The Pleasures and Limits of Dickensian Plot, or "I have met Mr. Dickens, and this is not him"

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Abstract:
This article sets out to show how two revisions of *Great Expectations* (1860-61) Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006), reanimate the tension in the Dickens novel between the desire for plot and the forces of randomness and coincidence that work against that drive for emplotment. In Palliser's elaborately plotted novel, 'design' is shown to be an important driving force in novels and lives, but it is also equated with cruelty, injustice and social inequity. In Jones's novel, set in Papua New Guinea during its recent civil war, the heroine triumphs in creating a life for herself from chaos, but in focusing on Matilda's assimilation of Pip's own misreadings, the novel calls attention to the limitations of plot as well as to its powers.

Keywords: chance, design, Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip*, Charles Palliser, plot, postcolonial, *The Quincunx*.

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Any bicentenary consideration of Charles Dickens has to take account of his forte as a novelist: his creation of labyrinthine, knotted plots that miraculously untie by the novel's end to show unexpected connections. Peter Brooks notes that "it was part of the triumph of the nineteenth-century novel in its golden age to plot with a good conscience, in confidence that the elaboration of plot corresponded to, and illuminated, human complexities" (Brooks 1992: 114). Surely this unfettered enthusiasm for plotting is one of the conventions embraced by neo-Victorian novels, which are at least partly responsible for a renaissance of the pleasures of plot – a resurgence of interest that began only a decade after Northrop Frye ridiculed Dickens's elaborate plotting by underscoring its utter disregard for reality: "Real life does not start or stop; it never ties up loose ends; it never manifests meaning or purpose except by blind accident; it is never comic or tragic, ironic or romantic, or anything else that has a shape" (Frye 1980: 240). Brooks

describes *Great Expectations* (1860-61) as "a novel that stands firmly within the golden age of plot, one that is centrally, unashamedly and – at first glance – unsuspiciously concerned with issues of plot and plotting" (Brooks 1992: 114). By considering Dickens's classic text in the light of its influence on two neo-Victorian writers, this essay aims to show that *Great Expectations* is both deeply invested in plot and cognizant of those forces that subvert the plotting of both novels and lives. I argue that Dickens's sophisticated understanding of both plot's powers and its limitations informs two very different neo-Victorian revisions of *Great Expectations*: Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989) and Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006). I will begin with Palliser's novel to discuss its emphasis on randomness, coincidence and chance, forces that work to undermine the protagonist's attempts to decode the plot of his life. From there, I will move on to Jones's antipodean novel, set on the island of Bougainville during Papua New Guinea's recent civil war. Jones adapts the Victorian plot to a postcolonial framework that emphasises how Pip's story is immensely sustaining and transforming to a young girl growing up on a war-ravaged tropical island, at the same time as it employs Pip's misreadings of his life's plot to teach Matilda the limitations of self-authorship.

Current devotees of the Victorian novel love it for its plot, causality, and coherence. Hilary Schor writes that

> for contemporary readers, the Victorian novel matters because of its plot [….] Moderns who turn the novel backward are looking for the confidence of psychological realism and the faith that character will emerge from incident, fact from fiction, and conviction from clutter. In the realist novel, all will be fitting, all will be appropriately clothed, and all will be well. (Schor 2000: 234)

Schor claims that neo-Victorian novelists are interested in Victorian novels because they offer a way to resuscitate Victorian debates about realism and to resolve them in new ways (Schor 2000: 234).[1] From this perspective, it seems that the interest in the Victorian era comprises a yearning for coherence and stability in the form of traditional plots, a yearning which

paradoxically acknowledges the destabilising influences of chance and coincidence that permeate the Victorian novel. George Levine stresses that

> even in narratives that seem to emphasize the power of chance over design, narrative makes chance impossible. Design is intrinsic to the language of storytelling, with its use of a narrative past tense: 'Once upon a time' [which] already implies design. (Levine 1981: 138)

