

THE ECHO CHAMBERS OF A CHILD'S TEMPORALITY: DICKENS'S *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

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While paying attention to the soundscapes Charles Dickens builds in *Great Expectations*, I offer phenomenological interpretations of them, bearing in mind the child's viewpoint and presence. The traditional phenomenological gaze, in this case, is going to be replaced with a phenomenological "ear". Adopting such an analytical direction, I would argue that temporality could be polymorphous and polyphonous, and that the sonorous time possesses the power of morphing the child's identity into diverse forms and directions.

Keywords: *Great Expectations, sonorous time, Dickens, Jean-Luc Nancy, the child's consciousness*

Preliminary remarks on the touching points between sonority and identity

We could describe the beginning of the novel *Great Expectations* (1860 – 61) as a sonorous beginning, one that is focused on the production of sounds. Sounds, accordingly, shape the temporalities of the characters in their own way. Pip is not able to pronounce the tongue-twisting name Philip Pirrip as a child and that is why he chooses to call himself Pip, which is not much of a choice rather than a physical impossibility, an audible compromise among the difficult tones of the world trying to pronounce him and his own (in)capacity to pronounce himself: "My father's family name being Pirrip, and my christian [sic] name 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" (CHD/ЧД2). The question of pronouncing and presenting oneself is simplified and compressed into one monosyllabic word that sounds more like an onomatopoeia of certain sounds rather than a meaningful actual word uttered to announce a personality, a being, an identity. Consequently, his unconscious child's simplification gets embedded in his memory, and when he grows up and is able to pronounce his full name, he still continues calling himself Pip, because now it is no longer a mistake but a sonorous force shaping his identity, character, and faith. Moreover, he is now known by his fellow human beings as Pip.

I think that we also have to pay attention to the biographical layer while interpreting the significance of Pip's name. Dickens was a parliamentary re-

porter, and as such, he had to learn shorthand. He learned it from Thomas Gurney's system presented in his manual *Brachygraphy* (1772) (cf. Bowles/Бойлз 2017: 23). His system was both logographic and phonographic (cf. Bowles/Бойлз 2017: 26), which means that Dickens's mind, while working, was constantly wavering between sounds and the different ways in which they could be signified and contracted. His work consisted of stealing the sonority from the written word in order to save time, and then restoring the sonority/time back to the words. Bowles says that "the connection between Gurney shorthand and Dickensian orality is not in what he wrote as a stenographer or how he wrote it but in the way it forced him to think stenographically about his writing" (Bowles/Бойлз 2017: 34). Dickens's practice as a shorthand reporter probably influenced his philosophy of describing, jotting down, perceiving, forming, and including sounds and names in his fiction. Pip is a good example not only of a childish, inexperienced tongue but also a product of a very complex and intellectually manipulated logo-phonographic system. Pip could easily be read as a typical Gurneyan contraction, compressing vowels, consonants, and time. These two reasons (the one that we find in the text itself and the one that we find in Dickens's life) for Philip Pirrip becoming Pip showcase the way in which the child's voice and the adult's more complex, but equally helpless voice, could sometimes sound the same. Therefore, the name Pip could be read as a contracted version of identity, of a voice that was originally stolen from his being, an initial lack of time, yet also an initial potential for temporal extension.

All the directions of identification begin and lead to this particular name and to the sonority surrounding it. In this text, I want to draw attention to one of the characters who affects Pip's temporality through the soundscapes he produces – the convict Magwitch. He fuels Pip's expectations and hopes for a better future, entering Pip's consciousness of time through sounds, and by such means, changing it.

Magwitch and his acousmatic influence over Pip

The novel commences with Pip being compared to a "small bundle of shivers [...] beginning to cry" (CHD/ЧД2) while surrounded by a river that looks like a "leaden line" (CHD/ЧД2) and a "distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing" (CHD/ЧД2). Actions like shivering and crying are a complex emanation of certain sounds that suggest emotional unrest. The soundscape is silent so that Pip becomes exemplar of the "resonant subject" as described by Nancy (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 21): "when in a perfect condition of silence you hear your own body resonate, your own breath, your heart

and all its resounding cave” (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 21). Such a soundscape appears as a symphony between a young, helpless child, full of dread and apprehension (perhaps of his great expectations), and the leaden and savage silence rushing into him, resonating his voice, leaving him unable to respond.

