

*Lewis Horne*

## ***Little Dorrit* and the Region Of Despair**

Deep within every man there lies the dread of being alone in the world, forgotten by God, overlooked among the tremendous household of millions upon millions. That fear is kept away by looking upon all those about one who are bound to one as friends or family; but the dread is nevertheless there and one hardly dares think of what would happen to one if all the rest were taken away.

— Kierkegaard, *Journals*

### 1

*Little Dorrit* presents characters who appear to be forgotten upon this earth—by what supreme being is not clear. Although some characters do speak of God, they do so mainly as a convention. All make their way through existence in their own way, some carving paths through the country of their lives with idiosyncratic determination, some wandering without much aim, some binding themselves to others to assist or be assisted, to use or be used. Many find substitutes for the God they consciously or unconsciously miss—Mr. Dorrit in his role as Father of the Marshalsea, Mr. Merdle in his financial empire, Mrs. Merdle in “Society,” Miss Wade in those things that stoke her resentment. The list goes on. Still others, fewer in number, manage a leap past such false gods to ally themselves with a larger good, a good that rests beyond the blazing sky, the cold of a mountain pass, the immediate landscape of despair, a good that is Christian in quality and context. More often, those who find their lives falsely aligned are freed, if at all, by a violent wrenching of the self from the circumstance in which it is mired, by a shock that awakens them to the terrible nature of the course they have been following. In presenting this situation, Dickens places his fictional world against a shadowy mythic back-

drop, something that echoes in the reader's mind, a myth made up of strange juxtapositions and bizarre drawings. Yet that myth, in its way, is as substantial as that which Thomas Carlyle put together, a compound equally as strange, for *Past and Present*.

One way of approaching Dickens's method and manner is to note a procedure Flannery O'Connor describes in "The Fiction Writer & His Country."<sup>1</sup> Though not specifically a Christian novelist, Dickens is close enough to being a "novelist with Christian concerns" to make O'Connor's description apropos.<sup>2</sup> A Christian novelist, she writes,

will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience.

Further, in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor writes that "every writer, when he speaks of his own approach to fiction, hopes to show that, in some crucial and deep sense, he is a realist."<sup>3</sup> I draw on O'Connor because her statements point to something we find in *Little Dorrit* more strongly, it seems to me, than in any of Dickens's other novels—that is, (1) his "prophetic vision," meaning "a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up," and (2) an implied view that the reader is, at least in part, one whose "sense of evil is diluted or lacking altogether, and so he has forgotten the price of restoration" and must be reminded of it through bizarre, even violent, actions in the novel.

When O'Connor writes of seeing far things close up, she is, I take it, speaking of seeing universal mysteries within the concrete particulars of the world, calling attention to the way the author brings those features of mystery—of the demonic, of the blessed, and so on—into the landscape and people which are being written about. "Beyond" the figure of Little Dorrit, for example, are goodness and beatitude; beyond Mr. Casby and his "patriarchal" appearance are forces that make an actuality of hypocrisy. When distance is closed, the object close up will manifest his or her difference from the everyday, will bear the appearance of what O'Connor would call the grotesque. The writer of the grotesque (O'Connor refers specifically to "[t]he Southern writer") "is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets." Or to use Ruskin's terms as he

describes the artist of the grotesque in *The Stones of Venice*, this person, in his Renaissance surroundings, at least, can be seized with a sense of the Terrible—that is, with an understanding of “the power of Sin” and “the fear of Death,” either of which can imprint themselves on his art. The activity of Ruskin’s artist—the extent to which the artist is free to let his creative instincts play—also imparts a sense of the Ludicrous. The balance between the two, weighted in one direction or the other, evolves into the grotesque.<sup>4</sup> Such a balance is characteristic of Dickens’s art.

In *Little Dorrit*, such grotesque or eccentric actions take various forms. One of the most evident shows in the way certain motifs, mainly Biblical or religious, lean towards parody, towards inversion, towards some variety of distortion designed to shock or rouse the reader from a too acquiescent lethargy. A good illustration can be found in the treatment of Mr. Merdle. Known and *seen* by the public as “the eighth wonder of the world,”<sup>5</sup> he is worshipped close up: “All people knew (or thought they knew) that he had made himself immensely rich; and, for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul” (539). His worshippers miss the fraud that is signaled in the man’s appearance—his reserve, the “dull red color in his cheeks,” his habit of appearing to be “anxious to hide his hands” (241)—and what it tells them about how close his very being is to them, and hence how far it is from the godlike power they worship. Only at his suicide does the distance collapse so that the real man is revealed: discovered in a bathhouse, the eighth wonder of the world shows as no more than “the body of a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features” (686). The shock called forth by such a revelation is not unlike the revelation in quite a different work in a different form—that scene in which the wizard is uncloseted when Toto draws the curtain in the film version of *The Wizard of Oz* to show a nervous Frank Morgan, the very real and very human wizard busy operating the showman’s fire and thunder. Dorothy is startled. So is the viewer. The distance between the near and the far, once great, is suddenly shrunk to reveal something ludicrous.<sup>6</sup>

