Dickensian Stuffing, *by Beci Carver*

The word 'roasted' is used twice within twenty-two pages in Dickens's *Great Expectations*, first in relation to Pip, whose heart and liver are threatened with being 'tore out, roasted and ate',[1] and second vis-à-vis the 'pair of roasted stuffed fowls' which Pip's sister Mrs Joe Gargery anticipates cooking for dinner on Christmas day (2). My first proposition in this essay is that Pip shares with the fowls not just the threatened future of being roasted 'and ate', but of having his crevices stuffed.

Pip is first presented to us as a character with bread stuffed into his pockets, and with organs that lend themselves to being found and eaten. When Magwitch turns him upside down, out comes food, and when Magwitch holds him by the leg and 'tilt[s]' him, blackmailing him with the removal of his heart and liver if he fails to co-operate, the action of tilting asks to be read as a forestaste of his body's pillaging:

> "Now lookee here", he said, "the question being whether you're to be let to live. You know what a file is."
>
> "Yes, sir."
>
> "And you know what wittles [i.e. victuals] is."
>
> "Yes sir."
>
> After each question he tilted me over a little more, so as to give me a greater sense of helplessness and danger.
>
> "You get me a file." He tilted me again. 'And you get me wittles." He tilted me again. 'You bring 'em both to me.' He tilted me again. 'Or I'll have your heart and liver out' (5).

It is as if everything is rolling around inside Pip while Magwitch shakes him. Like a roasted bird, he brims with internal treats, but unlike a traditional roast he seems incapable of keeping his stuffing stuffed in. A little later on, when he is dutifully smuggling 'wittles' in his trousers, he discovers 'the tendency of exercise to bring the bread-and-butter out of my ankle' (13). He is a self-emptying Christmas turkey. We could think of him as a dinner party gone wrong.

Dickens started work on *Great Expectations* in 1860,[2] two years after his marriage had ended; but his two decades of co-habitation with the culinarily curious Catherine Thomson featured enough dinner parties to educate them both in the wonders of stuffed meat. Catherine's cookbook of 1840, the chattily informal but informative, *What Shall We Have For*

Dinner?, abounds in examples of stuffing: there is stuffed mutton, stuffed steak, stuffed beef fillet, stuffed haddock, and stuffed sheep's hearts.[3]

The stuffed hearts in this list usefully foreshadow my argument in this essay; namely, that Dickens uses stuffing to configure the management of emotional intensity in *Great Expectations*. This argument is partly inspired by the following passage from David Trotter's brilliant introduction to the Penguin edition of the novel:

> *Great Expectations* is the most understated work by a writer not usually known for understatement: 'compactly perfect', Shaw called it, and its virtues flow from its compactness. Weighty matters encompass the novel, pressing on it from all sides, leaving their imprint on each descriptive detail, each turn of the narrative. As we read, we trace from the inside, so to speak, the forms they have moulded from the outside. Whatever the novel has to say about goodness, about guilt and desire, about the nature of capitalism, and these are all matters no introduction can afford to neglect, it says by the way it takes their stress, by its distribution of their weight. So while we may want to explore its uncertainties and contradictions, and develop its contexts, we should also, in the end, be prepared to let well alone.[4]

For Trotter, Dickens's style operates like an imprint, conserving on its surface ideas and moods that occur more profoundly elsewhere. It is as if the book's heart were external to it, and only available to us as an effect which we should take care not to overread. In my reading of the novel, this method of 'understatement' is configured by Dickens through acts of stuffing, which, in culinary contexts, could be thought of as techniques of understatement. What the novelist imprints delicately in language, the cook lets bulge delicately from a cooked creature's middle or thigh or bottom or heart. According to the logic of the stuffing metaphor, these secrets are internal rather than external; thus Pip's smugglings are *inside* his trousers. But they are no more accessible to us as readers for belonging to an interior space rather than an exterior one, because, as Trotter suggests, Dickens's prose itself contains neither interiors nor exteriors. As an instance of 'compactly perfect' writing, it offers only the surface matter of stray bulges.