The river is described as if made of lead, which probably alludes to the challenged mobility of time and space. Out of this stillness, a man is first introduced to Pip through the means of a “terrible voice” (CHD/ЧД2) which commands Pip the following lines: “Hold your noise! [...] Keep still, you little devil, or I’ll cut your throat!” (CHD/ЧД2). He appears both as someone who alienates Pip from himself, yet summons him back to himself. In the short text *Lying Awake* from Dickens’s *Miscellaneous Papers*,¹ we read the following: “This is a disagreeable intrusion! Here is a man with his throat cut, dashing towards me as I lie awake! A recollection of an old story of a kinsman of mine [...]” (CHD/ЧД). It could be noticed that the image from Dickens’s memory of a story that was related to him, left a bold trace on his memory – one that pursued him, and often intruded upon him in the seminal condition of daydreaming. One cannot but see the similarities between the portrayal of Magwitch – a man who threatens to cut throats and the disagreeable man with a cut throat running from a madhouse in a foggy London winter (cf. CHD/ЧД). This gesture on the part of Dickens resembles what Rowland calls “imitative self-othering” which helps the writer understand oneself better (cf. Rowland/Роуланд 2025: 124). Dickens imagines himself being the kinsman who encounters the man with the bleeding throat and milks the image for all it is worth, presenting it once again and seeing it through the eyes of a fictional child, Pip.

In the starting episode from *Great Expectations*, Magwitch’s voice acts as an “attack of time” (Nancy 2007: 39), bringing back the corporeality of Pip’s subjectivity and presence in order to transform it. This is the voice of the convict Magwitch, the man who will change Pip’s allotted fate of a blacksmith and will plant the seed of genteel aspirations and superiority in him. These words could be seen as a magical incantation that actually interrupts the child’s temporality and steals Pip’s authentic voice. His voice becomes part of another symphony connected with Magwitch’s designs and intentions. By threatening the boy’s *echo chamber* (Nancy’s term), Magwitch is threatening the boy’s identity and self-definition.

Jean-Luc Nancy, in his investigation of the sonorous time, sees the child’s first cry as an affirmation of one’s identity and subjectivity through

¹ These were short texts (some of which were anonymous) that Dickens published in different periodicals and were subsequently aggregated in a book by his scholars.

a “sudden expansion of an echo chamber²” (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 17). The child becomes “[s]omeone who comes to himself by hearing himself cry (answering the other? calling him?), or sing, always each time, beneath each word, crying or singing, exclaiming as he did by coming into the world.” (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 17 – 18). The memory of the first cry and the feeling accompanying it are irrevocably washed clean from each person’s memory, and that is why Nancy comes up with so many questions regarding the purpose of the cry. However, the conscious and remembered cries that follow might bear the trace of the first cry and the helplessness that most probably underlies it. Therefore, Magwitch’s appearance in the midst of a cry could be considered significant as long as we perceive sounds in the novel as cornerstones of subjectivity. Crying and interrupted cries, shivering, steps, clocks, wind that communicates or tears voices apart, or sonority that is scribbled down and summoned by the consciousness presented in the novel at hand, will appear as pinnacles of the interaction between subjectivity and temporality.

Pip’s submission to Magwitch’s voice probably happens as a cry of loneliness. A train journey, which Dickens experienced from France to England, made him so dreamy and detached from the world that he felt as if he was coming from the Moon (cf. CHD/ЧД). He imagined himself as a foreigner to his world and described some scenes that he saw in his mind’s eye: one of them being a lonely child at a window “always waving his hand” and “no one echoing the child’s acclamation” (CHD/ЧД). Communication and affirming subjectivity seem to be made possible through an echo, but this echo is not happening. Someone has to respond by waving back. Dickens also adds: “and I never, in six months, knew a hand or heard a voice to come in real aid of the child” (CHD/ЧД). Such a symbolical image makes the child’s consciousness appear as a lonely and silent cry, as a surge, a wave of a hand; a sound that could be barely detected by the negligent people living their life noisily and ignorantly. The world of the Moonian adults seems to castrate the cheerful voices of children by producing such theatrical paradoxes as “a marriageable young female aged five, in a mature bonnet and crinoline” (CHD/ЧД). These are children who are deprived of their proper childhood and whose throats are metaphorically cut with the knives of social appearances and polished melodramatic surfaces.

