The Novel as Vanishing Point: Fiction as Epistemology in "Little Dorrit"

Jayne Elizabeth Lewis

College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-adpp-f376

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
THE NOVEL AS VANISHING POINT:
FICTION AS EPISTEMOLOGY IN LITTLE DORRIT

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Jayne E. Lewis
1984
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Jayne E. Lewis
Author

Approved, May 1984

Donald Ball
Barbara DeMille
James Savage
"But men may construe things after their fashion, 
Clean from the purpose of the things themselves."

--Julius Caesar, I iii, 34-35.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THESIS</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENDNOTES</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

Although at least as much has been written about the aesthetic features of Dickens's novels as about the moral vision they embrace, the relation between art and ethos in the Dickensian imagination has received comparatively little critical attention. Yet the work at the very heart of the Dickens canon, *Little Dorrit*, demands to be read in terms of its broad structural and thematic concern not only with the idea of fiction as an equally moral and aesthetic system but, more precisely, with the idea of fiction as a form of mediation between a public, literal world and a private and imaginative one.

Such an idea governs the novel on at least two levels, each worthy of the comprehensive examination the present thesis attempts to afford. In the first place, characters in *Little Dorrit* so consistently orient themselves to social, psychological, and even spiritual realities by translating them into equivalent fictions that virtually everyone in the novel emerges as a kind of amateur novelist. By testing what amounts to an epistemology of imagination -- in which what is known is known largely through acts of fancy -- Dickens reflects the nineteenth-century impulse to respond to life in the fictional mode, an impulse that can be seen as clearly in the novelistic prose of Carlyle, Ruskin, and Newman as in the Victorian novel itself.

In the second place, if, as Ian Watt suggests, the novel in general may be roughly defined as a uniquely and essentially realistic literary genre, the question of how any prose narrative orients itself to reality by converting a social universe into a fictional one deserves consideration. Its concern with the efficacy of fictionalization as a technique of adaptation to experience makes *Little Dorrit* an ideal object of inquiry. A study of what might be called the will to fictionalization in the novel, the thesis addresses the larger question of how any novel responds to the world outside itself, and explores another subject central to *Little Dorrit* -- the role and responsibility of the artist.

In *Little Dorrit* Dickens regards art (and especially rhetorical art) as a potential bridge between various spheres of human activity and experience and so ultimately as a category of moral expression. The novel reflects a fascination with the nature of fiction at once peculiar to Dickens, and, in a broader sense, common to both the age and genre in which he wrote. But it also shows Dickens developing a more concrete and complex definition of fiction that critics of the novel have in the past been willing to admit. Thus while the present thesis focuses on the dynamics of the central themes of fiction and imaginative translation, its wider emphasis is upon the Dickensian conception of the nature and purpose of art.

iv
To advance the claim that *Little Dorrit* is a novel about novels, or simply that it is a novel about itself, would be to perform at best an exercise in critical extremism and at worst an act of academic vanity. But post-modernism aside, one of the central observations to be made about the work at the heart of the Dickens canon is that in *Little Dorrit* imagination mediates all experience and fictionalization emerges as an essential mode of orientation to reality. "Narrative," writes Barbara Hardy, "cannot be regarded simply as an aesthetic invention used by the artist in order to control, manipulate, order, and investigate the experiences of that life we tend to separate from art, but must be seen as a primary act of mind transferred to art from life."\(^1\) Just so, Dickens's conception not merely of narrative but of fiction in general may be understood at all only when it is understood as a "primary act of mind" so bound up with perception as to be inseparable from it.

"To begin my life at the beginning of my life, I record that I was born," announces David Copperfield, anticipating the fusion of imaginative and existential activity increasingly conspicuous in Dickens. Quite as, for David, being born and writing about being born conflate, the living of life and its rewriting in imagination become in
Little Dorrit indistinguishable. In the later novel, however, Dickens allows an omniscient narrative eye to examine the dynamics and implications of such rewritings: individually and collectively characters invariably attempt to convert experience into some version of itself that will be tolerable psychologically and acceptable socially.

In the first-person narratives preceding Little Dorrit -- as in any first-person narrative -- life and fiction must be coterminous; memory is simultaneously factitious and inventive; history is story. Thus without calling into question either her veracity as the author of her experience or her right to be so, Esther Summers can write near the end of Bleak House: "I have suppressed none of my many weaknesses on that subject [the subject of Allen Woodcourt], but have written them as faithfully as my memory has recorded them." Little Dorrit, on the other hand, concentrates on the techniques whereby its villains and its heroes alike internalize reality only by translating it into fiction. Hence when near the end of the novel Dickens introduces the "History of a Self-Tormentor" he also introduces a question quite literally of authority. Miss Wade's masterpiece of translation dramatizes the imaginative machinations which have constituted most psychic activity in the novel, and calls attention to their subjectivity. Moreover, it is precisely because in the course of the preceding 700 pages Dickens has examined those machinations objectively that the mental acts whereby Miss Wade does not, as she claims, "habitually discer[n] the truth" but rather fabricates a psychologically fatal fiction reveal themselves for what they are: methods whereby the ego invades, conquers, recreates, and potentially
either clarifies or destroys the real.

I

"'Why, will you pretend for to say,' returned the Captain, 'that they don't distinguish the old from the young there as well as here?' 'They don't make no distinguishments at all,' said she. 'They're vastly too polite.'"

--Fanny Burney, Evelina

Although an underlying conception of fiction as epistemology discloses itself to even a casual survey of the text, few studies of Little Dorrit have acknowledged the sheer ubiquitousness of the fictions it encompasses, let alone their efficacy to the consciousnesses which generate them. Nor has any study taken the prevalence of fiction as a point of origin for a comprehensive consideration of the novel as a work of and "about the moral imagination." Janice M. Carlisle concludes that Little Dorrit concerns "the moral limits of the imagination," but alludes only to the limitations that ultimately incomprehensible life imposes upon the novelist who attempts to record it accurately. In short, a puzzling critical myopia has precluded thorough analysis not just of the nature and function of fiction in the novel but, further, of the extent to which Dickens's conception of fictive imagination qualifies Little Dorrit's moral, social, and psychological design.

Certainly the novel's preoccupation with "genteel fictions" has always intrigued scholars. Yet of recent critics only Carlisle has confronted the active role "good" characters play in upholding the illusions of gentility generally associated with odious Society.
Other examinations of the imaginative lives of characters in the novel usually assume, with Peter Christmas, a false polarity in which reality equals absence of fiction equals truth equals goodness, and appearance equals fiction equals fictive gentility equals evil. John Holloway, for example, declares emphatically that in *Little Dorrit* "seeming imprisons reality," and Roger Lund decides that the novel's concern with fiction extends only to "a fictional examination of an entire society built upon sands of hypocrisy, sham, and affectation." By the same token, interpretations like Carlisle's make too few distinctions among the kinds of fictionalization *Little Dorrit* illustrates. Carlisle absolves Amy Dorrit of her prevarications on the marshy grounds that, given verisimilitude and mimesis as artistic ideals, the ambiguous and fundamentally amoral nature of reality necessitates the abandonment of "a straightforward and conventionally 'moral' posture" in favor of a more ambivalent one.

