



The Revenge of ‘Swamp Thing’: Wetlands, Industrial Capitalism, and the Ecological Contradiction of *Great Expectations*

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Abstract

This essay places Charles Dickens’ Great Expectations in the context of nineteenth-century understandings of England’s wetlands. By offering a new reading of a well-known novel the essay seeks to understand the ecological inflection of Dickens’ work, and more broadly the Victorian novel’s mediation between environmental and socio-economic history. Focusing on the marshes as a space of criminality and liminality, composed partly of land and partly of water, partially industrialized and partially “wasted,” this study argues that the construction of this space and its subjects as “criminal” derives from its very resistance to being made useful and (re)productive. More broadly, the essay suggests that a perspective combining ecocriticism with cultural materialism reveals how the novel’s contradictory representations of nature are intimately related to the contradictory status of these peripheral spaces under the regime of industrial capitalism.

Let us not, however, flatter ourselves overmuch on account of our human conquests over nature. For each such conquest nature takes its revenge on us.

-Friedrich Engels¹

In August of 1860, just prior to beginning work on *Great Expectations*, Charles Dickens, aged forty-eight, sold the lease on his London home and moved to the swamp. The country estate of Gad’s Hill Place, where Dickens established residence, was located in the middle of the North Kent Marshes, an area that is today recognized as one of the most important wetlands in northern Europe.² While he worked on his new novel, Dickens took daily walks through the bleak marsh landscape of the Hoo Peninsula, a

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triangular piece of land at the confluence of the Thames and Medway rivers, on which he would base the childhood residence of Pip, the novel's protagonist. "Dickens's removal to Gad's Hill Place," writes David Paroissien, "intensified his relationship with the whole lower Medway region" (27). Paroissien argues that Dickens' "accurate" descriptions of the Hoo Peninsula "convey an affinity with the environment characteristic of a regional novel" (27). Lawrence Buell further praises Dickens' regionalism, remarking that his "sense of the ecology" is as "keen" as that of his "ruralizing counterparts" like Thomas Hardy (46).

These assessments perhaps sit uncomfortably alongside Dickens' typical classification as a particularly urban writer – a master chronicler of city life whose main character is the metropolis itself. Dickens' descriptions are typically understood as part of a nineteenth-century "toxic discourse" of "gothicized" environmental "squalor," examples of which range from Friedrich Engels' description of factory towns in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, to muckraking investigative journalism and naturalistic portrayals of urban poverty (31, 43). Though not exactly "nature writing," these fictional and nonfictional texts deal with issues of pollution, sanitation, and public health. The infamous "fog" of *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, was not simply moist air, but in fact a thick coal smoke that had stifled London since the early modern period (Davis 31-34). London fog was not merely symbolic, but was also part of what Buell calls "a literal economy of filth and disease" (132). Thus to think of Dickens in environmental terms is to conjure a humanized and developed space – a thoroughly *built* environment.³ While it is no wonder that studies of Dickens have tended to focus on the polluted industrial landscapes the author depicted so well, and while the attention to a "rural" Dickens provides an important corrective to this focus, there may be a tendency to dichotomize these two positions, to focus either on the "pastoral Dickens" or the "gritty urban Dickens," a tendency that risks re-enforcing the epistemological polarity between urban and rural long ago critiqued by Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City*. As we will see, the value of Dickens lies precisely in the way his sprawling fictions avoid fixating on any space in isolation, and instead map the structural relations between spaces, tracing the flow of energy and natural resources as well as the flow of commodities and the circulation of capital over the English landscape.