In *Little Dorrit*, the reader finds Dickens’s curiously angled reminders of an underlying myth. They derive from the effort to yoke far things with close, the ludicrous with the terrible. They help to present the accommodations of human beings to the dark world in which they live.

## 2

The indifference of the natural world, the seemingly disinterested character of whatever metaphysical force is in charge of that world, is suggested in two passages that frequent critical commentary has made familiar. I refer to the opening chapters of the novel's two sections. In these, Dickens presents a universe *out there* upon which human beings have little impact. In the opening of the novel, words disclose an unreflective world, all surface and heat. No inner life is acknowledged, only a blank exterior with features frequently repellent. Though Marseilles is crossed and populated by "descendants from all the builders of Babel," human figures themselves are revealed in the opening description as not yet fully formed, their presence suggested through synecdoche, through response: "[b]oats ... were too hot to touch"; "eyes ache[d]" (1). One finds some of the same desolate openness at the beginning of the second book, at the Pass of the Great Saint Bernard. Less repellent initially, mainly because the scene is introduced with a description of "the fresh beauty of the lower journey," the quality of the setting alters as the travellers ascend the mountain into a barren land where "[i]cycle-hung caves" whisper "of the perils of the place" (420), where breath turns into "cloud" in the frigid air (421).

Following the description of a landscape given by a faceless narrator, the third chapter of both "Book the First" and "Book the Second" narrows to the view a character within the novel has concerning a more specifically populated landscape. If the initial descriptions suggest a world without concern for the beings that inhabit it, a deity—if one exists—not simply withdrawn but with his back turned as well, the description of these later scenes narrows to human perception. While the sun above Marseilles stares, suggesting a cosmos without soul, the city of London provides the environment which humanity has formed—the bells tolling as though the Plague is in progress, its "responsible houses ... frowning" (29), its citizens scarcely able to breathe. Looking out from his old room in the Clennam house, Arthur Clennam sees a "blackened forest of chimneys" (40). It is creation populated, miserably so. The view of Italy in the companion section of "Book the Second" is given through Little Dorrit's eyes as she looks out from the "corner of the illustrious carriage" in which she rides. What she sees registers as "unreal"—"places where they stayed the week together," "whole towns of palaces." Strangest of all is Venice, a kind of Italian version of London on Sunday: "all the streets were paved with water and ... the deathlike stillness of the days and nights

was broken by no sound but the softened ringing of church bells" (453).

What I want to suggest in reviewing these well-known passages and in the discussion that follows is that in recognizing a world subject to cosmic indifference, with circumstances of human sordidness taking a variety of forms, a reader finds a version of the fallen world, a world in which viable communication with spiritual forces has been lost, in which pleasant living conditions are a memory of the past or a dream of what has never been. Among the many critics who have commented upon these passages, two provide useful amplification of this point. Elaine Showalter sees in *Marseilles* an "agoraphobic nightmare," something without a shadow to defend or protect it, the shadow that "protectively harbors the chaos of identity." She finds the terrain of the Great St. Bernard "as blasted and desolate as that of *Marseilles*." Approaching from a different angle, George Levine finds that "[t]he primary physical feature of this world [of the novel] is entropic decline," something imparted, among other ways, in the "extreme images of disorder" with which each book of the novel begins.<sup>7</sup> Humankind have been expelled from Eden, and the populated country east of the flaming sword is, in its wasteland qualities, alive with monuments to human vanity and busy with the worship of false gods. It is a distortion of the lost world, an ideal situation which lies at a distance.

The nature of the fall is ambiguous. In some cases, perhaps, one can point to a moment in time when some choice or catastrophe moved someone into a situation of misfortune from what a reader assumes was a condition of at least partial happiness—financial misfortune for Mr. Dorrit, the "bad fever" that halts Maggie's mental growth (99), the interruption of Flora Casby's youthful romance with Arthur Clenham. But more often the condition is a general awareness, perhaps romanticized, perhaps unspoken, of the way things were or the way things could be. What is significant is the nature of the fallen world itself with its oppositions of good and evil, right and wrong, the true and the untrue—and the way people manage within it. The way is, in effect, an attempt to create new Edens, small paradises that can turn into purgatories or become personal hells. In picturing these conditions, in describing the characters and the way they engage, Dickens uses those sometimes "violent means" necessary—to use O'Connor's words again—"to get his vision across to this hostile audience," an audience which is used to seeing the deformities of the fallen world as

“natural.” The distance, in whatever form or meaning, is brought close up.