What Trotter understands as Dickens's method of 'understatement' in the novel may be read in conjunction with his treatment of Pip as a farcical character, since farce may further the aims of understatement by repackaging trauma as comedy. Rod Mengham writes of *Great Expectations*, that 'the book keeps on demonstrating how Pip never in fact recovers from being turned upside down over a gravestone in the churchyard';[5] but I would maintain that what Pip experiences as 'weighty matter', the novel succeeds in treating lightly. In my own reading of the novel, this lightness links arms with the metaphorisation of stuffing, both

in the sense that Pip characteristically keeps his emotional reactions stuffed deep inside himself, and in the metatextual sense that the word 'farce' derives from the French for 'stuffing.'

Dickens developed an appetite for farce when he first began to read with gusto in his pre-teen years, 'sit[ting] with his book in his left hand, and constantly moving it up and down, and at the same time sucking his tongue';[6] and the farce he favoured when organising himself thus was that of the eighteenth-century playwright Elizabeth Inchbald. Inchbald influenced his early writing in numerous specific ways, but she also more diffusely made him conscious of the Frenchness of farce, since so many of her plays were translated from French. In French the word 'farce' is also the word for 'stuffing',[7] and the French language retains a punning awareness of the word's semantic doubleness. To write French farce is thus always potentially, on the level of metaphor, a culinary exercise. And one of the propositions I want to make in this essay is that by writing a farcical novel about stuffing, Dickens writes a species of French farce.

Dickens was not the only writer of his generation to play games with the relationship between comic and culinary farce. In 1877, one of his correspondents, Enneas Sweetland Dallas, ghost-wrote the cookbook *Kettner's Book of the Table* on behalf of the famous French chef Auguste Kettner, and when he came to define the word 'forcemeat' – or the blended meat used in stuffing – he found himself glutting on the double meaning of the French word 'farce.' He writes:

> The French name for it is *farce*, and their use of it tends to farce … They swell out their viands, and surround them with farce, quennelles of whiting, quenelles of chicken … forcemeat shaped into balls, shaped into eggs, shaped into corks, farce inside the meat, farce coating it and making it, farce swimming around it: so that often a solid dish professing to be solid meat is mainly farce.[8]

Dallas exploits the implication of 'padding out' in the French word for stuffing, and in this sense he distinguishes between French and English stuffing *and* French and English temperaments, the former being prone (supposedly) to theatrical excess and the latter to reticence (or we might say 'understatement'). But within Dallas's pun there is also a conceptualisation of farce that suits both national cuisines: when he writes that French 'farce' may lurk '*inside* meat' or that 'a solid dish *professing to be* solid meat is mainly farce', he could be writing about English stuffing, since the English word (from 'estoffer' in Old French, meaning 'to furnish' or 'to supply material')[9] also suggests a technique of culinary incorporation.

Bringing comic and culinary farce together thus creates an Anglo-French punning logic, which puts Dallas in conversation with Dickens.

The conceptual association of farce with packaging and concealment dates back to the thirteenth-century use of the term to describe the phrases lodged between *kyrie* and *eleison* in litanies (e.g. 'Kyrie, *genitor ingenite*, *vera essentia*, eleison.')[10] And stuffing more generally, as the English word implies, necessarily involves hiding things. Alan Davidson writes in *The Oxford Companion to Food*:

> Besides being of practical advantage, the use of stuffings and forcemeats sometimes carries the idea of a conceit, a hidden surprise in an apparently plain dish. This sort of practice has a long history. An example from the classical Roman world is the roast pig served at Trimalchio's feast, which was stuffed with sausages and black puddings.[11]

In the ancient Roman version of stuffing, the roast animal's hidden contents derive their effect from suddenly being prodded into view. Roman stuffing delivered shocks, both positive and negative: it could provide you with surprise sausages or uncoil a Trojan army from a horse's stomach. In British cooking, on the other hand, stuffing is (and was) less surprising. There are of course long anxious pauses in the Gargery household when Mrs Joe seems to risk *not* finding what she wants in her stuffed larder because Pip has been stealing 'wittles' for Magwitch; but English stuffing may normally be relied upon to behave predictably. In English cooking, concealment is an appetiser not for mystery but for the reinforcement of expectation.