Elaine Showalter and Janet Larson assume that since Dickens was a fictionist his attitude toward anything created by the imagination could not have been other than inconclusive; like Carlisle, both critics do perceive the possibility that fictions can be useful as well as detrimental to the psyche, or to the society, that generates them. But also like Carlisle, neither Showalter nor Larson recognizes the extent to which Dickens vindicates fictionalization not only as a primary but also as a primarily moral act of mind. Showalter, for example, concedes that "in order to preserve minimal self-esteem, [Marshalsea] inmates construct protective fictions, 'sad tales,' and false histories which allow self-pity to dominate their relationships with others," and even sees Dickens himself to employ certain tactful
and circumlocutory narrative devices (e.g., the use of doubles) in order to protect the novelist's own identity as a "benevolent figure." Showalter, however, concerns herself only with forms of lying that preserve secrets and defend neurotic selves terrified of exposure: fiction in bono emerges as little more than a thinly disguised version of fiction in malo. Likewise, Randolph Splitter's (psycho)analysis of the imaginative constructions characters erect in the course of the novel finds those constructions mere strategies designed to expiate guilt symbolically; in addition, the "artifice" of the novel itself derives from the "artificer's" neurasthenic desire to convince himself "that the nightmare of modern society is only a nightmare, a dream, a fiction, after all." Conversely, but no less narrowly, Garrett Stewart supposes the imaginative impulse in Little Dorrit an essentially good one which allows its "heroes" (especially Arthur Clennam, with Little Dorrit's assistance) to escape from the oppressive confines of reality into an "idyll in imagination." His hearty approbation of the imaginative faculty prevents Stewart from considering the equally imaginative but finally imprisoning "genteel fictions" so beloved of earlier critics, and he quite overlooks the extent to which Clennam's fancies serve less to liberate than to isolate him. At most, Stewart can only remark that fancies like those of Flora Finching appear to be somewhat "inefficacious" -- for the most part, he too neglects to identify the crucial differences among the imaginative acts Dickens dramatizes in Little Dorrit.

This critical tendency to "make no distinctions at all" has sanctioned a proliferation of partial illuminations of the novel
which fail both to make comprehensive sense of its explicitly narrative texture and to appreciate a source of unity fully as rich in implication as the famous prison symbol. It has further prevented scholars from relating Dickens's aesthetic interest to the social and moral determinations he makes. For Ian Watt, however, it is social "realism" that distinguishes the novel from other genres; the novel is special because it refers to a "reality which it imitates." Furthermore, of all novels the Victorian would seem most intimately and directly concerned with an actuality primarily social. In a study of Carlyle, Macaulay, and Newman as imaginative writers, George Levine points out that in the Victorian conception "the crucial obligation of art is to be faithful to the real because it is in the real that people must live. And art's function is to extend man's capacity to sympathize with the creatures of the ordinary world among whom he must live." Such a directive unquestionably underlies Little Dorrit. Nothing of course absolutely requires that Dickens unite his analysis of the art and act of fiction with the social responsibility incumbent upon the nineteenth-century novelist. Nevertheless, Lionel Trilling's pronouncement that "Little Dorrit is about society. . . . It is more about society than any other of the novels. . . . It is about society in its very essence" conforms even to the most general impression one forms of a novel originally intended as social satire. And indeed it is scarcely as if critics have not attempted to show the relation between the fictions evolved and perpetuated in Little Dorrit and the social vision the novel achieves. On the contrary, they have clung with a tenacity worthy of the Barnacles themselves to the image of Society as a tawdry illusion, which like the Marshalsea and Bleeding
Heart Yard engages in "daily travesties of community"[^17] and whose cultivated "surfaces" must be "broken through by the emancipating reality underneath."[^18]

Yet because limited to narrow perspectives on the techniques of fictionalization Dickens explores in the course of *Little Dorrit*, critical examinations of the connection between fiction and society inevitably shortchange themselves. Even Nancy Hill's study of the picturesque in the novel -- although it finds satire of an aesthetic standard to double as social satire -- concludes only that Dickens "condemns" a "point of view substantially formed by the picturesque, the view that valued appearance more than substance, that believed surface could conceal sham."[^19] The relation between art and society in *Little Dorrit* remains infinitely more complex than will be apparent as long as fictions (ergo the society they unite) are invariably "bad" and continue to be regarded as something less than mental constructs that are ultimately as necessary and inevitable as Kantian categories of space and time to the apprehension of reality.

The real issue in *Little Dorrit* declares itself to be less the moral imagination, or the moral limits of the imagination, than the moral use of a perceptual donnée which turns out to be the imagination. If one begins with the premise Dickens articulates in the course of the novel -- fictions are necessary not, as Carlisle claims, because life itself has become so labyrinthine and indeterminate that it can only be confronted with lies, but rather because they permit the individual to orient himself to perplexing experience -- numerous possibilities for interpretation surface, especially with respect
to the novel's social dimensions. Trilling quite correctly noted that one of Dickens's main concerns lies with "society in its very essence," and subsequent critics have correctly if implicitly identified that essence as fiction. Not simply "genteel," however, "fiction" in the novel demands to be construed as a primary and valuable source of social cohesion, and as a mode of communication and mutual comprehension as indispensable to social intercourse as to private psychic activity. Indeed, its social indispensability derives from its psychological inevitability. \textit{Little Dorrit} encounters society in the abstract as well as Society in the concrete; the conclusions it reaches likewise transcend the notion of Society as sham. Even more important, the relation between aesthetic and morality -- between fiction and moral responsibility -- in the Dickensian imagination becomes apparent once one begins to examine the mechanics and the dynamics of the imaginative exchanges whereby something becomes nothing, poverty aristocracy, and imprisonment liberation.

II

"The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary Imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will. . . . It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate. . . . It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space.

--Coleridge, \textit{Biographia Literaria}, xiii

Structurally and thematically \textit{Little Dorrit} appears to arrange
itself into constellations of opposites. The "simple and radical con-
trasts" adumbrated in the "sun and shadow" of the opening chapter 
would seem to inform the novel at every level of its organization. 
Thus Book One ("Poverty") counterpoints Book Two ("Riches"); mammoth 
and stationary, the prison symbol finds its antithesis in the motif of 
"restless travellers" perpetually "climbing the dusty hills and toiling 
along the weary plains, journeying by land and journeying by sea, 
coming and going so strangely" (p. 67). Throughout the narrative 
something and Someone oppose nothing and Nobody, and characters fall 
into contrasting dyads, so that the voluble Flora Finching appears 
almost inevitably in the company of her cryptic legacy, Mr. F.'s Aunt; 
enormous Maggy faithfully accompanies the diminutive Little Dorrit; 
Pancks, "the little coaly steam tug," is frequently to be found with 
the "unwieldy ship" Christopher Casby in tow.

The dichotomies that form the novel's surface on virtually every 
front encourage a number of assumptions about its true design. It 
seems logical, for example, to suppose that one of the principal 
dualities in Little Dorrit will comprise truth and falsehood, fiction 
and reality, art and life. Hence Janet Larson concludes that "the 

novel insists upon the saving power of the Real and teaches the perils 
of Fiction," and Carlisle declares that in investigating the "instances 
in which characters create 'fictions' to hide the 'reality' of their 
feelings" she is simply examining "one aspect of the contrast" between 
seeming and being. An examination of the true nature of the 
dramatic juxtapositions that seem to govern Little Dorrit, however, 
reveals, quite simply, that no contrast in the novel is simply or, in 
the end, can be regarded as more than superficially a contrast. In
fact, Dickens insists upon underlying affinities between opposites and ultimately upon their eradication.