## 3

An example of one way Dickens uses the distortion of Biblical analogues to populate his mythic landscape and give it meaning is signalled in the name John Baptist Cavalletto—and in the nature of the character, Blandois, for whom he is a forerunner. Given the symbolic importance of these two figures, it is meaningful that they are the first two beings the reader meets. It is meaningful, too, that the reader sees them in prison, partly because the image of the prison so dominates the novel, but more importantly because an echo is set off that we hear clearly only after considering Blandois’s activities later in the story. The man reminds us of the figure in the Book of Job who has been “going to and fro in the earth, and ... walking up and down in it.” But he reminds us of more than that. When the reader is first introduced to the two men, he finds Cavalletto labelled by name John the Baptist—and also by his calling Blandois “master”; by the prophetic sound of his statement, “I always know what the hour is, and where I am” (5); by his “easy contentment with hard bread and hard stones” (14). The parodic reference is heightened when the master shows his superiority by calling the Baptist “pig” (5). The Baptist is, according to Blandois, “a poor little contraband trader, whose papers are wrong” (10), a criminal whose deeds measured alongside his superior’s render him, in Biblical terms, scarcely worthy “to stoop down and unloose” the latchet of his shoes (Mark 1:8). As John Baptist’s master, Blandois is the figure bearing, though not preaching, the gospel of the new world. The man wishes to be identified as “a gentleman” (10), though later in the novel, Cavalletto—the forerunner—identifies him to Clennam as “A prisoner, and—Altro! I believe yes!—an ... Assassin!” (657). The identification seems secure. If the reader feels that the significance of such an ironic inversion—Cavalletto as Baptist, Blandois as saviour—is dissipated in the narrative, one can only say, “Fair enough.” The effects are upstaged by the drawing of Blandois himself.

Many readers, indeed, have difficulty with the drawing of Blandois as a villain. His menace is melodramatic. However vividly presented, his posturings are stogy. His links to the central narratives appear less essential than they might. He is not the embodiment of evil that Cavalletto’s response appears to suggest or that the aversion Pet, Little Dorrit, and other “innocents” in the novel feel towards him implies.

Yet if Cavalletto is the Baptist, then Blandois presumably carries the new gospel, one in this case reinforcing the ethic of the world spread beneath the staring sun or shown in the ice and snow of the mountain pass. He reveals part of his message to Clennam during the latter's incarceration in the Marshalsea:

I sell anything that commands a price. How do your lawyers live, your politicians, your intriguers, your men of the Exchange? How do you live? How do you come here? Have you sold no friend? Lady of mine! I rather think, yes! (730).

The second sentence is almost a direct repeat of the words Blandois uses to identify himself to the Baptist in the Marseilles prison (10), a part of his gospel. And a few lines further: "Society sells itself and sells me: and I sell Society" (730). But *why* does he sell? His attempt to blackmail Mrs. Clennam is but a minor deed in the trajectory of his career. When Cavalletto whispers, "Assassin!" he points to a range of activity much wider. Because its nature is more often suggested than delineated, the man's evil becomes representative and potential, something within him by birth or instinct. The darkness that lies in his heart is the darkness that lies at the centre of the world. But it is more extreme. Mr. Casby is a hypocrite, and greedy, but these qualities extend only so far as Mr. Pancks will carry out his orders. The Barnacles in the Circumlocution Office obstruct and cause harm, but they do not kill. Blandois can take a life. As one so active, he becomes leader—or master. As he goes to and fro upon the earth, he has figurative or potential followers. Set Henry Gowan alongside the wicked leader and the innate cruel nature of the young man, his lack of earnestness and his playful cynicism, his lack of "belief in himself" (535) all become credibly dangerous. Without conscience, without scruple, Blandois's is the morality that other figures in the novel draw from. His is the morality that charges the fallen world, that unites so many of its figures.