In *Great Expectations*, when Pip is himself in the position of expecting something to emerge from a pocket – namely, the character Mr Pocket – his hungry anticipation mirrors that of a dinner guest. Yet there is nothing unpredictable about Pocket, or we might say that the emptying of Pocket's Pocket reveals nothing strange. Pip reflects:

> I had nearly maddened myself with looking out half an hour, and had written my name with my finger several times in the dirt of every pane in the window, before I heard footsteps on the stairs. Gradually there arose before me the hat, head, neckloth, waistcoat, trousers, boots, of a member of society of about my own standing. He had a paper-bag under each arm and a pottle of strawberries in one hand, and was out of breath. (174)

London in general is full of bad surprises for Pip; he reflects: 'London was decidely overrated' (174). But Pocket is not one of them. And not only is Pocket not disappointing, he makes Pip

happy. Pip's anxious period of writing his name in the window dust seems designed to pull our memory back to the book's opening paragraph, and the first sentence especially (i.e. 'My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip' (3)), so that when Pocket finally turns up he risks confronting his new housemate at his most profoundly miserable. Nevertheless, Pocket's presence is soothing, partly because it confirms Pip's expectation that he should appear and partly because the manner in which Pip's expectation is satisfied is farcical. Pip reflects, as if receiving relief in measured doses: 'Gradually there arose before me the hat, head, neckloth, waistcoat, trousers, boots, of a member of society of about my own standing.' The phrase 'arose before me' here may sound spectral, and may even remind us of Marley's ghost in *A Christmas Carol* who 'pass[es] into the room before [Scrooge's] eyes.'[12] Yet Pocket's grocery-list of bodily features topped off with the punnet of strawberries under his arm is somehow familiar in advance of its initial discovery. The ritual of uncovering an expected object, which has always belonged both to Anglo-French stuffing and French farce, enables Pip to relax.

Great Expecations is a novel not just about great expectations, but little ones. Those of its expectations that qualify as 'great' come to be associated with sudden bolts of panic and uncertainty and ultimately anticlimax. When Jaggers arrives Gabriel-like with the news of Pip's 'great expectations' (138), Pip is dumbstruck in a way that may recall Mary's instinctive worry at the knowledge that she is 'expecting' God's child. On the other hand, the book's minor expectations are relatively predictable, tangible and easily satisfied. Pip is genuinely pleased to see Pocket (he keeps telling us so), and his affection for him seems to deepen the more farcical Pocket becomes. When Pocket '[is] fast making jam of his fruit [the strawberries] by wrestling with the door while the paper-bags were under his arms', Pip 'beg[s] him to allow me to hold them' (175), as if recognising a fellow trainee in the effort to stuff. Their first communal act in a career of co-cohabitation is to perform a slapstick routine together that shows Pip both to approve of the person Pocket turns out (or turns himself inside-out) to be, and to appreciate their mutual investment in stuffing.

In another of Dallas's books, this time a literary-critical monograph of 1866 entitled *The Gay Science*, comic farce is associated with the ability to restore sanity. When Pocket appears in *Great Expectations* with the strawberries under his arm he is soothing, and when London theatre-audiences witnessed farce it seemed to Dallas that they were soothed too:

> At the West-End theatres we want farce and frivolity, bubble and ballet, not because we are [not] intellectual, but because it is a necessity of our existence that, in the hour of play, we should fly thought, and cultivate sensation.[13]

The 'hour of play' may perhaps be read as an ominous phrase in the context of *Great Expectations*, since one of Miss Havisham's most sinister habits is to summon Pip and compel him to 'Play!' in front of her (58). But her endeavours to make play grave are counterproductive to the extent that they simultaneously bear witness to the convention of using farce as an antidote to 'thought.' There is a sense in which even in its melancholy moments the novel remembers the lightness of farce.