For the relation between "fiction" and "reality," the subversion of all dichotomy acquires two implications. In the first place, although the novel witnesses the transformation of disparate entities into their polar opposites, this transformation is seldom if ever entirely objective. Rather, it comes about through the agency of various consciousnesses in the novel, and it comes about with a persistence suggestive of inevitability. In the second place, the division between fiction and reality, like that between any other pair of traditionally yoked opposites, becomes indeterminate. Just as characters incessantly convert nothing into something and something into nothing, poverty into riches and darkness into light, so, invariably, they convert countryside into landscape, human group into tableau vivant, life into still life, reality into its fictional representation. In Little Dorrit art emerges as the psychic process which accomplishes that conversion. Mutatis mutandis, each character must be seen as a kind of artist engaged in the active and creative construction of a private version of reality.

Near the middle of Book One Amy Dorrit descends into the theatrical underworld. There she discovers "a maze of dust, . . . where there was such a confusion of unaccountable shapes of beams, bulkheads, brick walls, ropes, and rollers, and such a mixing of gaslight and daylight, that they seemed to have got on the wrong side of the pattern of the universe" (p. 279). Just so, the visible universe Dickens creates in the course of Little Dorrit demands to be seen not,
as Douglas Hewitt would have it, "in terms of violent contrasts, striking parallels, repetitions" but rather in terms of patterns merging tirelessly into anti-patterns, of designs always busy turning themselves inside out and upside down. Little Dorrit occupies less a "world in reverse" governed by static paradigms which presuppose clear distinctions between unequivocal opposites than a world in reversal ruled by volatile principles of conversion.

To begin with the simplest and most obvious case in point, the novel's encompassing framework depends only nominally upon a contrast between "Poverty" and "Riches." In his extreme indebtedness William Dorrit embodies poverty, yet his pretensions to gentility, like those of his equally impoverished offspring, escalate in direct proportion to his insolvency. "It is certain that the more reduced and necessitous they were, the more pompously the skeleton [fabricated "for the overawing of the College"] emerged from its tomb" (pp. 277-78). The Dorrits and the Marshalsea collegians indefatigably convert their condition — indigence — into its contrary — affluence. More important, Dickens emphasizes only secondarily coexistent and contradictory states of destitution and illusory aristocracy, concentrating instead on the mysterious and subtle processes whereby for virtually all purposes of action material absence (poverty) becomes metaphysical presence (wealth). Testimonials and related rituals make up the prison life; the act of conversion supplants in importance the conversion itself, and William Dorrit retains his status only through repeated verbal and otherwise symbolic attestations to its existence.

On one level, Amy Dorrit's incessant labor confirms her family's
impoverishment: as Blandois suggests, a gentleman does not work ("Have you ever thought of looking to me to do any kind of work? . . . No! You knew, from the first moment when you saw me here, that I was a gentleman? . . . Haha! You are right! A gentleman I am!"
[p. 47]). On at least two other levels, however, the relation between Amy's willingness to work and the Dorrits' poverty is dramatic rather than static. That willingness not only encourages "the family fiction" that "was the family assertion of itself against her services" (p. 280), but even turns out to be an activity designed, not unlike the elaborate Testimonial ceremonies, to preserve the illusion of gentility. Indeed, in a grotesque parody of the act of earning, work becomes a way to convert "prison mendicity" into "fictive riches," for "over and above other daily cares, the Child of the Marshalsea had always upon her the care of preserving the genteel fiction that they were all idle beggars together" (p. 114). Amy's wages go toward the maintenance of the one grand illusion that makes up her father's life, and toward the dissolution of the novel's antipodal structure.

Abetted by his fellow inmates' obliging participation in conversion rituals, and by his younger daughter's active efforts to protect the façade that ultimately defines him, "William the bond" is functionally identical to the great and wonderful Merdle. Always "receiving homage" from the collegians of Society, Merdle represents the annihilation of all distinction between "Poverty" and "Riches," an annihilation effected only through the agency of the collective imagination. Merdle's wealth turns out to be a fabrication made possible by the monetary and moral confidence invested in him. Society (comprising both society in general and Society in particular) essentially imagines him into being. The
Merdle legends that circulate in Bleeding Heart Yard ("his ways being, as you might say and utter no falsehood, paved with gold" [p. 628]) only reiterate the mythic grandeur with which society at large endows "the rich man, who had in a manner revised the New Testament, and already entered the kingdom of Heaven" (p. 673). Of course, Merdle's assets show themselves to be nothing more than "ethereal vapour, moonshine," fully as insubstantial as the communal fantasies that transform a veritable prince of darkness into "the shining wonder, the new constellation to be followed by the wise men bringing gifts" (p. 777). The Merdle speculations by definition involve a kind of profane transubstantiation in which nothing seems able to become something, and indeed appears to do so. But, significantly, even had Merdle's wealth existed independent of public belief in its reality, it would have remained nothing: intrinsically worthless, money acquires value only in terms of that for which it may be exchanged, and social fancy ultimately makes nothing out of nothing. Merdle himself destroys binary oppositions that, because destructible, prove never to have existed in the first place, and thus Barnacle, with ironic accuracy, pronounces him "one of the greatest converters of the root of all evil into the root of all good" (p. 297).

Dickens by no means restricts the metamorphosis of "Poverty" into its equally intangible counterpart to simple reversals of fortune, or to the converging biographies of William Dorrit and Mr. Merdle. "Genteel" at last, Dorrit in fancy exchanges his newly acquired wealth for the old life of poverty and indebtedness and in the end "knows nothing beyond the Marshalsea." Although initially Dorrit's imagination transposes only past and present, so that during his "collapse in good company" he
merely reassumes the role he played throughout his imprisonment, the real transposition takes place between wealth and impoverishment, and Dorrit spends his last days in a sumptuous bedchamber sending his possessions "piece by piece, to an imaginary pawnbroker's" (p. 712). The end of the novel affirms in a different way that the relation of poverty to riches is one less of irreconcilable opposition than of affinity underscored by a common unreality. The affinity itself originates in the mediating power of the imagination, which finds equally illusory both the presence of money and its absence, and so negotiates freely between them. Declaring her "own great fortune" to be "nothing in the world!" (p. 885), Amy Dorrit converts material poverty into metaphysical riches ("I never was rich before..."), quite transforming one of the central contrasts in the novel. The codicil-burning verifies not only that transformation, but further the unique power of the imagination to effect it. The suppressed codicil indicates definitely neither financial gain on Amy's part nor financial loss on the part of the Clennam trust. It is simply "anything you like best" (p. 893).