That said, scholars have argued convincingly that even amid the psychological realism and 'unsuspicious plotting' of the Victorian novel, its concern with authorial design has always contained its own antithesis in an equally powerful obsession with the deconstructive forces of chance and coincidence (see Hornback 1971; Vargish 1985; Bell 1993; Monk 1993; Richardson 1997). Robert Caserio, for one, has argued that "every plot is pervaded by a counterforce that undoes plotting, and […] every attempt not to plot or tell a story is pervaded by a stubborn narrative impulse" (Caserio 1979: 282). More recently, Hilary Dannenberg has described the act of plotting as "any attempt to make sense of a larger, unorganized entity by constructing some kind of reductive and selective system" (Dannenberg 2008: 13). She notes that plotting relies on a configuration of events and characters into "an unstable matrix of possibilities", which paradoxically motivates the reader to long for possession of "that final configuration achieved at narrative closure when (the reader hopes) a coherent and definitive constellation of events will have been achieved" (Dannenberg 2008: 13). Dannenberg's definition underscores the contingency of plotting: it is a process that comprises at once the desire to assemble a coherent narrative and the knowledge that any narrative is arbitrary and could have been configured differently.

The tension between what Brooks calls the "official, repressive plots" of a novel like *Great Expectations* (Brooks 112: 122) and the subterranean energies that constantly threaten to disrupt those plots seems a natural outgrowth of nineteenth-century scientific debates over the place of man in the universe. Lyell and later Darwin demonstrated in their narratives of geology and natural history that "it was possible to have plot without man – plot both previous to man and plot even now regardless of him" (Beer 2009: 21). This loss of human control over both historical and geological

plots permeated the period's fictional plots as well. Gillian Beer claims that with the growing acceptance of the ideas of Lyell and Darwin, "Victorian novelists increasingly seek a role for themselves within the language of the text as observer or experimenter rather than as designer or god. Omniscience goes, omnipotence is concealed" (Beer 2009: 45). In contrast, Brooks argues that Dickens's elaborate plots are a response to the marginalisation of humankind from the larger plots of geology and history, as well as to the nineteenth century's crisis of faith: "the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on a new urgency when one can no longer look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world" (Brooks 1992: 6).

Great Expectations simultaneously demonstrates the attractions and limitations of narrative plots. In search of a plot for his life, Pip is first embedded in one 'wrong' narrative, and is then precipitated out of his 'true' plot (in which Magwitch is revealed as his benefactor) by Magwitch's recapture and imprisonment in London. Only after each of the novel's designs for him has failed does Pip achieve satisfaction: his self-made life in Egypt with Herbert and Clara. Plot is limiting for Pip because his belief that he knows the design of his life blinds him to the fact that many other life plots are possible for him. In his case, there is no 'proper' plot, and no absolute moral victory. What is central to the novel, for Brooks, is that Pip is forced to abandon one plot for another, only to find that in the end, he must accept both his own misreadings and his ultimate lack of authority over his own plot (Brooks 1992: 130).

Jay Clayton argues persuasively that many neo-Victorian novels work by exposing and extending the deconstructive tendencies that already exist in their Victorian precursors. Clayton lists several Dickensian characteristics that anticipate postmodernism, observing that the convoluted plots of the late novels might be seen as prefiguring Pynchon, and that the greatest difference between Dickens and Pynchon is tonal: "Only a thematic adjustment – from celebratory to paranoid (an adjustment that these 'dark' novels seem always to be on the verge of making themselves) separates the two authors' concerns with hidden connections" (Clayton 2003: 149). This comment is important because it shows both that Dickens's complex plotting is "celebratory", connecting unexpectedly related characters, and also that those narrative connections in the nineteenth-century novels always seem about to suggest something more ominous. One thinks here of the

uncomfortable feeling Pip experiences when he sees Jaggers's servant Molly, or of the scene in which Pip accidentally ends up in the same coach with two convicts, one of whom had been sent years earlier by Magwitch to deliver Pip a gift of two one-pound notes. Dannenberg identifies *Great Expectations* as a classic example of the traditional coincidence plot, noting that unlike earlier Dickens novels in which the hidden network of relationships results in "positive convergence", in *Great Expectations* the numerous coincidental encounters "become vehicles for the creation of a deep sense of menace" (Dannenberg 2008: 158). In addition, instead of using coincidence to create harmony and resolve hidden connections, Dannenberg argues that in this novel "a network of coincidental relationships becomes the means to expose the hero's illusory picture of Victorian society" (Dannenberg 2008: 138).