Great Expectations offers a veritable case study of the interaction between rural and urban. As the protagonist, Pip, moves back-and-forth between the marshland of his rustic youth and the London cityscape of his bourgeois maturity, his travels mirror the interplay of country and city in the Victorian era. While a handful of critics have argued for the symbolic importance of the marsh in the novel, few if any have yet contextualized this representation within the material reality of an actual exploited wetland. The Industrial Revolution and the rise of mechanized capitalism were responsible for a heretofore unimagined ecological transformation of the rural periphery: the draining of marshes and fens; the mining of hillsides for minerals; the clear-cutting of forests; the construction of rail lines; the enclosure of free lands for soil exhausting mono-crop agriculture – these were the expropriations that made the great capitalist mega-city possible. In his classic study *The Great Transformation*, Karl Polanyi points out that the rise of "industrial towns," with their "practically unlimited" need for food and resources, was the "most powerful" stage in the "subordination of the surface of the planet" (179). These historical developments created what Marx called a *metabolic rift* between town and country, leading to an increasingly impoverished rural periphery as well as an increasingly crowded and polluted urban center.⁴

Considering that *Great Expectations*, its author, and its readership were products of the industrial-capitalist city (and products of the city's dominant class, the bourgeoisie), this paper will argue that the novel depicts the "marsh" as a space of *criminality* because its spatial and temporal *liminality* – between

wilderness and development – creates anxiety for the industrial capitalist system. Under the nineteenth-century ideology of progress a space that had not yet been fully integrated into the socio-economic system was a problem to be dealt with. It is at this confluence of ecology and economy that the marshes do some of their most interesting cultural work. A thoroughly materialist history of Dickens' novel would consider it in the context of both social *and* environmental history, as the ideological product of a specific socio-economic formation and a specific physical environment. The anxious and often contradictory status of the marsh in *Great Expectations* points, more broadly, to the contradictory relationship between a finite land-base and an ever-expanding capitalist mode of production. Thus, through an analysis of Charles Dickens' novel, we can begin to formulate an ecocritical theory that is attuned to the specific historical form of socio-economic and environmental exploitation that was coterminous with the rise of the modern novel itself.

Pip's Marsh: Liminality and the Environmental Subject

Near the end of the first stage of the young Pip's "expectations," after he receives a mysterious inheritance and decides to leave his small village in order to become a gentleman, he takes a contemplative country stroll in order to "finish off the marshes...and get them done with" (148). "No more low wet grounds," he exclaims, "no more dykes with sluices, no more of these grazing cattle...farewell, monotonous acquaintances of my childhood, henceforth I was for London and greatness" (149). But the marshes cannot simply be "done with," not only because they dominate the plot and imagery of the novel as a whole, but also because they are central to Pip's very characterization. In the first chapter Pip reflects on his coming-to-consciousness through a description of the landscape:

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea. My first most vivid and broad impression of the identity of things, seems to me to have been gained on a memorable raw afternoon towards evening. At such a time I found out for certain, that this bleak place overgrown with nettles was the churchyard...and that the dark flat wilderness beyond the churchyard, intersected with dykes and mounds and gates, with scattered cattle feeding on it, was the marshes, and that the low leaden line beyond, was the river; and that the distant savage lair from which the wind was rushing, was the sea; and that the small bundle of shivers growing afraid of it all and beginning to cry, was Pip (24).

The opening line's linking of subjectivity and geography – "ours was the marsh country" – is heightened by the formal movement of the ensuing description. It does not begin inward with the speaking subject and then move out, nor does it begin far away with a panorama and zoom in. Instead it begins in the middle space of the immediate churchyard environment, expands to the entirety of the peninsula and the sea beyond, and then rapidly contracts to the objectified "bundle of shivers" that is our narrator. The description performs a back-and-forth, crisscross movement that disrupts a simple, linear, one-way understanding of subject and object. Furthermore, it is as if, through the description of the marsh, Pip has become not only de-individualized, but also de-humanized. For, what is a 'bundle of shivers' but a movement of flesh? We first meet Pip not as a person, but rather as a collection of matter and energy that is imbedded in the larger physical world. Moments of Pip's identification with the land reemerge throughout the novel, such as when he compares his mental state to the "windy marsh view...making out some likeness between them by thinking how flat and low both were," or when he comments that while "a stranger would have found [the marshes] insupportable...[he] knew them well" (114, 385).⁵

Near the novel's conclusion the melding of body and space is again emphasized, when Pip, fearing that he will be murdered on the marsh, envisions his body dissolving and being "changed into a part of the vapour" (389). Pip imagines himself returning in death to the intermingled state he had first experienced when coming to consciousness at the beginning of the narrative. Environmental subjectivity thus provides a kind of frame for the entire work.