The point at the moment is less to argue for the wider implications of such transactions between contrasting poles than to suggest that *Little Dorrit* asks to be read as a universe of opposites continually dissolving into each other under the auspices of the imagination. More than anything else, the novel's dynamic is one of movement, of translation and change reflected in chapter headings ("Moving in Society"; "Machinery in Motion") and in motifs of literal translation which center on interpretation itself, so that more important than
Cavalletto's Italian or its English equivalent are Mrs. Flornish's happy compromises between the two. Hampton Court exemplifies the structural and thematic translations that penetrate the deepest levels of the novel and undermine even its most emphatically stated polarities, subordinating all of them to the image of a world in transition. Dickens's narrative catches in the act of transformation the glorified tents of the "gipsies of gentility":

There was a temporary air about their establish­ments, as if they were going away the moment they could get anything better. . . . Genteel blinds and makeshifts were more or less observable as soon as their doors were opened; screens not half high enough, which made dining rooms out of arched passages; . . . curtains which called upon you to believe that they didn't hide anything; panes of glass which requested you not to see them; many objects of various forms, feigning to have no connection with their guilty secret, a bed (p. 359).

Even sun and shadow merge by the end of the narrative, when "the last day of the appointed week touched the bars of the Marshalsea gate. Black, all night, since the gate had clashed upon Little Dorrit, its iron stripes were turned by the early-glowing sun into stripes of gold" (p. 831).

It will be seen at once that all the dismantled antitheses in Little Dorrit ultimately express, synecdochally, the wider antithesis that encompasses them -- the fiction and reality opposition so beloved of critics. One knows, of course, that the Dorrits are actually in debt, that Hampton Court really is as cramped and noisome as it pretends not to be. But in dissolving dichotomies -- in concentrating on the symbolic acts that effect such dissolutions, and on the process of dissolution itself -- Dickens also appears to dissolve the old
familiar seeming and being antinomy. Just as the novel confronts
squarely no unequivocal example either of Riches or of Poverty, and
no situation in which empirical and imagined destitution coexist, so
all customary distinctions between reality and the versions of reality
characters create for themselves evaporate. Indeed, the primary
conversion in Little Dorrit, and the one in which characters engage
even as they conceive of imprisonment as liberation, or of indebtedness
as solvency, is of life into a representation of life.

The Dickensian technique of disclosing unexpected and startling
similarities between seemingly dissimilar characters reaches its
zenith in Little Dorrit, where characters like John Chivery and
Edmund Sparkler, Christopher Casby and William Dorrit, Mr. Meagles
and Mrs. Merdle, make very unlikely bedfellows indeed. Dickens
establishes one of the most perplexing affinities in the novel,
however, between Amy Dorrit and Mr. Merdle. In Italy, "all [Amy]
saw appeared unreal; the more surprising the scenes, the more they
resembled the unreality of her own inner life as she went among its
vacant places all day long" (p. 517). Little Dorrit is incontestably
one of Dickens's most virtuous characters; yet in Book One one of
his most unequivocal villains, Mr. Merdle, likewise "looked out of
nine windows in succession, and appeared to see nine wastes of
space" (p. 449). Little Dorrit itself does not offer a sharper
moral disparity than the one between Amy and Merdle, but the two
manage to share the one perceptual habit common to everyone around
them, and so habitually transform what they see into a fanciful
version of itself. Perhaps paradoxically, only when Merdle and Amy
are understood to orient themselves to experience in the same way do
the true and crucial differences between their perspectives reveal
dimensions. Otherwise, the "vacant spaces" Amy sees appear equivalent
to the "wastes of space" that rise to meet Merdle's eyes.

The medieval conception of fantasy as a cognitive process which
accurately reproduces sense impressions and presents them to the
organizing mind finds its nineteenth-century avatar in Little Dorrit,
where fantastic translations of life into representations of life
transpire continually. Even in Book One, long before the Dickensian
sleight of pen that changes an entire country into a painted landscape,
William Dorrit occupies the position of a "serious picture in the
obscure gallery of the Marshalsea" (p. 273). Just so, Dickens depicts
most of the members of the Dorrit family as "avenging illustration[s]"
in a "satire on family pride" (p. 277). Such descriptive devices
merely objectify a psychological or epistemic disposition to replace
the actual with the artificial, and, in a related vein, to substitute
the subjective (the inner world the mind creates for itself) for the
objective (the world external to and independent of the creative mind).

Blandois provides an extreme but apt example of a kind of
self-reflexive alchemy that renders even self-consciousness (and
self-approbation) acts of aesthetic appreciation. "I love and study
the picturesque in all its varieties," Blandois boasts. "I have
been called picturesque myself!" (p. 408). Blandois fashions his own
"picturesque" being so skillfully that the artificer himself becomes
artificial. Blandois considers "genuine" and "picturesque," "nature"
and "character" synonymous, and the ease with which he exchanges one
name and identity for another testifies to his imaginative dexterity.
But as D. W. Jefferson notes, Blandois "exists to create the impression of something which is not there," and one can go even further to argue that Blandois is "not there": in fabricating himself he simply illustrates the double truth of the maxim that nothing will come of nothing. Thus when Flintwinch ventures that he may be "not of a pious cast," Blandois rejoins: "On the contrary.... It's a part of my character. I am sensitive, ardent, conscientious, and imaginative. A sensitive, ardent, conscientious, and imaginative man, Mr. Flintwinch, must be that, or nothing!" In turn, there appears "an inkling of suspicion in Mr. Flintwinch's face that he might be nothing" (p. 408).

The caricature of a villain, Blandois seems always to be stepping either into or back out of a melodrama. Even Henry Gowan (whom Miss Wade perceives as "the dressed-up Death in the Dutch series" [p. 732]) finds "a pleasure in setting up Blandois as the type of elegance, and making him a satire upon others who piqued themselves on personal graces" (p. 542). In much the same way, Arthur Clennam comes upon the eminent Tite Barnacle, who "seemed to have been sitting for his portrait to Sir Thomas Lawrence all the days of his life" (p. 152) and who, in Merdle's company, shares "a strong general resemblance to the two cows in the Cuyp picture over them" (p. 616). The impulse to turn all experience into a fictive representation of experience asserts itself in Italy as well as in England. Returning from the latter country, William Dorrit can only establish a primarily aesthetic distance between himself and the sight of his brother and younger daughter together before the fire: "Allowing for the great difference in the still-life of the picture, the figures were much
the same as of old; his brother being sufficiently like himself to represent himself, for a moment, in the composition" (p. 699). Even Edward Sparkler translates what he sees into a "composition with Miss Fanny in the foreground" (p. 515).

Sitting in Casby's house, Arthur Clennam recognizes imagination as the necessary mode of apprehension it is: "In a word, it was represented (Clennam called to mind, alone in the ticking parlour) that many people select their models, much as the painters just now mentioned, select theirs" (p. 190). Indeed, the passage emphasizes not that some "people select their models," whereas others do not, but rather that "many people select their models" while others have their models thrust upon them. The ubiquitous reliance upon "models" equalizes everyone in the novel. On the surface, little distinguishes Mrs. Gowan, who with a turn of the tongue reduces the Meagleses to the "Miggleses," from the Meagleses themselves, who make Harriet Beadle into Tattycoram. Mrs. Gowan's imaginative transpositions replace an actuality with its mirror image, false, desirable, exactly inverting the thing it reflects: "With the utmost politeness and good-breeding, she feigned that it was she -- not [Mr. Meagles] -- who had made the difficulty, and who at length gave way; and that the sacrifice was hers -- not his" (p. 440). Similarly, the Meagleses also alter experiential givens in order to make the world habitable for themselves, not only in the sense that Pet's dead twin is "'changed . . . according to the changes in the child spared to us and always with us!" (p. 58), but also in the more disturbing sense that the Tattycoram they create is designed to corroborate a comfortable (and inaccurate) world view.
"Why, she was called in the Institution Harriet Beadle,\textsuperscript{1}" Mr. Meagles explains, \textsuperscript{1} -- an arbitrary name, of course. Now, Harriet we changed into Hattey, and then into Tatty, because, as practical people, we thought even a playful name might be a new thing to her, and might have a softening and affectionate kind of effect, don't you see? As to Beadle, that I needn't say was wholly out of the question. If there is anything that is not to be tolerated on any terms . . . it is a beadle\textsuperscript{11} (p. 57).