I wish to argue that Palliser's neo-Victorian novel *The Quincunx* builds on this 'dark' quality in Dickens by simultaneously revealing a proliferation of unseen connections, and suggesting their contingency and malignancy.[2] Palliser's protagonist, John Huffam, is still a child when he realises that he is not who he assumes to be. There is reason to believe that he is the heir to a great fortune, a mystery that hinges on a missing family codicil, but to receive the inheritance he must prove his own identity, excavate his family connections, and extricate himself from pretenders to the fortune who wish him ill. The remarkably convoluted plot of this 800-page novel generates a mystery that is as indecipherable to the reader as it is to John himself. As the plot thickens, John realises that the only way to save himself from foul play is to decode the design of his own life. Looking back on his early years, John muses about his childhood wish for a neatly ordered universe:

> I was terrified – as I suppose all children are – of things being random and arbitrary. I wanted everything to have a purpose, to be part of a pattern. It seemed to me that if I behaved unjustly I denied the pattern and by creating something ugly and meaningless, forfeited the right to judge that something unjust had been perpetrated against myself, and, even more important, the right to expect that there was any justice or design in the world. I wanted my life to involve the gradual unfolding of a design, and whether I have been

> successful in this remains to be discovered. (Palliser 1990: 30)

The quest to decipher his life's true plot, however, is not an easy one for John, who early on discovers that his family name is actually a pseudonym chosen "at hazard" by his mother. He asks:

> if something as important as one's own name, which seemed so rich in meaning, could be so meaninglessly random, then perhaps all names – and even words, for weren't they merely names? – were equally accidental and lacking any connexion with what they designated? (Palliser 1990: 62)

John's profound need for design is matched by an equally deep-rooted fear that life really is a random series of accidents, and that this randomness seeps all the way to the level of language, in which names are merely free-floating labels we append to objects for our convenience.

In *The Quincunx*, the competing systems of design and randomness are embodied by Silverlight and Pentecost, two down-on-their-luck puppeteers. While Silverlight is a firm believer in design, Pentecost is convinced that society is predicated on the "spiderly, cannibalistic, irrational pursuit of self-interest" (Palliser 1990: 225). According to Silverlight, "the argument from design" serves as proof of a "Supreme Spirit of Reason", and in his view it is "Reason" and not self-interest which forms the foundation of society (Palliser 1990: 228). Unlike Pentecost, who believes that the interests of the wealthy always oppose the interests of the masses, Silverlight feels that the economic order can be brought into conformity with "rational Justice", since individuals are naturally motivated by altruism and the desire to see justice done (Palliser 1990: 228). Pentecost's Hobbesian view of society, in which "everyone hunts and preys upon everyone else or at best feeds on everyone else like parasites on a dog" (Palliser 1990: 224), turns out to paint an accurate picture of the microcosm world of the novel, with its concerns with a malignant nature 'red in tooth and claw', and its warring families reproducing on a smaller scale the struggles between the 'two nations', rich and poor, so characteristic of the period. Palliser indicts a fundamentally unjust society in which "honest Merit is held back, Talent is passed over, and Insolence and Rank arrogantly

usurp the prerogatives of all" (Palliser 1990: 724). What appears to disturb Palliser most about the inequities of Victorian society is that they are insusceptible to change. Although Palliser has shown design to be necessary for the writing of fiction, he also makes the point that design has no moral valence. In his sympathy for the novel's less fortunate characters, he implicitly criticises design as a way of viewing the world as created for a potentially exploitative purpose, and not open to recalibration.

John's life is given its shape, or pattern, by his acceptance of a plot. Without his decision to devote himself to pursuing justice for his branch of the family, he would be nothing more than the victim of random events. When his mother dies, destitute, in a tenement, he judges her as having been "too trusting, but, more than that, she had had no purpose, no design, and had believed too much in luck", concluding that "[a]ll this had made her a victim, merely drifting through a life that had no meaning toward a meaningless end" (Palliser 1990: 446). John's mother dies because she lacks a plot to keep her going, whereas John is motivated to continue his quest by his desire to unravel the mystery of his identity, and to bring the evil Clothiers to justice for what they have done to his family. The machination toward an ending, which Peter Brooks describes as the very definition of plot, literally drives John's existence. *The Quincunx*'s insistence that without plot there is no meaning is most clearly articulated in John's revulsion at his mother's death. If design, for Palliser, has no moral weight, randomness forecloses any moral purpose in life, his novel clearly attesting to the importance of design in structuring both a novel and a life.