² In the present text, by an ‘echo chamber,’ we are going to understand a certain spatiality that unites temporality and sound, and by such means, becomes cross-temporal. It could also appear with its verbatim meaning as the vocal chamber, or the organs responsible for the sound production.

Magwitch, like a proper adult (a prisoner), introduces Pip to Pip's own alienation. He puts a halt to the autonomous formation and voicing of the blacksmith's boy's future. After being threatened, Pip brings the prisoner two main things that unlock a chain of comparisons with sounds mimicking a clockwork mechanism. Consequently, they align with the topic of temporality. For instance, when the starving Magwitch begins to swallow his food ravenously, his throat produces a clock-like sound: "Something clicked in his throat, as if he had works in him like a clock, and was going to strike" (CHD/ЧД2). Such a comparison suggests that Magwitch's voice is the voice of something like a magic watch that shapes Pip's future, aspirations, and decisions. Consuming food seems to be equated to consuming temporality by the sounds accompanying the event.

The second thing that is given to Magwitch by Pip is a file with which the prisoner is enabled to break free from his chains. After Pip leaves the coarse man to himself, in the foggy marshes, which disable vision, the child still hears how the man tries to escape because he is listening to the ticking sound of the file knocking on the chains: "The last I heard of him [of the convict], I stopped in the mist to listen, and the file was still going" (CHD/ЧД2). This part is unreliable on the part of the first-person narrator, for he hears of the convict once again, and very soon indeed.

After that episode, the Gargery family is stricken by an "apparition of soldiers ringing down their loaded muskets" (CHD/ЧД2) on their doorstep. The search for the runaway convicts begins, and Pip's heart is cringing with fear because his helping one of them might be revealed. When the group is looking for the convicts, Pip's perception of sounds gets intensified: "Mr. Wopsle had greatly alarmed me more than once, by his blowing and hard breathing; but I knew the sounds by this time, and could dissociate them from the object of pursuit. I got a dreadful start, when I thought I heard the file still going; but it was only a sheep bell" (CHD/ЧД2). In this quote, we can see how polyphonous sounds could be. Things that are solidly different in their essence could sound strikingly similar, and we cannot tell what is what before we are able to see the source from which they come. The polyphonic way in which Pip confuses the sheep bell with the sound of a file showering the iron chains with regular knocks probably happens because of three main factors. One of them is Pip's guilty conscience. The second one is the limitation of the visual perception, as a result of which the perception of sound is deformed. The third factor could probably be Pip's wish to believe that he had done something noble and good because the image of the helpless and meek sheep with a bell around its neck, producing just the same sound as a convict breaking free from his chains, is a beatifically pastoral

image alluding to the prisoner's innocence and the idea that he was morbidly wronged.

The instances listed above build the dubious image of Magwitch. The child cannot know whether he is innocent as a sheep, vicious as a snake, or whether he is a gluttonous Cronus inventing and shaping the voices of children whom he wants to consume. The convict and many other characters' appearances are introduced to Pip through a voice. If an object or a person is introduced to us through a voice or through dubious voices, this leads to over-predictions about what we will see, who or what produces the voice, and who or what is the source of a certain sound that comes and resonates within us. Such over-predictive and over-interpretative urges occupy Pip's mind as he is a child. The way in which the soldiers, together with Joe, Pip, and other people who joined the pursuit, are looking for the convicts not by what they see but by what they hear, triggers Pip's sensitive nature. Listening helps people find things that they cannot see. Moreover, sight is more focused on the present, while listening is more related to the future; it is strongly related to the idea of expectation and apprehension. Thus, the attack of time of which Nancy speaks is also an "attack of sense", a beginning of sense taking place "in a sonorous attack: a friction, the pinch or grate of something produced in the throat, a borborygmus, a crackle, a stridency where a weighty, murmuring matter breathes, opened into the division of its resonance" (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 27). The different sounds that are described in the novel are not usually sounds that are meant to convey sense. They play the role of sense-openers. I think that Nancy tends to see and imagine the operation of the sonorous time as a text³ in which the voices, or noises that bear no trace of meaning, play the role of a temporality's punctuation (cf. Nancy/Нанси 2007: 27). They are still responsible for the right perception of meaning without being meaningful in themselves. Expectations, apprehensions, and dread are emotions directed towards the future, and in the novel, they are usually unlocked with the voice of the convict Magwitch.