In much the same way, Arthur Clennam frequently finds "himself a long way on the road to a number of airier and less substantial destinations" than the ones that actually await him (p. 231). But William Dorrit also consistently and even compulsively builds "castles in the air" that so insinuate themselves into the deceptively simple act of observation that he fails to notice his surroundings. And Affery, resident equally of haunted house and haunted mind, effects the quintessential transformation of matter into mental energy, until all experience presents itself to her in the guise of a dream. Yet Dickens suggests a disconcerting parallel between Affery and Amy Dorrit, who also seems to perceive much of the world in terms of what it is not. Looking into Arthur Clennam's "dim room," for instance, she sees "a spacious one . . . and grandly furnished," informed by her own "courtly ideas of Covent Garden . . . costly ideas of Covent Garden . . . picturesque ideas of Covent Garden" (p. 208). The other guests at the "party" she attends later in the chapter are in reality nothing more than stars, yet "such a vista of wonder opened out before her, that she sat looking up at the stars, quite lost" (p. 217).
In short, the question of "distinguishments" poses itself again and again. It seems impossible to condemn the fictive lenses through which Mrs. Gowan, William Dorrit, and Affery view the world without condemning all of the imaginative acts in the novel. Part of the difficulty of making distinctions stems from the very nature of the world Dickens figures forth in Little Dorrit, for this world steadfastly resists its own figuring forth, and remains to the last a shadowy, mysterious, and finally incomprehensible nether-region where conclusions must be at last inconclusive. Objective indeterminacy throws the mind back upon its own resources in its struggle to orient itself to experience; the transmutation of what seems to be into its opposite simply furnishes one method of rendering the world sensible, hence tolerable. The recasting of experience into a fanciful version of itself -- into a picture or a dream -- supplies another. Only a closer examination of related techniques of representation, however, finds any sort of consistent correspondence between what one senses to be the novel's moral truth and the aesthetic determinations it makes. Yet the transgressions and abuses of the evil characters and institutions in Little Dorrit ultimately identify themselves as transgressions against and abuses of the imagination which, because a necessary accomplice to perception and comprehension, emerges as a defining feature of humanity. Likewise, Dickens at last locates the chief moral and social good in the conscionable use of the imaginative, and specifically of the narrative, faculty.

"Society, the Circumlocution Office, and Mr. Gowan," Dickens said of Little Dorrit, "are of course three parts of one idea and design." 27
Although Dickens referred to the satirical dimensions of the novel, Society, the Circumlocution Office, and "Mr. Gowan" are also three parts of the same imaginative design, for each of them embodies some perversion of the artistic act. In dramatizing those perversions, Dickens measures also the dimensions of any aesthetic enterprise, in much the way that any satirical distortion ultimately emphasizes the right and desirable proportions of what it depicts in exaggerated form. Imaginative failures in Little Dorrit reflect less an inability to fictionalize experience than a deeper failure to apprehend a trans-literal reality. Culpability originates in the fact that although the ego apparently cannot choose but view the world through a scrim of reverie, it nonetheless retains a great deal of choice about what it will represent to itself, and about how it will represent it.

Mrs. Gowan congratulates her friend Mrs. Merdle upon "represent[ing] and express[ing] Society so well" (p. 441), and indeed both women -- both of whom consider heart and Art reciprocal metaphors rather than the metonyms they should be -- stand in synecdochal relation to Society, and to the kind of art in which Society engages. That species of art may be summarizes as the art of varnishing, and its particular reprehensibility lies not so much in the fact that its way of converting apprehended moral realities is to efface them entirely as in the corollary to that fact: such effacement requires the conscious and deliberate rejection of the possibility of representing reality accurately, and so becomes a sin both of omission and of commission.

Varnishing, Dickens stresses, is not an involuntary act; nearly always it follows a necessarily imaginative perception of some true state
Hiding the empirical smokescreen. The real wretchedness is more apparent to the members of Society than to the ardor of their efforts to repress and deny it evidence of that truth, Mrs. Merdle's rhetorical it is Mrs. Merdle who somehow manages to impart central at the same time that she turns her back upon are not in our natural state, "Mrs. Merdle remarks, "Society suppresses us and dominates us" (p. 286).

of course saw through her own threadbare perfectly, and ... knew that Mrs. Merdle saw through it perfectly, that Society would see through it perfectly," and yet because Fanny knows down to the last screw the mechanisms operates that she becomes such a singular sensation. the cultivation of surfaces naturally (or unnaturally, as the case ... the dogma wherein all of Society's faith resides.

"fair varnisher" William Dorrit and the "fair varnisher" Mrs. personify the choice to erase all intimations of rather than engage in the imaginative enterprise that would organize it into a coherent representation of a moral conceives of art -- the imaginative perception of underlying potentially deceptive experience -- as work, emphasizes that it is not the character of gentility General's insistence that "everything [be] surface and without substance" (p. 557) merely articulates the to venture further into the wilderness of need be. Thus it comes as no surprise that Casby,
a "mere Inn sign post without any Inn" (p. 190), should embody simultaneously superficiality and indolence: the two in Dickens go hand in hand. Indeed, Casby's patriarchal utterances follow a syntactical pattern of repetition that signifies his imaginative torpor.

Part of the aesthetic stagnation Dickens depicts in *Little Dorrit* stems from art's inability to illustrate anything other than surface, and from the modern artist's inability to recreate what he sees in any image other than his own. *Little Dorrit* establishes art as the primary human profession, but Gowan, the explicit artist figure, "applies himself to his profession very little" (p. 606). Further, just as Society chooses to believe only in surfaces, and so to believe in nothing, so Gowan "has no belief in anyone else, because he has no belief in himself" (p. 606). The Casbys of the world provide perfect subjects for the Gowans of the world: Casby "had been accosted in the streets, and respectfully solicited to become a Patriarch for painters and for sculptors" (p. 187). Similarly, Italy's "picturesque" surface lures professional (that is, professed) artists precisely because it only appears to be.