John Huffam's quest to discover his true identity and the correct plot of his own life is obviously indebted to the figure of Pip in *Great Expectations*, whom we know to be equally perplexed by the mystery of his rise from blacksmith's apprentice to gentleman. Pip's interpretation of these events, that he is being groomed by Miss Havisham to marry her ward Estella, turns out to be a misreading, but his sense that his life is unfolding at the whim of others is decidedly accurate. When Estella reminds him that "[w]e have no choice, you and I, but to follow our instructions. We are not free to follow our own devices, you and I" (Dickens 1994: 261), she is of course correct: she and Pip are puppets. Pip's faulty assumption that Miss Havisham is his benefactress stems partly from wishful thinking, partly from an ingrained sense of plot: "She had adopted Estella, she had as good as adopted me, and it could not fail to be her intention to bring us together"

(Dickens 1994: 229). Dickens foregrounds the human desire to make sense of seemingly random events, even when this impulse finds itself consistently thwarted. Miss Havisham fits into the mystery Pip has conjured for himself: in his mind, the old woman has slated him to "tear down the cobwebs [and] destroy the vermin – in short, do all the shining deeds of the young knight of romance, and marry the princess" (Dickens 1994: 229). Once Pip has embedded himself in this particular narrative, he abdicates responsibility for his own actions and begins to perceive himself as driven by his imagined plot. Pip's horror when his benefactor turns out to be Magwitch is partly attributable to having his rise in the world financed by a convicted felon, but also to his shattering recognition that he has misconstrued the plot of his own life. Pip comes to call his fabricated expectations "my poor labyrinth" (Dickens 1994: 229), because in failing to recognise that there could be another pattern for his life than the one in which he has invested himself, he becomes trapped in a web of his own making.

In the end, John Huffam finds a midway ground between Pentecost and the idealistic Silverlight in deciding that although his 'strings' are pulled by someone else, his sense of agency emanates from his ability to detect a pattern in seemingly random events. *The Quincunx* operates analogously, by creating coherence out of a vast assortment of details, while acknowledging simultaneously that the author's pattern-making is a method of imposing meaning. When John describes his motive for getting back Jeoffrey Huffam's final will as a desire to "make order and meaning out of the randomness and injustice I have seen all my life" (Palliser 1990: 644), he might as well be articulating a key preoccupation of postmodern narratives: the imposition of order on random events in a way that grants them meaning, and the concurrent acknowledgement of the arbitrariness of that meaning.

Despite Pentecost's view that patterns are merely artificial structures we deploy to comfort ourselves and hold chaos at bay, Palliser's novel suggests that patterns are impossible to do without. Yet *The Quincunx*'s mysterious narrator reminds us of the limitations of these same patterns when he says,

> the concatenation of events is always more complicated and inexplicable than we like to imagine. We must remember that

> a pattern – whether of the past or future – is always arbitrary or partial in that there could always be a different one or a further elaboration of the same one. In the end we have to make a guess or hazard all upon the throw of the dice. (Palliser 1990: 755)

Patterns, in lives and books, are essential for the constitution of meaning, but ultimately they are not directly related to an essential truth. Any pattern we fabricate, the novel suggests, could be supplanted at any time by another pattern using the same details. What we must "guess", the passage indicates, is which interpretation of "the concatenation of events" is most useful, and most satisfying. Palliser's novel, then, refracts the Victorian concern with the workings of Providence in both lives and novels through the postmodernist fear of being overwhelmed by randomness in a world that has discarded its master narratives.

I am using Palliser's version of Dickens to make the case that Dickens's sense of emplotment is crucial to understanding his legacy to the twenty-first century – both for its promise of coherence and for its prescient comprehension of the chaotic impulse that plot struggles to quell. Palliser's revision of Dickens, and his insistence on representing the compelling power of plot, also helps us to understand the enormous appeal of *Great Expectations* to Lloyd Jones's young protagonist on her tropical island. If Palliser's book provides a postmodern refraction of *Great Expectations*, then Jones's response to Dickens offers a postcolonial spin that demonstrates a former colony's ability to recast the Victorian novel in its own mould and for its own purposes, but with a similar enthusiasm for plot.

At first glance, Lloyd Jones's *Mister Pip* (2006) seems an unlikely neo-Victorian novel. It takes place about as far from Victorian England as it is possible to get – in Papua New Guinea – in the early 1990s, during that country's civil war. Its protagonist, Matilda, is a fourteen-year-old girl growing up on the island of Bougainville – the largest of the Solomon Islands, now an autonomous region of Papua New Guinea – where the copper mine has been abandoned by its Australian owners. The native rebels, or 'rambos', have declared war on the mine and the company, and by association on the 'redskins' whom the Australians have hired to protect the mine. Black islanders on Bougainville are caught in this conflict when the island is blockaded – no supplies can get in, and no people can get out.