The centrality of setting to character counteracts readings of *Great Expectations* as concerned primarily with the psychology of the first-person narrator (Carlisle, 447). This allows us to consider this classical *bildungsroman*, with its "country boy in the city" narrative, as a political allegory of primitive accumulation and uneven development⁶ – to see Pip not simply as an individual, but as a figure for a larger class-perspective and for a whole set of assumptions about the natural world under the emerging industrial capitalist order. In this context it is important to note, however, that the "mingling" of Pip's body with the marsh space is not depicted as entirely positive, let alone "proto-ecological"; Pip is at best ambivalent about the environment, as he contrasts the "lights and life" of the town with the "lonely" death of the marsh." Far from a mystical, affirmative "becoming-one" with nature, the novel emphasizes the marsh's uncanny and frightening negativity. The marsh's problematic positioning within the novel points to a history of material conflict involving this peripheral and spatio-temporally liminal environment.

In many ways the marsh (both the real marsh and the marsh of the novel) could be described as liminal, or in-between. At the most literal level of ecology, a wet-land is a unique combination of water and soil. In particular, the salt marshes of northeast Kent are a combination of coastal and inland ecosystems. Joseph Siry describes them as a "reciprocal nurturing of ocean and earth" where "salt and fresh water flow together," "transitional areas" between "deep waters" and "the dry lands of the coastal plain" (3-4). Thus, at the micro-biotic level of marsh ecology there is a physical liminality, somewhere between wet and dry as well as between fresh water and salt water. In terms of political geography, the Thames estuary, though it could be considered peripheral to the city, is also a middle ground between the imperial power center and the colonial hinterland. Located at the mouth of a major river, it is a kind of highway for that which goes out of the metropole and that which comes in from the colony.

In *Great Expectations* the liminality of the marsh is reflected in the characters that use it to mediate their own temporal in-between-ness. It is never a destination in itself, but rather an area that characters pass through. The marsh is the "place of study" where Pip teaches his caretaker Joe to be "less ignorant and common" – to move from one intellectual state to another (116). It is the place where Pip wanders as he contemplates transitioning from one occupation to another, as well as the place he literally travels through in order to move from the country to the city. The marsh is always a space "on the way" to somewhere else. But if *Great Expectations* is, as it has often been read, ultimately a novel about finance, economics, and social class, then the historical liminality underlying these characterizations could be the situation of the marsh within the development of modern capitalism: it is a space in-between stages of development. Like the wandering/wondering Pip, it is always "on its way," but "not yet" fully integrated into the dominant system.

The Socio-Economic Liminality of the Wetland Environment

The North Kent Marshes, with their "lonely, unvisited atmosphere" of "bleak and windswept" vistas, "remote villages" and "scattered churches" seem to be worlds away from the city of London (Paroissien, 27). But although it may have appeared "wild," contextual research and a closer reading of the novel reveal that it was actually a thoroughly developed space. According to archeological findings, the Hoo

Peninsula had been settled since Roman times. Human-made infrastructure on the marsh included an intricate system of sea-walls, dykes, and run-off channels (used to prevent flooding), as well as a “system of drains and floodgates [that] served to protect the rich alluvial topsoil” (29, 139). In *Great Expectations* we are told that the repugnant villain Orlick lodges “at a sluice-keeper’s out on the marshes [sluice-keepers monitored the flow of water in drainage canals],” attesting to the continual presence of laboring human bodies in the remotest corners of the peninsula (118).