Dickens was already conscious of the efficacy of farce as a mood-changer in the mid-1830s when writing *The Pickwick Papers* – another novel of his that treats 'weighty matters' with admirable subtlety. The following passage is an anecdote relayed by Pickwick's doctor, John Hopkins, about another client of his whose daughter and son were involved in a farcical argument:

> 'Child's eldest sister bought a necklace, – common necklace, made of large wooden beads. Child, being fond of toys, cribbed the necklace, hid it, played with it, cut the string, and swallowed a bead. Child thought it capital fun, went back next day, and swallowed another bead […] Next day, child swallowed two beads; the day after that, he treated himself to three, and so on, till in a week's time he had got through the necklace, five-and-twenty beads in all. The sister, who was an industrious girl, and seldom treated herself to a bit of finery, cried her eyes out, at the loss of the necklace; looked high and low for it; but I needn't say didn't find it. A few days afterwards, the family were at dinner – baked shoulder of mutton, and potatoes under it – the child, who wasn't hungry, was playing about the room, when suddenly there was heard a devil of a noise, like a small hail storm. "Don't do that, my boy", said the father. "I ain't a doin' nothing", said the child. "Well, don't do it again", said the father. There was a short silence, and then the noise began again, worse than ever. "If you don't mind what I say, my boy", said the father, "you'll find yourself in bed, in something less than a pig's whisper." He gave the child a shake to make him obedient, and such a rattling ensued as nobody ever heard before. "Why, damme, it's *in* the child!" said the father, "he's got the croup in the wrong place!" "No I haven't, father," said the child, beginning to cry, "it's the necklace; I swallowed it father." – The father caught the child up, and ran with him to the hospital: the beads in the boy's stomach rattling all the way with the jolting; and the people looking up in the air, and down in the cellars, to see where the unusual sound came from. He's in the hospital now", said Jack Hopkins, "and he makes such a devil of a noise when he walks about, that they're obliged to muffle him in a watchman's coat, for fear he should wake the patients!"[14]

The subject matter of this passage is irreducibly sad. The 'industrious' daughter who values her necklace too much, and the mysteriously noisy, ultimately hospitalised son, would be pathetic figures without the ornamentation of farce. Dickens himself, having lost his eight-month-old daughter Dora to unknown causes in 1850, knew what it was to agonise about mysterious symptoms in young children. Yet the text's farcical qualities somehow protect it against gloom. Dickens draws attention to farce or stuffing as his mechanism by first tucking potatoes behind mutton, and then tucking another collection of small, spherical objects inside Hopkins's son. The passage then becomes more and more farcical as the beads tinkle more and more, and take over as the story's point and punchline. The boy's distress is stuffed under the din; and the only revelation the text has to make is a predictable one about the origin of the sound – the swallowed beads.

There is good stuffing and bad stuffing in *Great Expectations*, and there are good and bad stuffers. Pocket is an accident-prone stuffer whose strawberries are crushed like forcemeat on his way through the door, while Pip's attempts to stuff his trousers occupy a slow moment in his maturation: bad stuffing puts the progressive impetus of the bildungsroman at stake. Dickens himself was appreciative of deft stuffing, albeit of the taxidermic variety: after his death in 1870, a majestic stag's head of his possession was put up for auction and sold to H. Hicks.[15] And one of the last fictional characters he devised is simultaneously and in a sense synonymously a connoisseur of taxiderms and aesthetic perfection per se. Dickens writes of Mr Tartar's domestic environment in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*:

> His gleaming little service of plate was so arranged upon his sideboard as that a slack salt-spoon would have instantly betrayed itself; his toilet implements were so arranged upon his dressing as that a toothpick of slovenly deportment would have been reported at a glance. So with the curiosities he had brought home from various voyages. Stuffed, dried, polished, or otherwise preserved, according to their kind: birds, fishes, reptiles, arms, articles of dress, shells, seaweeds, grasses, or memorials of coral reefs; each was displayed in its essential place, and each could have been displayed in no better place.[16]

Tartar equates imperfection with 'slack[ness]' or the appearance of looseness ('a slack salt-spoon would have instantly betrayed itself'), as if the effect of the faultlessly arranged accessories and ornaments on his shelves were somehow equivalent to that of a plumply stuffed stag's head. Tartar succeeds through sheer neatness in becoming a version of a good stuffer. Moreover, Dickens's 'compact[ness]' in *Great Expectations* may remind us of this neatness, although Dickens also differs from Tartar in that his instruments are culinary rather

than taxidermic, while his French-influenced farce operates through the *concealment* of 'weighty matters' rather than the *exhibition* of neatness.