Matilda and her mother are unable to join Matilda's father, who was taken to Australia by his boss, and the islanders are deprived of both electricity and groceries. Nor is there any more school, until the village presses the one remaining white man, Mr. Watts, into service as a teacher. Willing but untrained, Mr. Watts begins to read to his students from his favourite novel, *Great Expectations*.

I wish to argue that in *Mister Pip*, we are given *Great Expectations* as a narrative of self-determination that empowers a young indigenous girl, but also as a narrative that is inherently self-conscious and unstable. The story Mr. Watts tells, for instance, is no longer Dickens's story, but his very personal retelling. Matilda is looking for a story to be her lodestar – something that will help guide her through an increasingly impoverished, incoherent life. In appropriating Pip's story as her 'own', she is not so much invalidating her own lived experience as trying to imagine her way out of a life that lacks any narrative trajectory at all. Edward Said has noted the importance of narrative to the formation of postcolonial history: "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about the strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own individuality and the existence of their own history" (Said 1993: xv). Said's formulation describes precisely what happens when Matilda takes on a coming-of-age story from the heart of Empire in order to give her own life the plot it sorely lacks, and (ironically) to reinforce her ability to write her own story. What matters about Matilda's relationship to Dickens's novel is not simply that it is an attractive 'story', or that she is entranced by its language, but rather that in it she hears "someone giving an account of himself and all that mattered" (Jones 2008: 24). That ability to tell the story of one's life – to believe one has a story worth telling – becomes crucial to Matilda, who is living in a place where "the most unspeakable things happened without once raising the ire of the outside world" (Jones 2008: 166). This comment seems entirely consistent with Peter Widdowson's observation that

> contemporary novelists seem to be using fiction to excavate the past for a 'hidden history', to voice or revoice those previously rendered voiceless by their oppressors, to articulate what Michael Dash, in the context of postcolonial 'writing back', has called a 'counter-culture of the

> imagination' in order to 'redefine history' or defeat 'historylessness' and regain an identity: 'a more speculative vision of history in which the consciousness of the dominated culture would predominate'. (Dash qtd. in Widdowson 2006: 493)

The issue of counteracting the "voicelessness" and "historylessness" of the dominated culture is raised in the novel, where Matilda finds in *Great Expectations* (and in her teacher) a confirmation of the fact that "our voice was special, and we should remember this whenever we used it, and remember that whatever else happened to us in our lives our voice could never be taken away from us" (Jones 2008: 256). However true to one's imagination or lived experience this notion may be, it expresses an idea that must seem naïve to readers familiar with the line of criticism exemplified by Gayatri Spivak's work, which highlights the complexities of the debate about "voice" in a postcolonial context. Spivak advances the notion that Westerners granting collective speech to the "subaltern", or member of a marginalised category, cannot help but re-inscribe the subaltern's subordinate position in society (Spivak 1988: 84). Spivak's argument would complicate any simple conflation of Matilda's voice with self-expression, but the novel already complicates such a view itself, in that it is through both Dickens' ironic novel and through Mr Watt's refraction of that novel that Matilda finds what she needs to construct her own life.

Mark Llewellyn has recently critiqued the novel's reclamation of the Victorian story, noting that "the concluding lines of Jones's novel attribute a power to the nineteenth-century story that leads ultimately to a reductiveness of the twentieth-century individual's lived experience" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 26). Regarding Matilda's claim that "Pip was my story, even if I was once a girl, and my face black as the shining night" (Jones 2008: 256), Llewellyn asks: "If the narrator always has her voice, why must she read herself as 'Pip,' indeed what does it mean for Pip to be her 'story'?" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 26). Yet I would argue strenuously that Matilda creates her own version of Pip's story – a postcolonial version that focuses not on the Victorian details of Pip's 'expectations', but which emphasises both Pip's misreadings and the appeal of 'authorising' the plot of one's own life. Pip's resonance for Matilda lies

in the fact that he breaks out of the given plot of his life, even if his departure from that given plot is based on misconceptions.