In contrast, few practice an ethics of self-discipline, self-denial, and sacrifice. For those who do—Little Dorrit, John Chivery, Arthur Clennam, and others like them—there is no kingdom of promise to verify the value of such behavior. Characters must transform what they have into their own reward, their own Eden or paradise. If the world they encounter is one of Society, of Finance and Commerce, of Bureaucracy, then their way of survival is that of Compassion and Benevolence, of Work and Industry, of Getting Things Done. They must deal with what is "natural" in that world by setting up, as best

they can, their own garden walls against it. In this regard, I would like to consider two illustrations of the effort to maintain the rightness of things in a world so *unright*, both of them illustrative in different ways of the kind of distortion I have been considering. One is that of Flora Finching, whose circumstance is not bounded by tangible walls, the other that of Arthur Clennam, whose walls are for a period of time the concrete walls of the Marshalsea. In both cases, a reader might respond to the attempt to practice goodness with a species of shock.

## 4

A figure of humor and, even more, of pathos, a figure much more ludicrous than terrible, Flora finds her age of happiness in the past, her experience with Adam mythologized by the loneliness and romantic lenses through which she views it. Having lost her Adam, she is now, at times, a pathetic wooer of him. Alone with Arthur, she pretends to the physical delicacy of a Fanny Price. She hints at old intimacies. A parody of the sentimental heroine, she is given to self-dramatization, to playing the games of illicit romance, to continuing to be one of those separated lovers who “when rent asunder ... turned to stone” (277). But at heart, her benevolence is not spoiled. She may hire Little Dorrit to sew for her in order to maintain confidences “about our mutual friend” (276). But she can exclaim as well, “Why, what a good little thing you are, my dear!” (274)—and do so in apparent sincerity. A reader need not doubt her statement relayed by Mr. Plornish: “She was a old and a dear friend, she said particular, of Mr. Clennam, and hoped for to prove herself a useful friend to *his* friend” (273). The narrator is more direct: she “had a decided tendency to be always honest when she gave herself time to think about it” (278); she displays, too, “a natural tenderness that quite understood [Little Dorrit’s account of her background]” (279).

This lonely Eve is full of prattle, much of it brimming with romantic cliché, but now and then something comes through that is reflective of more than a simple giddy nature. Once, for example, in the middle of much else, she tells Little Dorrit, “[Y]et we do not break but bend” (276). In such a manner, she goes her earthly way, filling the universe with her chatter, a benevolent chatter that can be “heard” in the actions of others who are decent and good in their way, people like Daniel Doyce, the Plornishes, the Meagles, John Baptist Cavalletto, people marked by their own kind of deformity. The chatter takes in all subjects, the good and the bad, the happy and the unhappy, weaving



them into a heady recounting of the present and the past, her way—like her giddiness and tipping—of being stoic, of bending. Hers is a goodness blooming in the hard soil of the fallen world, a goodness with its own limited effectiveness. Without complaint, she looks after her “family,” dealing as best she can with her “legacy,” Mr. F’s Aunt.<sup>8</sup> After Mrs. Clennam’s relapse, Mr. Casby expresses his displeasure that Flora calls so often on the woman to see how she is: after all, he says, Mrs. Clennam “is not just now in circumstances that are by any means calculated to—to be satisfactory to all parties” (775). That is, Mrs. Clennam is no longer involved in Finance and Commerce. Mr. Casby complains, too, of Flora’s inquiring about Arthur while he lies in the Marshalsea. When Pancks suggests, “Perhaps it’s kind,” Mr. Casby replies, “Pooh, pooh, Mr. Pancks. She has nothing to do with that, nothing to do with that. I can’t allow it” (776). But Flora does, in her dithering way, have much to do with kindness—and with other qualities of Benevolence and Compassion.

In drawing Flora Finching, Dickens draws on the sentimental tradition. If Little Dorrit is the child of the Marshalsea, goodness coming from the heart of that unhappy institution, that representative of society’s injustice, of humankind’s weakness, perhaps criminality, then Flora is a child of disappointments, of lost love. Hers is a goodness with distortions, bendings, weaknesses, with limited effectiveness. Without Adam, without acknowledgment from a kind deity, her earthly father’s concern a sham benevolence, Flora builds her walls, shielding herself with her chatter, her tipping, her “family,” her actions. She creates what is for her a substitute Eden into which she can withdraw. Such, Dickens might be saying, is the power of goodness and the way in which it preserves itself. A limited power.

Arthur Clennam’s is a situation differently disfigured and closely connected with the Marshalsea, an enclosure mocking the walled garden of paradise. The association of such a building with crime and guilt provides an external shape for Clennam’s own nebulous feelings of wrong-doing. The prison’s durability along with the difficulty of obtaining release from it might be seen to match the man’s solemnity, his condition of emotional stasis, the problems he has of delivering himself from his own despair. The exposure of that despair to the reader presents a different kind of disfigurement of character. It shows less in appearance than in the muted temperament of the man, a mutedness as telling as Flora’s extravagance of behavior.