Pip is Dickens's proxy in a number of obvious ways (perhaps most conspicuously in his experiments with language, as Steve Connor has shown),[17] but his gradual cultivation of an ability to stuff is perhaps what brings him closest to the novelist at mid-career, who both felt compelled for aesthetic reasons to write more subtly, and motivated by bitter personal experience to advocate for privacy and emotional reserve. When he writes of the youthful 'dread of not being understood' (65-66) in *Great Expectations*, his language vividly recalls his own horror at being misunderstood when in June 1858 he announced his separation from Catherine. In a state of shock at having been judged so severely by former admirers, he wrote:

> Those who know me and my nature need no assurance under my hand that such calumnies are as irreconcilable with me, as they are, in their frantic incoherence, with one another. But, there is a great multitude who know me through my writings, and who do not know me otherwise; and I cannot bear that one of them should be left in doubt, through my poorly shrinking from taking the unusual means to which I now resort, of circulating the Truth.[18]

Trotter has shown in his study of 1988, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens and the Economies of the Novel* that Dickens normally uses the word and concept of circulation postively, to signify health (it allows money to flow, people to move, legacies to be conferred, messages to be communicated, water to reach those who need it, and sewage to be disposed of safely).[19] But in this passage the decision to 'circulat[e] the Truth' is freighted with apprehension and a fair portion of disingenuity. For Dickens was in fact much less interested in letting air get at his secrets than in pointing to the surface or the stuffed trouser-leg he was willing to show the world, and insisting it was all there was to see. Crucially he says nothing about his biggest secret – his affair with the eighteen-year-old Ellen Ternan. In *Great Expectations*, Dickens's efforts to shield his vulnerability from public contempt and exploitation may seem echoed by Pip's suppression of the tears that prick his eyes when Estella mocks him. Pip reasons: 'I was so humiliated, hurt, spurned, angry, sorry […] that tears started to my eyes. The moment they sprang there, the girl looked at me with quick delight […] This gave me power to keep them back' (62). The 'keep[ing] back' of emotional injury may be understood as Pip's narratorial method in the novel.

There is a penalty attached to incompetent stuffing in *Great Expectations* which only one character faces. When Pumblechook attempts to 'stuff[…] himself' with food at Mrs Joe's

funeral buffet and stumbles over to Pip 'breathing sherry and crumbs' as if even the basic circulatory act of breathing were beyond him, the result is twofold: he humiliates himself in public and loses the capacity to be lightly farcical (280). Pumblechook shares with the Veneerings in *Our Mutual Friend* an inability to promote the silliness of his behaviour into an occasion for laughter. He is comic without being light: there is an unsparingness to his characterisation that makes his failures grotesque rather than slapstick. And more grotesque still than his ineptitude at the simplest of stuffing tasks – stuffing oneself – is his failure to keep secret his greed for Pip's attention. Pip observes while he watches him: 'I became conscious of the servile Pumblechook in a black cloak and several yards of hatband, who was alternately stuffing himself, and making obsequious movements to catch my attention' (280). The rhythm by which Pumblechook alternately 'stuff[s] himself' and betrays his social neediness operate together, one after the other, as if there were a pulley system connecting the two. Pumblechook fails to stuff himself effectively and fails to conceal his intentions by turns and *in* turn, because one failure entails the next.

Pumblechook seems especially richly deserving of scorn at this moment partly because, as Trotter notes, '[he] never misses an opportunity to patronize [Pip] or deprive him of credit' (x), and Pip is overdue his revenge. Until this moment, Pip has always had to stuff his reactions to Pumblechook deep inside himself. At the Christmas dinner towards the beginning of the novel, Pumblechook and others' insults come so thick and fast that Joe feels compelled to compensate Pip with constant ladlings of gravy. Pip stuffs himself with the meat grease because he knows that to react would attract even more negative attention (26-27). Thus, when Pumblechoook fails both to hide his feelings and his food at Mrs Joe's funeral, he bungles the same two-layered project at which he compels Pip to excel.