The most common human uses of European coastal marshland included the grazing of sheep and cattle, the mowing of grasses for hay, and the cutting of turf for fuel or building material, activities which could not occur unless the area was drained of water (Beeftink 104). Additionally, chalk and limestone were found to be plentiful on the Hoo Peninsula, and their “presence accounts for the lime industry of northeast Kent and the development...of several cement works around the Medway estuary” (110). The area was well known for its lime kilns; according to nineteenth-century travel accounts they were “the leading feature of the landscape” (110, 380). The centrality of the lime industry to the marsh region is reflected in *Great Expectations*, where lime-kilns appear several times, included during Pip’s climactic near-death confrontation with Orlick. Dickens alludes to the environmental impact of these structures when he describes “how the mud and ooze were coated with lime” and how the kiln gave off a “sluggish stifling smell” (385).

The development of marshes for these myriad purposes was a contentious political issue throughout British history. In the seventeenth century, for example, riots broke out following attempts to drain and enclose the Fens of Lincolnshire, an event which turned out to be both a social and ecological disaster (Ponting 126). The draining of marshes and fens were some of the “best known” land “reclamations” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and in the nineteenth century the shift to steam power sped up a trend that had begun centuries earlier, reducing “the open marshes to a regular and monotonous scene” (Taylor 130, 148). Thus, the bleak “monotony” that Pip finds in the marsh landscape is not “natural” at all, but is rather a historical result of the transition to agricultural and industrial capitalism.

Of course such developments had a significant impact on marsh ecology. The effect on wildlife was immense: drainage, when combined with the growing bourgeois leisure sport of hunting, led to the reduction and even extinction of many bird species (Simmons 161). Intensive livestock grazing meant the trampling of vegetation and subsequent loss of floral species diversity (Beeftink 105; Polanyi 34). Mining and cement manufacture were perhaps the most destructive industries in the region, creating a scarred landscape of pits and quarries, and emitting air pollutants and noise (Beeftink 106). Furthermore, increased international trade meant that ever-larger areas of coastal land were required for ships and their cargo, and thus ports grew “at the expense of salt-marshes and mud-flats” (Simmons 180). Imperial conquest abroad resulted in shrinking marshland at home.

The draining of wetlands was only one part of a larger process of privatization and commodification that exploited labor as well as land. Forests were cleared and open fields were enclosed (legally, through increased private ownership, and physically, through the construction of fences, stone walls and hedgerows). The long process of the enclosure of the commons enriched landowners, even as it robbed rural workers of access to the means of production and depleted the ecological diversity of the English countryside (Linebaugh 43, Thompson 217). It is no coincidence that commonly held public properties “were often the wettest land in the parish” (Martins 45). These marsh spaces lent themselves to subsistence farming and hunting, and the gathering of useful materials for basic survival. Thus it was specifically in these wetlands where “the poor...had the most lose” as a result of privatization and capitalist development.

It is unclear to what extent the marsh in *Great Expectations* would have been affected by the generally widespread process of enclosure. When Pip remarks, “the full moon rose as I left the enclosed lands, and passed out upon the marshes,” his statement seems to reveal that the marshes depicted in the novel remain “open” or “common” land (385). Although nearly thirty percent of England’s surface was privatized during the most intense period of Parliamentary Enclosure from 1750-1819, the area around northern Kent seems to have been largely untouched by such measures (Turner, 32). A statistical map of parliamentary enclosures by county shows less than one percent enclosure in Kent, versus fifty percent in neighboring counties (Yelling, 15).⁷ This evidence is misleading, however, since a main reason the southeast region of the country did not see a large spate of Parliamentary enclosure in the nineteenth century was because the area had already been enclosed much earlier. Separate studies conclude that Kent was almost entirely enclosed by as early as 1600 (Turner 38; Yelling 88; Baker 386). Kent and neighboring Essex were “counties where ‘inclosures be most’” (Turner, 38). Nonetheless, the Hoo Peninsula may have been an exception to this domination. Baker argues that “common meadows certainly existed in Kent,” especially “beside the Rivers Medway and Stour and in the marshlands of the Thames Estuary” (387). In the north and east of the county “substantial areas of open-field land existed” and “some land... [Such] as the upper chalk in Kent...favoured the retention of open land” (Yelling 29, 88). What we can conclude from this conflicting data is that the Hoo Peninsula was at best an island of common or sporadically owned land in a sea of thorough privatization.

