaggers’s criminal clients fetch him not only credit but also money. Wemmick stops at the individual cells at Newgate not only to gather intelligence or locate appropriate witnesses but also to negotiate “fees.” With Wemmick the acquisition of criminal property, especially the property of prisoners condemned to death, has become so routine that it is made to appear as part of his cheery practicality:

While he was putting up the other cast and coming down from the chair, the thought crossed my mind that all his personal jewelry was derived from like sources. As he had shown no diffidence on the subject, I ventured on the liberty of asking him the question when he stood before me, dusting his hands.

“Oh yes,” he returned, “these are all gifts of that kind. One brings another, you see; that’s the way of it. I always take ’em. They’re curiosities. And they’re property. They may not be worth much, but, after all, they’re property and portable . . . my guiding star always is, ‘Get hold of portable properly.’” (201)

What is important about Dickens’s representation of Wemmick’s transactions is not their extraordinariness but their ordinariness. The very fowl that Wemmick serves to Pip for dinner may have been acquired from a con-
vict, but the signs of Wemmick’s links with the criminal world coexist with, indeed are a constituent part of, the happy, almost idyllic ambience that envelopes Wemmick’s Walworth home:

The interval between that time and supper, Wemmick devoted to showing me his collection of curiosities. They were mostly of a felonious character, comprising the pen with which a celebrated forgery had been committed, a distinguished razor or two . . . and several manuscript confessions . . . They were agreeably dispersed among small specimens of China and glass, various neat trifles made by the proprietor of the museum, and some tobacco-stoppers carved by the Aged. (209)

Wemmick’s museum renders familiar and everyday what would be normally unmentionable in respectable discourse and, in this process, makes visible the countless ties that, in fact, bind respectable society to its criminalized “other.” Indeed, Wemmick’s remarkable museum may be seen as a micro-cosmic representation of not only the great world outside but also of the compositional method by which this world is articulated. Thus, just as murderous razors coexist with lovingly preserved tobacco-stoppers carved by Wemmick’s father in Wemmick’s museum, Dickens works with the juxtapositional energies of the urban aesthetic to create in Great Expectations not the autonomous, internally integrated world of the realistic novel but a textual field capable of registering the movement of money, goods, and people between the dramatically disparate zones that make up the city and, in this way, of cutting across those discursive maneuvers by which the nineteenth-century notion of gentlemanliness sought to preserve its internal integrity.