Like Flora, Arthur Clennam acquires a posture. He is an “exile,” a wanderer, an “outsider.” Early in the novel, he is presented as “a grave

dark man of forty" (16), someone with a "sunburnt face" (77). Even later, his physical appearance is little amplified. When he speaks, he presents himself more comprehensibly than Flora, but his words are not infrequently given in indirect speech, as though to emphasize a kind of greyness to his presence. If Flora is the woman who has lost her early love, living in a romantic dream, Clennam is the man who has lost his way, though he is more direct in describing his condition than Flora is hers. "I counted up my years," he tells Little Dorrit, "and considered what I am, and looked back, and looked forward, and found that I should soon be grey. I found that I had climbed the hill, and passed the level ground upon the top, and was descending quickly" (374). Such statements sound like soliloquies. Indeed, when Clennam later muses about himself in the third person, the tone and diction are not much changed from the way he describes himself to other people. Consider two passages, the first spoken to Mr. Meagles in Marseilles, the second to himself in his London room as he questions his worthiness of Pet Meagles:

I am the son ... of a hard father and mother. I am the only child of parents who weighed, measured, and priced everything: for whom what could not be weighed, measured[,] and priced, had no existence. Strict people as the phrase is, professors of a stern religion, their very religion was a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as a part of a bargain for the security of their possessions. Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next—nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere—this was my childhood, if I may so misuse the word as to apply it to such a beginning of life. (20)

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[A] man ... who had been of age some twenty years or so; who was a diffident man, from the circumstances of his youth; who was rather a grave man, from the tenor of his life; who knew himself to be deficient in many little engaging qualities which he admired in others, from having been long in a distant region, with nothing softening near him; who had no kind sisters to present to her; who had no congenial home to make her known in; who was a stranger in the land; who had not a fortune to compensate, in any measure, for these defects; who had nothing in his favor but his honest love and his general wish to do right. (194)

The passages are not inaccurate in what they describe. But Clennam would appear to have weathered the time following his expulsion from his Eden of romance not much better than Flora. She has turned silly, he melancholy ("diffident," "grave," "deficient"). She has turned to alcohol, he—perforce—to wandering. She has her "legacy," he no

family ("sisters"), home, companions, fortune. The world in which he wanders is, in its way, the world of selling that Blandois describes, the world in which bargains are struck. The first of the two passages above provides the terms upon which the world operates—the austerity, "discipline," "penance" that accompany spiritual bargaining; the weights, measures, and prices that go along with the material. Clennam, though, is unable to "bend" as Flora is. Instead, he is almost broken. Indeed, he himself tells Mr. Meagles he is "broken, not bent" (20).<sup>9</sup>

His is a more direct confrontation with the chicanery of the world, with Society, Finance and Commerce, Bureaucracy. He does not construct epitaphs for himself as John Chivery does. But he is, as he tells Little Dorrit, "descending swiftly." Still, he has learned in his life to "[look] well to his feet on Earth" and guide his "steep steps upward" according to certain principles—"[d]uty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth" (311). His is a resignation to the here-and-now, to the natural world of which he is a part. He may carry with him "a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without" (158), but he has given up the hope that they might ever be his. Like Flora, he has broken off dialogue with the world, something suggested in the quality of soliloquy his speech sometimes conveys. In his study of the Bible, Gabriel Josipovici makes a statement near the beginning of a chapter called "Dialogue and Distance" that is enlightening here:

It is one of the characteristics of dialogue that it both maintains distance between the two persons engaged in it and bridges that distance. Walter Benjamin, commenting on a poem of Brecht's, and writing not about dialogue but about friendship, puts it beautifully. "It does not abolish the distance between human beings," he says, "but brings that distance to life." Yet dialogue will only do this if both partners abide by its rules. It is always possible for one of them to refuse to take part, or to try and flout the rules.<sup>10</sup>

Flora functions according to her own idiosyncratic rules. Distance does not exist. In his claim that he is "broken," Clennam would appear to some degree to have cut off dialogue with others. But even more he has cut it off with some remnant of himself, with whatever vital part might waken him to an invigorated view of the world and his place in it. He, too, functions according to solipsistic rules. What Clennam lacks, a deficiency that is registered in his grey and sometimes nameless personality, and what he does not recognize even after he finds it, is faith. He is unable to make the leap towards an ultimate goodness because his faith does not soon find root. As he thinks of Pet Meagles,

he summarizes the quality and circumstance of his existence to that point:

From the unhappy suppression of my youngest days, through the rigid and unloving home that followed them, through my departure, my long exile, my return, my mother's welcome, my intercourse with her since, down to the afternoon of this day with poor Flora, ... what have I found? (158)

The answer comes with a knock on the door, "Little Dorrit." But he does not appreciate until much later what she brings, the extent to which she is the "vanishing point" of "his own poor story" (714). And so he continues at an emotional distance, without linking dialogue, as Josipovici defines it, and in despair.