Unfortunately, when Pip's "young eyes" (CHD/ЧД2) closely follow the act of the prison ship's disappearance, the sounds that send Magwitch away, are the sounds of torches plunged into water: "We saw the boat go alongside, and we saw him taken up the side and disappear. Then, the ends of the torches were flung **hissing into the water, and went out, as if it were all**

³ Nancy explicates the connection between hearing, listening and writing in the following quote: "Writing is also [...] a voice that resounds. [...] Perhaps we never listen to anything but the non-coded, what is not yet framed in a system of signifying references, and we never hear [entend] anything but the already coded, which we decode" (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 36).

over with him" (CHD/ЧД2, emphasis added). The hissing sound elaborates on Pip's feeling of guilt as well as on his hunch about something macabre awaiting him in the future. It is so because the hissing sound could be connected with the image of a snake, a well-known image representing temptation, sin, and irreversible fall. The two sounds that Pip mistakenly applies to the convict are a sheep's bell and the hissing of a snake. The confusion of the perception of sounds is connected to Pip's confusion about the convict's character.

Magwitch: his second appearance

The second appearance of Magwitch happens with the activation of all the clocks. During Magwitch's first appearance, Pip is seven, while, when Magwitch appears for a second time in the novel, Pip is 23. Nevertheless, the man from Pip's traumatic childhood seems to bring back to Pip his childhood consciousness of time through the symphony of sounds, accompanying him. That is exactly how sonorous time functions according to Jean-Luc Nancy: "The sonorous present is the result of space-time: it spreads through space, or rather it opens a space that is its own, the very spreading out of its resonance, its expansion and its reverberation. This space is immediately omnidimensional and transversate through all spaces" (Nancy/Нанси 2007: 13). The sonorous time of Pip functions in the realm of two dimensions – the dimension of childhood memory and the way in which this childhood memory reverberates on the walls of the events in the present. The sounds that Pip heard on his first meeting with Magwitch are now boldly repeated and multiplied. First comes the ticking sound that is now urbanized but equally swallowing and vigorously consuming one's time: "I read with my watch upon the table, proposing to close my book at eleven o'clock. As I shut it, Saint Paul's, and **all the many church-clocks in the city – some leading, some accompanying, some following – struck that hour**. The sound was curiously flawed by the wind; and I was listening, and thinking how the wind assailed and tore it, when I heard a footstep on the stair" (CHD/ЧД2, emphasis added). When the sound of the numerous clocks gets dissolved into the wind, it does not perish completely. Pip's consciousness takes it and unites it to the mysterious footstep that is coming in his direction.

The footstep sound is a rhythmic sound that reflects a certain progression of time, of an alien subjectivity and presence nearing: "What nervous folly made me start, and awfully connect it with the footstep of my dead sister, matters not. It was past in a moment, and I listened again, and heard the footstep stumble in coming on" (CHD/ЧД2). Just as in Pip's childhood, Magwitch appears in his consciousness through different allusions to the

dead. Firstly, he was like a voice coming from a grave, and now he is a footstep likened to the footstep of Pip's dead sister coming from below. Such an appearance evokes fright and the space of the graveyard, but also a dose of familiarity and the space of home. The first words exchanged between Pip and Magwitch position the characters in space in a very significant manner:

"There is some one **down there**, is there not?" I called out, **looking down**.

"Yes," **said a voice from the darkness beneath**.

"What **floor** do you want?"

"**The top. Mr. Pip.**" (CHD/ЧД2, emphasis added)

Magwitch's voice comes from below and is engulfed by the darkness, while Pip's voice comes from above, for he is a dweller of the top now. Oftentimes, throughout the novel, Pip had been connected with the action of ascending stairs with heavy boots when he was poor and still a child, with light boots when he became a gentleman, with concern about whether the wood of the stairs would collapse when he was becoming a gentleman. Now that he has ascended the stairs and is one of the "upper lodgers", he has probably once and for all lost the "means of coming down" (cf. CHD/ЧД2). Magwitch is there to remind Pip of the lower social status that is still extant and of mortality.