If we understand *Great Expectations* to establish an interdependent relationship between the operations of farcical comedy and the ability to stuff, Pumblechook's antics might be thought to throw a spanner in the works of the novel's whole conceptual mechanism. If Pip is Dickens's proxy, Pumblechook is his proxy's malign alter ego. Furthermore, in this capacity, I would venture that Pumblechook also presents us with a perverse form of growing old, by which age advances without the accompaniment of maturation. Seen in this light, Pumblechook is not only a danger to the book's farcical spirit, but to the optimism of the bildungsroman's structural association between growing up and growing wise. Pumblechook is already old when we first encounter him; Pip is banned by his sister from using the ageing appellation 'uncle' when addressing him, but it suits him (24). For even then, it is as if Pumblechook is always already too old to grow up; and if growing up means learning to stuff

oneself with tears or pain or wittles, he will never learn. He is too old to mature by learning how to be a secretive child.

Great Expectations is a book by a mature writer about learning to communicate wisely, which is to say, learning about what not to say and how not to say it. As Trotter hints, to write a 'compactly perfect' novel is to write a tactfully silent one. The book so often invites us to read it as a story of wish fulfilment, from the moment Pip's 'expectations' are indefinitely stretched by Mr Jaggers's announcement; and yet we never really learn what Pip's wishes are or what it costs him to forsake them. His most vivid (though still implicit) wish, that he and Estella should be married, is pushed into the background by a mixture of understatement and farce. Is it possible to remain wistful while a man with strawberry punnets under both armpits is simultaneously wrestling with a doorknob and making jam? There is certainly a sadness to Pip's slow discovery that Magwitch is right about the dangers of openness and about the necessity of stuffing his secrets away and revealing only what he is expected to reveal. By choosing to make Pip a rich man, Magwitch could be said to attempt to circumnavigate this sadness by fulfilling Pip's wishes without his having to admit to them. This attempt to trick fate into providing satisfactions normally reserved for the riskily honest ultimately leaves Pip with his wishes unmet, but at least he is never roasted and ate.

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[1] Dickens, *Great Expectations* (London: Penguin, 2003), 6. All future references to the novel will be taken from this edition and given in the text.
[2] On September 14th he told the Hon. Mrs Watson that he was 'on the restless eve of beginning a new big book', and at the end of the month he began *GE*. Norman Page, *A Dickens Chronology* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987), 106.
[3] Catherine Dickens, *What Shall We Have For Dinner?* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1952), 30, 38, 18, 11, 21.
[4] Trotter, 'Introduction', *Great Expectations*, vii.
[5] Mengham, *Charles Dickens* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2001), 101.
[6] Quoted in Michael Allen's *Charles Dickens's Childhood* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 68.
[7] Alan Davidson writes that the 'French word *farce* [is] still in use as their word for stuffing.' Davidson, *The Oxford Companion to Food* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), online edition.
[8] Dallas, *Kettner's Book of the Table* (London: Dulau & co, 1877), 187.
[9] *Oxford English Dictionary*, online edition.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Davidson, 793.
[12] Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (London: Bradbury & Evans, 1858), 15.
[13] Dallas, *The Gay Science* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1866), 341.
[14] Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers* (London: Penguin, 2000), 423.
[15] 'A STAG'S HEAD AND ANTLERS' belonging to Dickens was sold to H. Hicks. J. H. Stonehouse, *A Category of the Libraries of Charles Dickens & William Makepiece Thackeray* (London: Piccadilly Fountain Press, 1935), 8.
[16] Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood and Other Stories* (Oxford: Wordsworth Classics, 1998; first published, 1870), 44.
[17] 'Pip has a direct and spontaneous relationship with language itself, ignoring the social the social frames from which it comes.' Connor, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 119.
[18] Dickens, 'Personal', *Household Words*, XVII: 429 (June 1859), 601.
[19] Trotter writes that the metaphor suggests 'the principle not only of trade, but also of intercourse, of meaning, of identity.' Trotter, *Circulation: Defoe, Dickens, and the Economies of the Novel* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988), 6.