If portions of this region were adjacent to, but not entirely owned and controlled by private interest, those spaces would likely have been perceived as both threatened and threatening. This fact returns us once again to our theme of liminality: Pip’s marshes sit anxiously between public and private, as well as between wilderness and development. They are spaces that had been thoroughly exploited by mercantile and industrial capitalism for centuries, but whose very ecology *as wetland* resisted the streamline production process. It is this real and symbolic in-between-ness that fuels the dominant attitude toward the marshes in *Great Expectations* – that of criminality.

The Criminalization of the Marsh

The association between wetlands and vice has deep roots in the western imagination. In the urtext of British culture, *Beowulf*, the reader first learns of the monster Grendel in relation to his swampy habitat: he lives in “mearc,” a borderland, and “moras,” a wasteland.⁸ There is a clear association in this text between wet spaces and evil, and this association clings to the language as it develops. The Old English word *marsh* (deriving from the Germanic *mere*) is etymologically related to *moor*, a word that by 1400 had developed into the term *morass*, which originally meant a low, wet tract of land, but by the 1800s had taken on the second meaning of “a complicated or confused situation which is difficult to escape from or make progress through” (OED). For a similar association one need only think of the negativity attached in modern times to the word “swamp,” a North American variant on “marsh.” In *Great Expectations* Dickens builds on the linguistic link between wetlands and confusion and constructs the marsh, like his London fog, as a negative moral symbol.

The criminalization of the marsh is enacted most basically on the level of plot, for it is on the marsh where Pip assists the escaped convict Magwitch, committing the criminal act that sets the story in motion. Dickens’ descriptions of the space further construct a criminal atmosphere: early in the novel Pip learns of the “hulks” or “prison-ships” that sit in the bay “right ‘cross th’ meshes” (34). The image of a prison on the water suggests wetness as a metaphorical source of criminality. When Pip gazes at the river and the sea beyond, he notices a marker of transgression and crime imbedded in the moist landscape, in the form of a “gibbet... which had once held a pirate” (27). Similarly, the “dripping”

signpost that points the way to Pip's village seems to "oppress" his "conscience like a phantom devoting [him] to the Hulks" (35). Here moisture, criminality, and oppression are discursively linked. After Pip aids the criminal, he projects his feelings of guilt onto the marsh landscape:

The mist was heavier yet when I got out upon the marshes, so that instead of my running at everything, everything seemed to run at me....The gates and dykes and banks came bursting at me through the mist...The cattle came upon me with like suddenness, staring out of their eyes, and steaming out of their nostrils, "Holloa, young thief!" (36).

The wet, unruly land, barely contained by gates and dykes, seems to assault him, much as a criminal would. The domesticated animals – themselves a piece of nature "shackled" by civilization – become a conduit for Pips own identity as a criminal.⁹

The central agent of criminality in the novel is of course the convict Magwitch, and it is no coincidence that Pip initially encounters him out in nature. Pip sees "a fearful man...a man who had been soaked in water, and smothered in mud" (24). Magwitch is literally covered with marsh matter, to the extent that he resembles the modern-day comic book "swamp thing." Magwitch's appearance connects in interesting ways with his personal history. For he is, it turns out, a bastard son of nature, a kind of macabre inversion of the Wordsworthian child-hero. Just as Pip becomes aware of his subjectivity through the surrounding environment, so too does Magwitch, albeit with a criminal inflection: "I first became aware of myself, down in Essex, a thieving turnips for my living" (319). It is in the process of stealing from nature, or rather stealing nature from a human owner, that Magwitch comes to consciousness. This self-described "ragged little creature" had never been taught his name, but only knew it "Much as I know'd the birds' names in the hedges to be chaffinch, sparer, thrush" (319). As a transported convict in Australia, Magwitch became a shepherd and for long periods of time saw "no faces but the face of sheep" (298). It is implied that the lack of human contact has contributed to the character's bestial nature. Magwitch describes himself as "warmint," and Pip dreads him as he would a "terrible beast" and "recoil[s] from his touch as if he had been a snake" (305, 298). Magwitch's repugnant animality, his status as vermin, provides yet another negative image of nature. Furthermore, this natural image is an active, embodied force that has a frightening agency in the narrative.