Henry Gowan can represent nothing. In the logical terms *Little Dorrit* not only invites but reinforces, this means both that he lacks the imagination to glimpse, and hence to represent, anything (he can represent nothing) and that he is able to glimpse, and hence to represent quite accurately, what it nothing (he can represent nothing). *Little Dorrit* observes most delicately that, with respect to his portrait of her father, "I am not quite convinced I should have known [it] from the likeness if I had not seen him doing it" (p. 606), yet Gowan's portrait of Blandois turns out to be an exact, if inadvertent,
image of multivalence and essential nothingness. In other words, in its failure to represent anything in particular, the portrait ironically captures Blandois himself perfectly, for Blandois lacks identity. Thus when Amy and Fanny visit his studio, Gowan invites them to "at least see the original of the daub, that you may know what it's meant for." The "original of the daub," however, is himself "a bravo waiting for his prey, a distinguished noble waiting to save his country, the common enemy waiting to do somebody a bad turn, an angelic messenger waiting to do somebody a good turn -- whatever you think he most looks like!" (p. 545). Gowan is in the true sense of the word no artist at all, and he is no artist because he refuses to confront the intimate relation between art and reality. In failing to realize that the artistic imagination provides the only possible means of apprehending anything other than the surfaces of things, Gowan becomes a kind of criminal of the imagination. Marrying art to artifice, he, like Society, divorces it from reality. For him, to live the life of the artist is to "pass the bottle of smoke. To keep up the pretence as to labour, and study, and patience, and being devoted!" (p. 452).

Art itself, its earning power aside, equals "hocus-pocus."

To Society's art of varnishing moral reality, and to the Gowanesque art of denying art's relation to what can in fact be known only through the intercession of the active imagination, Dickens yokes "the great art How not to do it" (p. 455). The Circumlocution Office reveals its raison d'être to be the artful dodging of reality itself -- an art at last as deceptive (and hence as antithetical to true art) as the surfaces cultivated by the Merdle coterie, or as the perverse sort of naturalism at which Henry Gowan excels. The engaging young
mouthpiece of the Circumlocution Office, Ferdinand Barnacle, glibly describes its essence:

"Why good Heaven, we are nothing but forms! Think what a lot of forms you have gone through, And you have never got any nearer to an end?"
"Never," said Clennam.
"Look at it from the right point of view, and there you have us -- official and effectual"(p. 804).

The "whole Science of Government" turns out to be the perpetual generation of memoranda, and of memoranda designed to promote a veneer of efficiency that lures and vanquishes the real.

Equally important, however, Dickens depicts the art of circumlocution as a falsely imaginative and hence immoral act of apprehension: "Whatever was required to be done, the Circumlocution Office was beforehand with all the public departments in the art of perceiving -- HOW NOT TO DO IT" (p. 145). Society, in perpetual motion, varnishes and converts reality until it has reduced it to homogeneity, and indeed to the Dickensian bête noir, anonymity. Thus Mrs. General, Bar, Jury, Bishop, and the other "courtiers of the Great and Wonderful Merdle" (who like his wife and Mrs. Gowan bears no Christian name) are all in effect innominate. Similarly, the Circumlocution Office, concerned only with "keeping this wonderful, all-sufficient wheel of statesmanship, How not to do it, in motion" (p. 146), moves toward the annihilation of all identity. Its offense against the real is also and equally an imaginative and perceptual crime: because the Circumlocution Office makes no distinctions among the suppliants who wander into its line of vision, it automatically converts them into a single faceless, nameless throng whose members may be "all
indiscriminately tucked up under [its] foolscap paper" (p. 146).

The three modes of art that Society, Gowan, and the Circumlocution Office exemplify represent three modes of denial, and three disjunctions between, reality and its imitation. Ultimately Dickens condemns all three forms of artistry on both aesthetic and moral grounds. Having established art as a primary act of mind, Little Dorrit dramatizes both the abuse and the perversion of the imaginative faculty; in dramatizing those abuses and perversions, it insists all the more emphatically on art's status as a primary act of mind. The Circumlocution Office, Henry Gowan, and Society all exploit mercilessly the same technique of fictionalization whereby the ego orients itself to experience. In each case, the fictive capacity only rearranges experience itself, failing to penetrate imaginatively the shadows and contradictions which unquestionably compose the sensible world -- choosing to interpret them literally rather than anagogically. Mrs. Clennam, and to an extent even Arthur, with his unchecked inclination to regard himself as an old man, also distort their own imaginative perspicacity, converting what they perceive into a fictive barrier which effectively isolates them psychically from the rest of the human world. Though more complex than those of Society and the Circumlocution Office, their imaginative machinations also constitute complete or partial failures of the representative and active imagination.

In his "Meditations on a Hobby Horse," E. H. Gombrich distinguishes between the conventional notion of visual art as a representation of reality and his own conception of art as a substitution for reality designed expressly to meet the needs of the artist. Gombrich does
not go so far as to suppose that something originally intended (of necessity) to represent reality can become a substitute for it, but in *Little Dorrit* Dickens explores such a possibility. Mrs. Clennam provides only the most obvious example of the way objective phenomena may be translated into their subjective doubles. Like that of Miss Wade, hers is essentially a mind-forged world whose salient features have been borrowed from an array of experiential givens, distorted, and admixed to corroborate a terrible private creed. "The change I await here," Mrs. Clennam informs anyone who will listen, "is the great change"; yet in the present sense, she "awaits" no change at all but continually effects it. Her "Bible, bound like her own construction of it" (p. 69), objectifies the extent to which fiction has become a substitute for a psychological and spiritual reality. Dickens indicates in his monthly number plans for *Little Dorrit* an intention to show "people like the houses they inhabit," and at least with respect to her moral condition, Mrs. Clennam's "dim bed-chamber," with its "black bier-like sofa" and "smell of black dye" composes a telling aesthetic.

Not, however, simply an objective correlative for Mrs. Clennam's repressive state of mind, her bedroom also distinguishes itself because she has created it ("she never changed her room"), because quite literally she cannot see beyond it, and because it is equally illusory and actual. An early and omniscient description of the room underscores its phantasmagorical quality, annihilating all division between its objective and its subjective features:

... when it was dusk there early in the afternoon, changing distortions of herself in her wheeled chair, of Mr. Flintwinch with his wry neck, of
Mistress Affery coming and going, would be thrown upon the house wall, and would hover there like shadows from a great magic lantern. As the room-ridden invalid settled for the night, these would gradually disappear: Mistress Affery's magnified shadow always flitting about, last, until it finally glided away into the air. Then the solitary light would burn unchangingly, until it burned pale before the dawn, and at last died under the breath of Mrs. Affery, as her shadow descended on it from the witch-region of sleep (p. 221).

Perception in Mrs. Clennam's case ultimately takes the shape of imaginative conception; "unable to measure the changes beyond [her] view by any larger standard than the shrunken one of [her] own uniform and contracted existence" (p. 388), Mrs. Clennam unconsciously forces experience to conform to, and at last to confirm, an especially terrifying dogma whose reality and whose fictionality become identical.

Like numerous other characters in Little Dorrit, Mrs. Clennam perverts the human creative faculty by "breath[ing] her own image into a clay image of her Creator." Yet for Dickens reality cannot be known except insofar as the mind represents it to itself, and by the logic the novel establishes, Mrs. Clennam could not hope to know her "Creator" except insofar as she created him; i.e., except insofar as she inferred his existence from the experiential particulars that surrounded her. In Affery, who turns out to have been, "like greater people, right in her facts, and always wrong in the theories she deduced from them" (p. 863), Dickens provides several clues about the feature unifying all of the fictions in the novel, for, broken down into its constituent parts, the imaginative act loosely parallels
the pattern of deductive reasoning. The Dickensian imagination moves from the great general facts of existence, which in their murkiness demand that theories be constructed to explain them, to the smaller fragments which reflect and clarify them. Such a pattern is of course finally inductive rather than deductive: experience at last confesses itself subordinate to wider truths that underlie it. Nevertheless, knowing is clearly imaginative and inferential, mimetic only in the Platonic sense of mirrors and caves. One simultaneously creates and discovers what one knows.