The story of self-authorship has a tremendous universality that is translatable to Matilda's own, very particular, lived experience: it is important to note that when Matilda finally goes to England to research her thesis, visiting Dickens's study at Eastgate House inspires her not to write her dissertation, but to embark upon writing her own life story instead. Sue Kossew points out that although the novel demonstrates the ambivalence of the colonial process, it is unambiguously enthusiastic about its culmination in Matilda's discovery of "the courage and confidence to find her own voice" (Kossew 2009: 287).[3] *Great Expectations* teaches Matilda that "you can slip under the skin of another just as easily as your own, even when that skin is white and belongs to a boy alive in Dickens' England" (Jones 2008: 231). In her study of empathy and the novel, Suzanne Keen points out that "for immersed readers, entering fictional worlds allows a refreshing escape from ordinary, everyday pressures and preoccupations" (Keen 2007: xv), an observation supported by Matilda's comment that "[i]t was always a relief to return to *Great Expectations*. It contained a world that was whole and made sense, unlike ours" (Jones 2008: 67). Matilda's remark demonstrates just how welcome Pip's story is to children whose world seems damaged beyond repair. The neo-Victorian impulse to look back as a way of going forward, as a way of making sense of the world, could therefore not be more applicable to Matilda's circumstances. From Pip she learns that she can have expectations, and that her life contains within it the possibility of change, and of self-authorship.

In addition, Jones's novel counterpoints Pip's story with the folktales of the 'special guests' Mr. Watts invites into his classroom: the children's parents and grandparents, who are asked to share stories, like that of the voyage of the heart seed or the life cycle of the mayfly. When Daniel's grandmother tells the class everything she knows about the colour blue, Mr. Watts reminds the children that "while we may not know everything about the whole world, we can, if we are clever enough, make it new. We can make it up with the things we find and see around us" (Jones 2008: 60). Jones's celebration of these indigenous stories helps establish a sense of Bougainville's cultural identity, counteracting its marginalised position. The bits of wisdom the visitors offer create a parallel narrative, a kind of "counter-culture of the imagination" in Dash's sense: the habits of

crabs and how to use them to forecast the weather; Matilda's mother's claim that parrot fish "remember you from the day before and the day before that one" (Jones 2008: 56); May's story of the frigate bird that brought her a birthday note from across the bay only to be eaten for lunch the next day.

Jones's sense of plot also includes a strong sense of its limitations. When the island's only copy of *Great Expectations* is destroyed, the children work together to reconstruct it from the fragments they remember – a project Matilda keeps a secret from her mother, who she knows would say "That won't hook a fish or peel a banana" (Jones 2008: 147). Although Matilda recognises the relevance of Pip's story, she is also alert to the way it can be translated into versions more immediately meaningful in the context of the use value and practical knowledge the islanders prize. For instance, when Matilda is swept out to sea in a storm, she grabs onto a log and names it "Mr. Jaggers" in tribute to "the man who saved Pip's life" (Jones 2008: 216). Moreover, although Matilda sees in Pip the confident narrator of his own autobiography, Jones relies on our knowledge of Pip as a terrible misreader of his own life. We see this kind of narrative scepticism when Mr. Watts attempts to buy time for his escape by telling his own story to the rebel soldiers – only to have his week-long testimony end with his being shot, then chopped up and fed to the pigs. Telling the story of his life is not, for Mr. Watts, ultimately empowering.

In a similar vein, even though Matilda clings to Dickens's novel as representing coherence and unity, ironically, just as in *Great Expectations* and *The Quincunx*, most of the plots in *Mister Pip* break down, or fail to go according to plan. Mr. Watts's wife, Grace, who grew up on the island, was sent away as a scholarship student to become a dental nurse – just as Estella is sent to a finishing school by Miss Havisham to become a lady. However, unlike Estella, Grace did not follow her original plot: "she used her scholarship to hook a white man. Instead of a dental nurse, we got Pop Eye" – the islanders' name for Mr. Watts (Jones 2008: 145). The islanders, who do not understand Mr. Watts's presence on the island, imagine that, like the convict Magwitch, he is there "doing penance for an old crime" (Jones 2008: 2). Mr. Watts, an orphan, claims to have been raised in Wellington by an elderly spinster who was jilted on her wedding day like Miss Havisham – a plot that turns out to be fabricated for the benefit of the 'rambos' listening to his tale. And perhaps most tellingly, as Kossew has pointed out, the illiterate 'rambos' misread the name of Pip, which Matilda has written in the

sand, as the name of a real person being hidden by the villagers – a misreading which sets in motion a series of disastrous events (Kossew 2009: 284). Family narratives also dissolve: Matilda's father leaves for Australia; the Wattses' daughter dies in childhood; even the imperialist plot of social 'progress' fails when the siege deprives the islanders of all their colonial amenities. Although Matilda sees in the Victorian narrative coherence and closure, compared to the seemingly far-fetched island stories her mother and the illiterate neighbours tell, in effect Pip's misinterpretations – and their refraction through Matilda's hungry reading – show the Victorian universe to be no more solid than the islanders' belief that a woven sleeping mat can keep one from being lost in one's dreams. Pip's story, it turns out, is only redemptive up to a point.