Because of Magwitch's initial emanation from the marsh, his negativity seems to accuse the wetland by proxy. Later in the novel, when he comes to London in search of Pip, he metaphorically brings nature with him. On the night that Pip and Magwitch are reunited in London the weather is "wretched...stormy and wet...a vast heavy veil had been driving over London from the East, and it drove still, as if in the East there were an Eternity of cloud and wind....and gloomy accounts had come in from the coast, of shipwreck and death" (292). The wind from this storm, "rushing up the river," shakes Pip's residence. The intrusion into Pip's life by this criminal is signaled by the intrusion of unruly weather that seems very close to the atmosphere of the marsh. The East, the direction from which Magwitch and storm both come, is the closest route to the sea, and therefore the closest route to the marshes, the prison-ships, and to the colonial periphery beyond. The wind that travels directly up the river, as if it has come straight off of the marsh, violently assaults the "exposed" structures of the city. Sea, wind, rain, mud, and the East all coalesce in the figure of Magwitch. The violence saturating these descriptions seems, in an almost Darwinian way, to *naturalize* the violence inherent in Magwitch, while, reciprocally, Magwitch's violence seems to confirm the destruction inherent in the environment and reinforce the criminality of the marsh.

The negative attitude toward wetlands was sustained in the Victorian imagination by pseudoscientific theories regarding the health effects of wet environments. When Pip notices that Magwitch is sick during their initial meeting, he says, "It's bad about here...you've been lying out on the meshes, and they're dreadful aguish. Rheumatic, too" (37). It is not simply that Magwitch is sick, but that the land itself seems to be sick and seems to have infected him. The "miasma theory" of disease, dominant from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, incorrectly held that sickness resulted from decaying vegetable matter in the air. Under this theory, a marsh, with its moist climate and bounteous plant life, would have been, by definition, a dangerously unhealthy place. Although such ideas had been largely discredited in the scientific community by the rise of germ theory, the miasma thesis held on in popular imagination late into the century, and it is likely that the denigration of wet, fecund spaces, as inherently pestilent, would have played a part in the vilification of marshes. It is no wonder that *Great Expectations*, written in the midst of major cholera outbreaks, would have been preoccupied with such a problem.¹⁰ The equation of the marshes with sickness in the novel helps to further crystallize an ideological fear of undomesticated nature. By casting the undeveloped marsh as both unhealthy and unjust (criminal), *Great Expectations* effectively *naturalizes* development. Under the nineteenth-century ideology of progress, capitalist industrialization is made to seem benevolent, as the "improvement" of the land is now a part of the "natural" order.

However, if tones of darkness and monotony dominate the representations of the marsh in *Great Expectations* in order to justify its development, the novel also contains a fair number of positive references to pastoral nature. For example, Pip projects his dreams of marriage onto an idealized landscape: "It was summer-time, and lovely weather...I began to combine...Estella with the prospect" (116). A similar idealization occurs near the end of the novel when Pip returns to the forge of his youth in the hopes of now marrying a different woman: "The June weather was delicious. The sky was blue, the larks were soaring high over the green corn, I thought all that countryside more beautiful and peaceful by far than I had ever known it to be yet" (433). These rather predictable stock pastorals appear often in Dickens; in works from *The Old Curiosity Shop* to *Oliver Twist* to *Little Dorrit*, the country is set against the city as an Edenic pleasure ground, a return to childhood, and a space of freedom and morality, in opposition to the dirty, corrupt city. According to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Dickens' "brilliant rhetoric...blurs into imitative literary stereotype when he turns his attention to a pastoral scene" (452).