A similar pattern of church-bells and footsteps leading the young man to his child's consciousness of time could be observed in *David Copperfield*⁴. When David roams the "old spots" around his childhood home, Blunderstone, he is "startled by the sound of the church-bell" because it resounds as a "departed voice" to him (cf. CHD/ЧД1). This voice opens a dimension, an echo-chamber in his present as if he were still a child: "My echoing footsteps went to no other tune, but were as constant to that as if I had come home to build my castles in the air at a living mother's side" (CHD/ЧД1). Such tunes cause one's subjectivity to bounce back as if mortally hit by the Nancian attack of time. McSweeney observes that "in the climax of the passage, the visual-spatial expansion and the aural-temporal contraction are fused in the spatio-temporal image of the deep of Time" (McSweeney/Максуини 1994: 115). She also notes how the tension between memory, visual perception and sound provoke an opening of an empty distance between the subject's consciousness and its positioning in time: "David's inner self seems unat-

⁴ A parallel between *David Copperfield* and *Great Expectations* might be considered very natural. We could even describe *Great Expectations* as a resonance of *David Copperfield*. Dickens related falling into "unconscious repetitions" and was deeply affected by rereading *David Copperfield* in the process of writing *Great Expectations* (cf. Forster 1874: 329).

tached to the earth – a mote-like void losing itself in the larger spatio-temporal void” (McSweeney/Максуини 1994: 115). Sounds, noises, and different sayings seem to be the elements opening such temporal journeys and lapses in temporality through the repetition of the characters’ childhood memories of sounds.

The threat directed to the complete stoppage of Pip’s voice is also reiterated in the moment of the new meeting between Magwitch and Pip: “With my heart beating like a heavy hammer of disordered action, I rose out of my chair, and stood with my hand upon the back of it, looking wildly at him” (CHD/ЧД2). Pip’s heart is “beating like a heavy hammer,” an image that enlivens the image of a file knocking on iron chains, and also the image of a faith that was interrupted and abandoned – the faith of a blacksmith. Even though Pip has abandoned this faith, it remains as a melodious backdrop in his identity. In his heart and his genuine friendship, he remains Handel – a name of a composer. This faith would probably have given him harmony instead of disordered and suffocating beats, but such direction was interrupted and remained dormant. The reference to Handel also betrays Charles Dickens’s own musical preferences. Charles Cudworth even remarks that *The Harmonious Blacksmith* was probably Dickens’s favourite piece of music written by Handel (cf. Cudworth/Къдурт 1970: 589). Dickens probably chose to add the name of the composer as a significant detail in his novel *Great Expectations*, linking it to Pip’s identity in a very sound-oriented way. In London, Pip introduces himself as Philip and Herbert Pocket expresses his dislike to the ring of the name, saying the following: “it sounds like a moral boy out of the spelling-book” (CHD/ЧД2), and that is why he proposes calling him Handel instead. Herbert’s remarks once again confirm the bond between sound, temporality, and identity. Even though Herbert chooses to call Pip Handel because the name Philip sounds like a boyish name, or a name of a fictional character from a spelling book, the name Handel is no less connected to Pip’s childhood and his experiences back then, alongside his and Joe’s problems with spelling. It is mainly because of the reference to Handel’s work that both the reader and Pip are reminded that he was brought up “by hand” (cf. CHD/ЧД2) to become not a gentleman but a proper blacksmith. But that was before Magwitch and the despotism of his clock-sounds.

Magwitch’s clockwork mechanisms are revealed through the first thing of Pip’s possessions that catches his eye: “Look’ee here!” he went on, taking my watch out of my pocket, and turning towards him a ring on my finger, while I recoiled from his touch as if he had been a snake, “a gold ‘un and a beauty: that’s gentleman’s, I hope! A diamond all set round with rubies;

that's gentleman's, I hope!" (CHD/ЧД2). We could see this as a metaphor of how Magwitch transformed and minted Pip's time. The first thing that grabs Magwitch's attention is Pip's watch. Time is somehow always connected to metal, be it lead or steel. For instance, lead (connected to the river surrounding Pip's homeplace) and steel (files are usually made of steel). Time gets encapsulated as a regular rhythm within a clock – it shows its minting, ensnaring, and the commodification of time as sound. Now Pip's time is connected no more with lead or with iron, but with gold, for the cage is already complete. Meanwhile, his heart is still beating with the sounds of a hammer.

Concluding remarks

To sum up, we have attempted to analyse the child's consciousness of time by following the sonorous traces left on it. It has been argued that temporality in *Great Expectations* could be polyphonous and that it exercises an effect on the child's identity formation. We have given examples of the ways in which Magwitch affects Pip's consciousness of time through soundscapes. Another prolific example is Miss Havisham, but this idea is going to remain as a starting point for my further investigations.

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