What, then, is the relationship of Lloyd Jones's postcolonial novel to its Victorian precursor? In the neo-Victorian tradition, as Palliser's novel demonstrates, the postmodern suspicion of narrative coexists with an embracing of the pleasures of plot that are endemic to Victorian fiction. As a result, although Matilda's reading of *Great Expectations* may be a misreading of a partial version of the original, it is ultimately transformative, leading to a range of life choices different from those initially available on her tropical island. Hence rather than simply appropriating Pip's story wholesale, or even substituting it for Matilda's own life experience, I contend that Jones uses Pip's story to give a marginalised girl a voice, and to bring to our attention historical events that escaped most of the Western world's notice.[4] As Palliser does with 'design' in *The Quincunx*, Jones uses plot to counter the loss of personal and collective history – in this case the undocumented injustices of the Papua New Guinea civil war – while also introducing an element of wariness regarding the powers of plot.

Furthermore, Jennifer Gribble refers to Homi Bhabha's argument that the literature of Empire stems from "the discovery of the English book", adding that in *Mister Pip*, the discovery of the English book leads to "a process of mutual affirmation, a cross-fertilisation in which stories bring people and ideas together and empower them" (Gribble 2008: 190). Indeed, in keeping the 'rambos' at bay with his autobiography, Mr. Watts tells a story that combines the events of his life with the plot of *Great Expectations* and with the islanders' stories to create a kind of hybrid, "a made-up story to which we'd all contributed" (Jones 2008: 191-192). For Bhabha, the

presence of colonial authority results in the hybridisation of the colonial text: "As a signifier of authority, the English book acquires its meaning *after* the traumatic scenario of colonial difference, cultural or racial, returns the eye of power to some prior, archaic image or identity" (Bhabha 2008: 153; original emphasis). Bhabha goes on to contend that once it has come into conflict with the "dark unruly spaces of the earth", the English book changes (Bhabha 2008: 153). Cultural differentiation permanently alters its value and destabilises its authority. To follow Bhabha's argument, *Mister Pip* shows not the uncritical absorption of an imperialist narrative by a colonial subject, but rather the reciprocal engagement of the islanders with a text that continues to be alive and mutable.

Mister Pip is also a narrative of loss: what happens to the natives as they mingle with the whites and eventually vanish into their world, just as Matilda's father did? Matilda wonders if she can find a life that is authentic, one that does justice to the world she was born into and the world in which she must make something of herself. And 'make' is the key word here: what she wants is not a received plot, but a plot of her own devising. Pip has "been given the opportunity to turn himself into whoever he chooses", Mr. Watts tells Matilda, and that is what she aspires to as well (Jones 2008: 71). In his critique of the "literature of return", in which postcolonial characters who have grown up in the imperial centre return to their native lands in order to assume "alternative identities", Simon Gikandi observes that the writing of postcolonial identity has grown increasingly complicated:

> the myth of return in postcoloniality is more complex than the simple opposition between home and exile […] it is plagued by conflicts and pluralities that emerge from the histories that migrancy seeks to leave behind. (Gikandi 1996: 199)

Matilda embodies the kind of hybridity that Gikandi seeks to define as emblematic of a new kind of postcolonialism, one that eschews the traditional oppositions of centre and colony, home and exile in favour of a more globalised identity. Matilda has no home left on Bougainville, but she also has an ambivalent relationship to Australia, where she perceives her father as having been assimilated into the white majority culture. In London, at first she feels "blessed" to have the run of the British Library (Jones

2008: 247), but after a while she simply feels lonely, and disappointed in her discoveries about Dickens, who turns out to have been a rather tyrannical father. The self she presents to the world is a displaced and fragmented one: she represents what Gikandi might call an "agent of the new cartography" – someone who epitomises the postcolonial condition Gikandi defines as produced by "the bounded spaces of both the postcolony and the postempire", a condition which also stems from "the gap that separates the ideality of Englishness from its bleak realities" (Gikandi 1996: 221; 223).[5]