Although Dickens' pastorals may not be particularly interesting in their own right, the strange *contrast* between the beautiful, rejuvenating marsh and the bleak, criminal marsh, signals a revealing contradiction in Dickens' attitude toward the environment. Ultimately it is this contradiction that points beyond the text to Dickens' place in an industrial capitalist society that increasingly came to romanticize nature as a space of transcendental beauty and moral worth, at the same time that it subjugated the earth's surface to the logic of profit.

Conclusion: The Novel and the Ecological Contradiction

What is the ecological contradiction of capitalism? In classical Marxist theories of economic crisis, the basic contradiction of capitalism involves a conflict between the *forces and relations of production*.¹¹ Put simply, capitalists increasingly exploit their workers to the point that they cannot function properly as consumers and purchase the very commodities they produce, thus causing a crisis of overproduction. James O'Connor adds to this theory what he calls the "second" contradiction of capitalism: the fact that it also degrades its *conditions of production*, or, the very land-base on which it relies. O'Connor

describes this as “the contradiction between self-expanding capital and self-limiting nature” (10). The increased accumulation of surplus demands an ever expanding and intensifying level of material throughput that is fundamentally at odds with a finite material world. In Teresa Brennan’s temporal terms, the lag-time of nature – the time it takes plants and animals to grow – is incompatible with the constantly accelerated speed of capital. The attempt to “speed up” nature in order to make it more productive invariably weakens natural systems to the point of collapse. Paul Burkett and John Bellamy Foster go further than O’Connor, arguing that there are not “first” and “second” contradictions, but rather, that the ecological contradiction is central to the overall functioning of capital: the mode of production that robs workers of their labor power is the same one that robs the soil of its nutrients, and these should be understood holistically as part of an integrated set of problems.¹² “Sustainable development” and “green capitalism” are thus oxymorons. As long as we live under a system that must increase in order to exist, we contradict the finite base of existence that is the planet Earth.

In a sense, the modern novel is a material *product* of unsustainability, insofar as the form flourishes with the rise of capitalism and its dominant ideologies. As such it is of necessity the product of a spatial separation between town and country, between people and the land. From an ecocritical perspective we could hypothesize a link between the “ecological contradiction” and the longstanding Marxist preoccupation with the contradictory nature of cultural forms. This is not to suggest that literature simply and directly “reflects” the material contradiction in a one-to-one manner, but rather that it mediates our understanding of the complex antagonistic relationship between capitalist structures and biophysical processes. A single literary text will construct multiple, contrary depictions of the natural world, because it is the expression of a particular class formation that has contradictory attitudes about that world. We might say that it often has a particular attitude (romantic reverence) that contradicts the everyday material relationship (socio-economic exploitation). Historically contentious environments such as the marsh arise as sites of anxiety and problems in the novel, typically problems that must be disavowed through a gesture of romantic “respect” for the land.

For all of his rage-filled, anarchic invectives against bureaucracy and injustice, Dickens was ultimately a sentimental liberal and a romantic reformer who sought to ameliorate class conflict in the realm of feeling. If a classical Marxist argument says that Charles Dickens is a product of the bourgeoisie, who, however much he might push for anti-capitalist reform, remains trapped within an ideology that he must justify in the formal closure of the novel, then an ecological Marxist might add that however much Dickens desires to pastoralize nature as a space of bounty and hope, he is caught in a system that is required to justify environmental exploitation. This is not a fault or inconsistency in Dickens the author, but rather a contradiction in a society that glorifies the nature it must inevitably destroy. If *Great Expectations* fails to adequately celebrate “wild” nature, it is precisely in this “failure” that it becomes a complex occasion for analysis. What the novel does, through the liminal, criminalized space of the marsh, is make apparent the hidden ecological contradictions of the capitalist system. In its back-and-forth movements between polluted city and industrializing country, *Great Expectations* provides a mental map of the metabolic rift between humans and the land. Through its fissures, lapses, asides, and contradictions, the novel form provides clues to what Engels called nature’s “revenge,” and helps us understand the ideology of unsustainability that came to dominate in Dickens’ time, and still dominates today, despite much “green” rhetoric to the contrary.