If, as Clennam says, in a passage excised from the final draft of the novel, "[m]ine is a barren story ... and is all told in the first page" (204), then part of the novel shows how he is released from that first page so that the story and dialogue of his life may begin again—or at least be renewed. He finds renewal in the Marshalsea, himself a resident of that repository of guilt, the very bottom of despair, a place that is both Eden and Hell. It is Hell because there he is brought to an awareness of self, an understanding of his own being that was not his earlier. Though his misery is strongly characterized, we get fuller dramatization of his own awakening through the appearances of his mother with her disclosures about his past and of Blandois with his performance as a kind of alter-ego.<sup>11</sup> His change is enacted in part in his response to the prison. For him, the Marshalsea becomes a kind of Eden because there, in "another state of existence," coming to an awareness of Eve, he is able to link up the distance between himself and Little Dorrit, two partners who will abide by similar rules of dialogue.

Taking into account where he was, the interest that had first brought him there when he had been free to keep away, and *the gentle presence that was equally inseparable from the walls and bars about him* and from the impalpable remembrances of his later life which no walls nor bars could imprison, it was not remarkable that everything his memory turned upon should bring him round again to Little Dorrit. (699-700) [My emphasis.]

Although Little Dorrit herself takes on strange and ambiguous qualities when measured against the bleak world in which she moves, those qualities bring up close the nature of Christian goodness. Earlier in the novel, in an uncharacteristic outburst, Frederick Dorrit scolds the family for its treatment of Little Dorrit. In doing so, he gives to the

Dorrit family members the terms that describe who Little Dorrit is—"your affectionate, invaluable friend ... your devoted guardian ... your more than mother" (470). The terms apply no less to the role she plays in Arthur's life. In his eyes, she is "a child apart from the rest of the rough world" (166). She is also "the Child of the Marshalsea." She proclaims to Mrs. Clennam the most directly Christian message in the work: "Be guided, only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him" (770).

Though it is not paradoxical that Little Dorrit's message should come from "one of the least of these" (Matt 25: 40, 45), it is paradoxical that there is more goodness in the prison than out. It is paradoxical that the walls that cage are the walls that protect, that the walls that restrict are those, in the doctor's words, that free. It is paradoxical, too, that in the world's terms Eden is the habitat of the debtor and criminal, that the region of liberty and independence is the place of the morally afflicted and fallen world itself. That it is so is suggested in the closing lines of the novel as the newly married couple, fresh from the Marshalsea, go "down" into the world and the life of service and love they are going to live in it. Much like Adam and Eve at the close of *Paradise Lost*, "[t]hey went quietly down into the roaring streets, inseparable and blessed; and as they passed along in sunshine and in shade, the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted, and chafed, and made their usual uproar" (802).

## 5

"[A] modest life of usefulness and happiness," the care of "Fanny's neglected children," the nursing of Tip (801)—these are to be the deeds of the new Adam and Eve, their way of spiritual survival.<sup>12</sup> Describing the configurations of behavior and tracing the strange varieties of response this behavior will require, given the world in which those deeds will be performed, lie beyond the novel's borders. But a reader can wonder.

In the light of his own "ultimate concern," to use Flannery O'Connor's phrase, Dickens has observed and presented manners of his time. In his presentation, he has emphasized peculiarities of nature and behavior in such a way that a reader might be jarred into a kind of awareness that might not otherwise occur. In *Little Dorrit*, the reader

finds a fallen world whose populace lives too strongly according to a mercenary and egoistic gospel. When the reader observes figures like Mr. Casby or Mr. Merdle, whose lives are directed by features of that new gospel, or figures like Flora Finching or Arthur Clennam, whose lives are not, the reader finds characters whose faculties or appearances or morals are somehow misshapen, turned unnatural. The temper of that world and the way in which different characters are affected by it and respond to it, the distortions a reader finds, are matters I have tried to deal with in this essay. Likewise, I have tried to show the way in which Dickens presents that world, the way in which he uses different kinds of deformity, in some manner both ludicrous and terrible, to do so. That kind of deformity we sometimes call the grotesque. In making use of the grotesque, Dickens is bringing far things close up, making the familiar *unfamiliar*, imparting to us his jarring vision of an unholy world.