So it is that "no human eyes have ever seen more daring, gross, and shocking images of the Divine nature than we creatures of the dust make in our own likeness, of our own bad passions" (p. 344). The "Divine nature" provides one potential ordering of reality which would seem to be less prior to the mind than created by it and which, because of the faith invested in it, becomes functionally real. The past provides another, and in Little Dorrit memory emerges as one mode of apprehending (through fictional lenses) the real. Thus legacies invariably bequeath realities -- the terse and uncompromising truth, for example, that Mr. F.'s Aunt chirps at appropriate moments ("'You can't make a head and brains out of a brass knob with nothing in it!'" [p. 319]), or the "life of degradation" William Dorrit cannot avoid "bestowing . . . as a sort of portion" (p. 275) upon his daughter Amy, or the moral imperative ("Do Not Forget") Clennam's father bequeaths his son and widow.

Conspicuous throughout the novel, "D.N.F." exemplifies the past as a reality the present inherits. Significantly, "D.N.F." also becomes
a kind of Victorian Rorschach, acquiring a different meaning for anyone who looks upon it, and, for all purposes of thought and action, becoming whatever it is believed to be. Mrs. Clennam's response to the monogrammed watchcase epitomizes the technique of fictionalization whereby the ego recreates a reality to its own satisfaction simply by "deducing theories" from the facts, and gradually coming to believe in them. "D.N.F." speaks to Mrs. Clennam "like a voice from an angry cloud. Do not forget the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not forget the appointed suffering" (p. 344). Blandois's interpretation of this most ambiguous of texts likewise depends upon its translation into his own particularly sinister language: "'D.N.F. was some tender, lovely, fascinating fair-creature, I make no doubt,'" he decides. "'I adore her memory on the assumption'" (p. 405). Mrs. Clennam's and Blandois's versions of "D.N.F." contrast sharply with that of Arthur Clennam, who, characteristically, reads the monogram as an injunction to make reparation.

Memory itself, however, demands to be seen as one means by which the present may be converted into an alternative version of itself. While remembrance of things past in itself can assist in the apprehension of the real, the act of recollection also proves eminently capable of obscuring and altering present circumstance. Flora Finching and Arthur Clennam furnish the most dramatic examples of the way memory can assist in the fictionalization of the present moment by converting material experience into an immaterial equivalent. But they are definitely not the only exemplars of such an imaginative technique, serving rather as foils for Amy Dorrit's more truly imaginative orientation to memory and to the past.
The "moral mermaid," Flora Finching, is a creature half of the romanticized past and half of a present she romanticizes by insisting upon its identity to the past. Upon his reunion with his rose turned effusive peony, Arthur Clennam notes immediately the "inconsistent and profoundly unreasonable way in which she instantly went on, nevertheless, to interweave their long-abandoned boy and girl relations with their present interview" (p. 195). This is of course the technique whereby Flora makes the present psychologically habitable, and it is equally an imaginative and a linguistic strategy that allows her to envelop herself in a fantastic verbal cloak wherein all distinctions between past and present evaporate: "'Very polite of you to say so, Arthur -- cannot remember Mr. Clennam until the word is out, such is the habit of times forever fled, and so true it is that oft in the stilly night ere slumber's chain has bound people, fond memory brings the light of other days around people" (p. 315).

Yet for Clennam himself, memory also transforms the present, recasting immediate experience in the image of the past. Thus at the beginning of the novel Clennam returns as much to his own childhood as to London, and in the coffeehouse listens to a bell whose "sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the procession would not stop with the bell; but continued to march on," returning him to the "dreary Sunday[s] of his childhood" (p. 69). Whereas Flora mixes memory and desire, for Clennam memory remains until the final chapters a source of pain which falsifies the present as thoroughly as do his erstwhile beloved's imaginative transpositions. Garrett Stewart observes that memory is to Arthur "no balm but merely a chill restorative of his blighted past," and this is true as far as it goes. At last, however,
Clennam's memory becomes an epistemological tool; Clennam finally replaces the present with the past in order to apprehend a moral reality. Such an act is in itself imaginative, a fictive means to a very real end. Elaine Showalter observes that in the Marshalsea Clennam spends his time "in the cultivation of his own memory, the 'right kind of remembering' which is a precondition of growth." Interested only in the psychic dimensions of Clennam's imprisonment, Showalter can see his only as a "meditation on self-knowledge," but, equally important, it is only through a kind of mental alchemy that Clennam transposes past and present. Consequently, his "meditation" is not simply on "self-knowledge," but ultimately upon the moral constants underlying the variables and ephemera of empirical experience. Such constants, suggested in the flowers Amy Dorrit leaves Clennam and eventually in her own spectral figure, gradually replace the miasma of sensory experience that surrounds and sickens him in the early stages of his imprisonment.

Dickens's insistence that the artificers who "represent Society so well," Mrs. Merdle and Christopher Casby, speak habitually in "the imperative mood present tense" leads one to suspect that the truth can only be narrated in the subjunctive mood past tense. Just so, in the Marshalsea Arthur Clennam essentially tells himself "his own poor story," and specifically the history of his relation with Little Dorrit. Such a mode of reflection allows him to verify John Chivery's suggestion that Amy loves him and is at once reflective, narrative, and imaginative, involving a number of hypothetical transpositions ("Consider the improbability, . . . consider the improbability" [p. 798]; "Granted that she had loved him, and he had known it and had suffered
himself to love her..." [p. 801]), and culminating in the organization of all experience around a single point of reference whose actuality can only be comprehended through an imaginative act of faith: "Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point" (p. 801). The vanishing-point passage deserves further explication, and will receive as much below; in the present context, the passage affirms simultaneously the triumph of the imaginative memory over circumstance and the victory of the actual and the permanent over the artificial and evanescent.

One of the Dorrit family's main transgressions, upon its accession to "Riches," centers on its refusal to remember. The chief wrong it does its youngest member is to forget the past. Only Frederick Dorrit (who, tellingly, also "had insensibly acquired a new habit of shuffling into the picture-galleries... and passing hours and hours before the portraits of renowned Venetians,... silently presenting [his niece Amy] to the noble Venetians" [p. 534]) masters the art of memory. Such an imaginative act of faith instills in an always murky and indistinct present a kind of clarity and coherence -- by viewing it in the mirror the past provides, Frederick Dorrit manages to understand the present as it is. Frederick observes no difference between present riches and past impoverishment, appearing in Book Two exactly as he appeared in Book One and identifying at once the failure of perception that becomes a moral and imaginative failure as his brother's family forgets its indebtedness to Little Dorrit.