Endnotes

- ¹ Friedrich Engels, "The Part Played by Labor in the Transition from Ape to Man," 241.
- ² The North Kent Marshes have been designated as one of twenty-two "Environmentally Sensitive Areas" recognized by the UK government. The region has been designated as having "international importance for over-wintering and breeding birds" ("North Kent Marshes ESA") and contains at least three reserves monitored by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).
- ³ Such a perspective has been bolstered by recent shifts in the field of ecocriticism, away from a celebration of supposedly pristine "wild" nature and toward a "post-natural" outlook that considers in complex ways the "degraded" and thoroughly humanized urban and suburban landscapes, as well as a shift from a deep-ecology-influenced critique of anthropocentrism to a social ecology and environmental justice focus on human health. See Raglon, Bennett and Teague, and Adamson.
- ⁴ See John Bellamy Foster's *Marx's Ecology*, 155-163.
- ⁵ There are other instances in Dickens novels of body and space intermingling: Buell points to Dickens' description of the Brighton seashore in *Dombey and Son*: "little Paul Dombey Jr.'s effort to understand the sea's almost-but-not-quite intelligible language...[are] symptomatic...of the reciprocity of personhood and environment...Dramatizing the strange but imperative mutual interdependence of people with things and with unknown others" (92).
- ⁶ See Part VIII of Marx's *Capital*, on "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation," and also Neil Smith's *Uneven Development*.
- ⁷ We learn that an "insignificant 0.8%" of Kent was enclosed by act of Parliament (Turner, 34). In a ranking of counties by both the number of parliamentary acts and the total acreage enclosed, Kent comes in last, with 34 acts and about 8,000 acres enclosed, compared, for example, to 362 acts and 667,099 acres in Lincolnshire (Turner, 33).
- ⁸ See *Beowulf* lines 102-104: "Wæs se grimma gæst / Grendel haten, / mære mearcstapa, / se þe moras heold, / fen ond fasten" [That grim daemon was called Grendel, a notorious prowler of the borderlands, who held the wastelands, swamp, and fastness] (38).
- ⁹ An entire essay could be written about the significance of animal imagery in the novel, from Wemmick's pig (277, 343), to the infestation of Havisham's house (94, 283), to the description of Pip as a "swine" (44) or Drummle as a "spider" (289), to the Smithfield Cattle Market (162-3), to the fact that Estella's first husband dies resulting from "the ill treatment of a horse" (437). See Ritvo.
- ¹⁰ There were four major cholera epidemics in Britain during the nineteenth century: 1831-2, 1848-9, 1853-4, and 1866. *Great Expectations* first appeared in serial form in *All the Year Round* in 1860, between the third and fourth outbreaks. Beginning in the 1840s, the science behind miasma theory was discredited by John Snow, who ruled that diseases like cholera were not caused by "the inhalation of miasma or effluvia" from the atmosphere, but rather from germs (Vinten-Johansen 7). Drinking "dirty" water may certainly give someone cholera, but only if that water happens to contain the specific bacteria that causes cholera; the "dirt" itself is of course not a disease causing agent. Marshes, fens, and swamps, were sometimes breeding grounds for disease, but this was because disease-carrying insects bred there, not because of any quality in the land. Snow's pioneering introduction of what would become "germ theory" was later confirmed by twentieth century microbiology.
- ¹¹ "At a certain stage of their development, the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production, or – what is but a legal expression for the same thing – with the property relations within which they have been at work hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an epoch of social revolution." Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.
- ¹² See Burkett, "Fusing Red and Green," and "Marx's Ecology and the Limits of Contemporary Ecosocialism," and Foster, "Capitalism and Ecology: The Nature of the Contradiction."

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