"In the greatest fiction," writes O'Connor, "the writer's moral sense coincides with his dramatic sense, and I see no way for it to do this unless his moral judgment is part of the very act of seeing, and he is free to use it" (31). This is the freedom Dickens uses, and from it comes the power of his novel.

#### NOTES

1. O'Connor's material comes from *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, 1969) 33-34, 37, 44, 48, 45.
2. James Kincaid, for example, finds *Little Dorrit* "rooted ... deeply in Christian pessimism," in *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971) 193, and like other critics finds the work, among Dickens's writings, "more darkly moral than any novel before it" (198). Janet L. Larson believes the novel to be the "most overtly Christian of [Dickens's] mature works," finding the Book of Ecclesiastes an important subtext for the novel with the Book of Revelation "the chief rival subtext"; see: *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1985) 184, 182.
3. Dickens is no exception. Though the subject of realism is an immensely complicated one, a reader might consider Dickens's "Preface to the Charles Dickens Edition (1867)" for *Martin Chuzzlewit*: "What is exaggeration to one class of minds and perceptions, is plain truth to another. That which is commonly called a long-sight, perceives in a prospect innumerable features and bearings non-existent to a short-sighted person. I sometimes ask myself ... whether it is *always* the writer who colors highly, or whether it is now and then the reader whose eye for color is a little dull?" Or note Dickens's defense in his "Preface to the First Edition" of *Bleak House* in which he defends "[t]he possibility of what is called Spontaneous Combustion ... [in] the death of Mr. Krook." Moreover, Dickens's term "a long-sight" appears closely akin to what O'Connor calls "prophetic vision."
4. *The Stones of Venice*, III, vol. 11 of *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1904) 166. The grotesque is a complex topic, the literature on it extensive. I find Ruskin's notions of "the ludicrous" and "the terrible," features to be found in the mind of the artist as he responds to the world, most

useful here. Some of the critics who treat the subject say more about the nature of the grotesque object itself. In "Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning; or, Pure, Ornate, and Grotesque Art in English Poetry," originally published in 1864, Walter Bagehot looks more towards its subject. Grotesque art, he writes, deals "not with what nature is striving to be, but with what by some lapse she has happened to become"; see: *Collected Works*, ed. Norman St. John-Stevan, vol. 2 (London: The Economist, 1965) 353. In "An Attempt to Define the Nature of the Grotesque," the concluding section of *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*, tr. Ulrich Weisstein (1957; Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963), Wolfgang Kayser states that "THE GROTESQUE IS THE ESTRANGED WORLD" (179-189) and attempts to list certain characteristics of it. Arthur Clayborough finds that Dickens produces that "estranged world" through "two kinds of modification, the sentimental and the satirical"; see: *The Grotesque in English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965) 251, leaving room for what he calls "Celestial Caricatures," a term perhaps applicable to someone like Little Dorrit herself.

5. Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979) 580. All further references to the novel are from this edition and appear in the text.
6. For a detailed discussion of the way Dickens uses "biblically grounded satire" in his presentation of Merdle the man's fall, see Larson (188-190).
7. Elaine Showalter, "Guilt, Authority, and the Shadows of *Little Dorrit*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34 (1979): 26-27. Showalter is concerned more largely with the ambivalent impact of the shadow world and its "psychic turbulence" (20), its danger, its vitality, upon the surface of institutions, people, narration, etc., as demonstrated through a number of features in the novel. George Levine, "Little Dorrit and Three Kinds of Science," *Dickens and Other Victorians: Essays in Honor of Philip Collins*, ed. Joanne Shattock (London: Macmillan, 1988) 11. Levine's is part of a larger discussion in which he analyzes the interweaving in the novel of natural theology, thermodynamics, and evolutionary biology. In Levine's words, "*Little Dorrit* enacts an almost irreconcilable conflict between two mythic structures, which I will identify with thermodynamics and Darwinian theory, for control of a world Dickens was trying to save for order, stability[,] and God" (4).
8. Mr. F's Aunt has received a fair amount of critical attention. For a good summary of attitudes towards her, see Showalter, 36-37. Showalter herself believes "Mr. F's Aunt is best understood as the embodiment of Flora's repressed anger at Arthur's rejection" (37). The idea is apt, pointing to a kind of parallel in the way Mrs. Merdle's parrot embodies the savagery lying behind Society's polish. It seems especially telling near the end of the novel where Flora bids farewell to Little Dorrit in the pie-shop, giving up all her fanciful claims to Arthur—and finding unusual difficulty getting the old woman, and perhaps her own thoughts, on the road home. Still, at the "surface" level of plot and character, Mr. F's Aunt clearly provides an instance of Flora's sense of responsibility and kindness towards others. In this way, Flora and her treatment of Mr. F's Aunt become a comic counterpart to Little Dorrit and her actions of Christian goodness, a comic counterpoint to Little Dorrit and her kindness to Maggie, for example, who is in some ways Little Dorrit's version of Mr. F's Aunt.