Ultimately, Matilda comes to recognise that 'her' version of *Great Expectations* is not the original one. When she borrows the book from a local library, in order to reread it, she is surprised to discover that Mr. Watts must have read them an abridged version: the library book seems wordy and unfamiliar. On a break from college, she decides to research Mr. Watts's early life in Wellington, New Zealand, and visits his first wife, whom he had never mentioned. The encounter causes her to acknowledge the partiality of 'her' truth:

> We only see what we see. I have no idea of the man June Watts knew. I only knew the man who took us kids by the hand and taught us how to reimagine the world, and to see the possibility of change, welcome it into our lives. Your ship could come in at any time, and that ship could take many forms. Your Mr. Jaggers might even turn out to be a log. (Jones 2008: 245)

Visiting Eastgate House, Matilda peers at the mannequin of the author in his study and whispers to no one in particular, "I have met Mr. Dickens and this is not him" (Jones 2008: 255). Just as in Bhabha's analysis, the original has been compromised in the wake of the intervention of the colonised, which he reads as culminating in a "production of colonial hybridity" (Bhabha 2008: 161). There are no originals anymore and no copies, only Matilda's version of Charles Dickens, which manifests itself most solidly, at the end of Jones's novel, as inspiration for Matilda's autobiography.

The legacy of Dickens, then, in these two novels so indebted to him, has less to do with the re-circulation of Victorian ideas and more to do with a fascination with the powers, pleasures, and politics of plot. In Palliser's *The Quincunx,* the author creates a novel that closely resembles the originals

in form and theme, amplifying *Great Expectations*' concern with plotting by opposing it to randomness, chance and coincidence. John Huffam has limited control over the plot of his life, but he does discover in himself the ability to find patterns in the midst of randomness. In contrast to Palliser's panoramic epic, *Mister Pip* is a slim volume that shares few formal qualities with its Victorian antecedent. However, like *The Quincunx*, it makes use of the relationship between *Great Expectations* and its contemporary revision to demonstrate the potential connections between a young Bougainvillean girl and a boy coming into his expectations in Victorian London. Even while acknowledging the possibility that the story Matilda hears is not 'Pip's story' at all, but a hybridised version born out of fragments and misrememberings, Jones tellingly grants Matilda more authority than Pip in crafting her own life. In accepting that one narrative may take many forms, both these Dickensian revisions reiterate the continuing influence and relevance of *Great Expectations* in any discussion of the power of plot to shape both novels and lives.

Notes

1. Schor makes a distinction between contemporary readers, who read Victorian novels for their reassuring plots, and contemporary novelists, for whom the Victorian novel represents an opportunity to interrogate Victorian debates over mind and matter, spirit and body, and past and future, among others (Schor 2000: 234). Schor's point is that these questions so central to the Victorian era are recuperated in such a way as to materialise the Victorian past.
2. In his *New York Times* review, Michael Malone notes that "Mr. Palliser appears to have set out not merely to write a Dickens novel but to write all Dickens novels" (Malone 1990: n.p.). Although clearly Palliser's byzantine inheritance plot owes a great deal to Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), its depiction of a young boy trying to make sense of his parentage and find his way to a possible inheritance is most evidently inspired by Pip's story.
3. Relevant here is Paul John Eakin's work, in which he defines autobiography as a performative act in which the self is created through language (Eakin 1985: 5). This line of thought can be traced back to Paul de Man's contention that a fictive self is produced through autobiography, and that "whatever the

writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture" (de Man 1979: 920; original emphasis).

4. Geraldine Bedell notes in an interview with Lloyd Jones that "the so-called developed world looked the other way while [Bougainville] was subjected to a campaign of genocide" (Bedell 2007: n.p.). David Cohen numbers the dead at 20,000 over the course of a decade of civil war (Cohen 2010: n.p.).
5. Recent postcolonial scholarship has focused on complicating the relation of empire to colony to take into account more nuanced 'globalised' relationships. See in particular Elizabeth Ho's analysis of the "problematic postcolonialisms" engendered by "settler colonies" like Australia, Canada and Hong Kong, which she notes produce differently inflected forms of neo-Victorianism (Ho 2012: 171). Jay Clayton observes that recent neo-Victorian postcolonial novels do not "write back to empire", but rather "confront their own implication in global structures of power" (Clayton 2012: 727).

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