For other brief comments on Mr. F's Aunt, see Susan R. Horton, *The Reader in the Dickens World: Style and Response* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1985) 68; Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975) 170; and J. M. Scott, *Reality and Comic Confidence in Charles Dickens* (New York: Barnes, 1979) 153-154, 173, 198-200. In addition, Mr. F's Aunt is treated by Nancy Aycock Metz, in her discussion of Flora Finching, in "The Blighted Tree and the Book of Fate: Female Models of Storytelling in *Little Dorrit*," *Dickens Studies Annual* 18 (1989): 229-233, and by Michael Squires, in his discussion of structural features of the novel, in "The Structure of Dickens's Imagination in *Little Dorrit*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (1988): 49-64.

9. In her chapter titled "The Seer, the Preacher, and the Living Gospel: Vision and Revision in *Little Dorrit*," Janet L. Larson devotes most of the middle section, "Confession and Dialogue," to a complex discussion of Ecclesiastes's scepticism about the efficacy of experience in the light of ideal teachings concerning it. Larson's central example of vain travail is Arthur Clennam, a person like the one in Ecclesiastes 4:8, who "hath neither child nor brother; [and] yet is there no end of all his labor, neither is his eye satisfied with riches; neither saith he, For whom do I labor, and bereave my soul of good?" (216). Arthur illustrates Ecclesiastes's uncertainty that human effort and experience will afford wisdom

- (227-230). He provides a portrait that "casts a bleak light" on the value of sorrow and renunciation (232) and is one "who renounces nearly everything but for nothing and with no divine aid" (233).
10. Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God: A Response to the Bible* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1988) 168.
  11. For a consideration of Blandois's link with Clennam and a review of some critics' attitudes towards it, and of Clennam's association with his mother, see Showalter, 31-35. See also Dianne F. Sadoff's discussion of Rigaud as "Clennam's dark double" in "Storytelling and the Figure of the Father in *Little Dorrit*," *PMLA* 95 (1980): 137-138. For a view of Clennam as an artistic failure in the novel, see Robert A. Stein, "Arthur Clennam and the Trouble with *Little Dorrit*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 17 (1981): 191, who feels that "the explanation for [Clennam's] triumph over despair has unintended or unassimilated implications" that expose a "fundamental indecision" on Dickens's part in defining Arthur's character. I sympathize with those critics who find a more believable complexity in his character and more artistry in the drawing of it. See, for example, T. N. Grove, "The Psychological Prison of Arthur Clennam in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*," *Modern Language Review* 68 (1973): 750-755; Avrom Fleishman, "Master and Servant in *Little Dorrit*," *Studies in English Literature* 14 (1974): 575-586; Jerome Beatty, "The 'Soothing Songs' of *Little Dorrit*," *Nineteenth-Century Literary Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson*, ed. Clyde deL. Ryals (Durham: Duke UP, 1974) 219-236; and R. Barickman, "The Spiritual Journey of Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam," *Dickens Studies Annual* 7 (1978): 168-189.
  12. Edwin B. Barrett refers to the Book of Common Prayer—"Service which is perfect freedom"—to describe the emancipating quality Little Dorrit embodies: "The prison is no prison to her; it is her home and her freedom." Except when riches force her to be idle, this quality is what allows her to function outside the Marshalsea, a world that "mirrors some of the worst features of prison life"; see: "*Little Dorrit* and the Disease of Modern Life," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 25 (1970): 214. J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958), believes Little Dorrit's "voluntary refusal to will" makes her a "human incarnation of divine goodness" (246). In his discussion of *Little Dorrit*, Avrom Fleishman points out that "Little Dorrit is not of the children of this world; she is the Child of the Marshalsea, the lowest of the low, and therefore of the blessed poor, of whom is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Fleishman, 580). Joseph Gold, in *Charles Dickens: Radical Moralists* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1972), suggests that Little Dorrit is "Dickens's ultimate statement on Christianity in the humanist form" (226, 220), standing against the Old Testament wrath of Mrs. Clennam, the older woman's god formed "like the one made by those at Babel." Dennis Walder writes of "the contrasting views of Mrs. Clennam's imprisoning Old Testament ethos and Little Dorrit's liberating New Testament spirit" in *Dickens and Religion* (London: Allen, 1981) 171.