Little Dorrit herself would seem to excel at the imaginative conversion of present into past, but her talent for doing so surfaces
only in the second half of the novel; her fidelity to the prison life renders both that life and the life in Italy equally unreal: "With a remembrance of her father's old life in prison hanging about her like the burden of a sorrowful tune, Little Dorrit would wake from a dream of her birth-place into a whole day's dream" (p. 517). In their common unreality, past and present become interchangeable, and thus Amy appears simply to trade the new world for the old one:

All that she saw was new and wonderful, but it was not real; it seemed to her as if those visions of mountains and picturesque countries might melt away at any moment, and the carriage, turning some abrupt corner, bring up with a jolt at the old Marshalsea gate" (p. 516).

Indeed, throughout the novel, Dickens emphasizes the imagination's free passage back and forth between the poles it regards as equally illusory, but if Amy simply exchanged past for present, little would distinguish her imagination from the one that very nearly destroys Arthur Clennam; if she indiscriminately wove past and present together, no real distinction would emerge between her continental reverie and Flora Finching's flights of fancy. What Amy does, however, is to turn both the past and the present into mutually qualifying frames of reference, each of which, imposed imaginatively upon its opposite, ultimately defines it. Consequently, Amy "would lean upon her balcony, and look over at the water, as though they all [all the scenes of her past] lay underneath it. When she got to that, she would musingly watch its running, as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison again, and herself, and the old room, and the old inmates, and the old visitors: all lasting realities that had never changed" (p. 520).
At first glance, Amy Dorrit's private fictions appear to be exceptions to a general rule of imaginative exploitation. Without looking too closely, one assumes, with Janet Larson, that Little Dorrit at best adopts an ambivalent attitude toward the relation between art and life, and that the novel indeed "exposes a deeper pessimism about what artists might accomplish in a culture fundamentally hostile to imagination and truth."\(^{31}\) Dickens's early description of the river near Twickenham, however, suggests otherwise: "between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with the solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer's soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful" (p. 382). The passage offers far more than a conventional (and slightly sentimental) pastoral scene; it also proposes an alternative vision of the relation between life and art -- a vision which insists upon their reciprocity and at the same time corrects the equally moral and imaginative distortions reflected in Society, in Henry Gowan, in the Circumlocution Office, and even in the misguided mental propensities of Clennam, Flora Finching, and Mrs. Clennam.

III

"But in public who shall express the unseen adequately? It is private life that holds out the mirror to infinity; personal intercourse, and that alone, that ever hints at a personality beyond our daily vision."

--E. M. Forster, Howard's End

The scholars who attempt to salvage the notion that Little Dorrit
in some way affirms, or at least, exculpates, the artistic enterprise
turn inevitably to Amy Dorrit and Daniel Doyce as artist figures,
arguing that, in their modest ways, both characters typify art in bono.
Indeed, one cannot deny that Doyce and Amy together seem to realize
some sort of imaginative ideal. Nevertheless, because critics have
failed to recognize fictionalization as the way the Dickensian self
makes sense of reality, they have had to translate Amy's artistry, and
that in which Doyce engages, into artistic terms. In other words,
Amy Dorrit's life of service, or her capacity for love, or her
gestures of tolerance and forgiveness -- not unlike Doyce's modest
perseverance -- presumably establish her as the true artist in the
novel, but they do so only metaphorically, with the result that
neither Little Dorrit nor Doyce may be seen as more than a surrogate
artist; neither is quite the real thing. Edwin Barrett, for example,
considers Amy's "selfless devotion" the "highest function of the
fancy, the moral and social imagination operating as love"; Showalter
grants that in Doyce Dickens "seems to be trying to reconcile the
visionary poet with an older conception of the artist as skilled
craftsman" but ultimately his work, like Arthur Clennam's "morbid
melancholy" can claim little more than an analogical relationship
to the artistic sensibility.

But Dickens is not Henry Gowan, and his main concern lies less
certainly with art as a product or outcome, or indeed with art as
"making" in any concrete, rigorously physical sense of the word, than
with art as an internal process of apprehension. In the end, the
role and responsibility of the artist in Little Dorrit is only
secondarily to make; Dickens identifies art primarily with seeing.
Such an observation may displease the reader who, accustomed to accept the stereotypical notion of the ideal Victorian artist as earnest craftsman, remains perfectly willing to regard the eternally diligent Doyce and the eternally vigilant Amy Dorrit as diluted but faithful versions of that ideal. It may also appear to be inconsistent with the Dickensian tendency to discriminate "good" characters from "bad" ones according to the amount of work they do. It is not, however, that the artist is not also a maker, but rather that in order to make, he first must see, and it is this facet of art Dickens examines in Little Dorrit. At last, the novel illustrates the conception of the true artist Browning propounds in Sordello: "the best/Impart the gift of seeing to the rest" (III, 364-65). Such imparting requires first not merely sight but insight.

Amy, in short, is an artist; what makes her a finer artist than virtually everyone around her (Doyce being the possible exception) is nothing more than her perspicacity, her ability to apprehend the form not only of the morally good but ultimately of the morally real. Such an apprehension is an imaginative act because it involves more than a simple conversion of experience into an alternative version of itself, requiring further the seeing of what cannot be seen, the perceiving of what is not immediately perceptible. The artist in Little Dorrit exists foremost to make the invisible visible — to translate it into a recognizable form or, in other words, to represent what cannot be presented. In Browning's phrase, he exists to "impart the gift of seeing to the rest" and in Forster's phrase to "hold out the mirror to infinity." Recent criticism has overlooked entirely one of the novel's central motifs — that of vision — yet it is only by
understanding the intimate relation between literal, moral, and aesthetic vision that one can begin to understand what Dickens truly means by "art," why he insists upon fiction as a primary act of mind, and how fiction can serve as a source of social cohesion, and ultimately of moral redemption.

A return simply to the techniques of representation dramatized in *Little Dorrit* discovers a definite pattern in the methods whereby characters unconsciously convert experience into a version of itself. "Good" characters like Doyce, Clennam, Mr. Meagles, and most conspicuously Amy Dorrit construct not so much models of what they see as representations of what cannot be seen, simulacra which simulate what otherwise would remain altogether inaccessible. Again, the world of *Little Dorrit* is an ambiguous one whose mysteries remain largely unsolved and whose connections turn out to be illusory. Although this self-contradictory, vacillating world obtrudes relentlessly upon the senses, it can be known in its entirety only inferentially, through a kind of imaginative induction or extrapolation from the material particulars it comprises. Thus it becomes more than possible to be right in the "facts" and, like Affery and "greater people," wrong in the theories deduced from them. In the present sense, Carlisle correctly deduces that Amy, for example, must "pretend a little" if she wishes to acknowledge the nature of visible things, for these can be mirrored only in grotesque, deceptive images.

Nevertheless, that is only half the question, for Dickens preserves the possibility of deducing "theories" from something other than the surfaces on display throughout *Little Dorrit*. The novel suggests also the necessarily imaginative "imitat[ion of] the goodness of a better
order of beings" (p. 53). Such an imitation requires foremost an extension of the boundaries of the imagination, and, just so, a widening of perspective and a diversification of point of view. Imagination, like love in a Shakespearean comedy, looks not with the eyes but with the mind, and on one level Little Dorrit moves away from the outward and visible to the inner and spiritual, replacing the all too concrete particulars of its plot with abstract realities comprehensible (and communicable) only when the eye pierces imaginatively the material world.

Far from the last to observe that "the imagination in Little Dorrit is marked not so much by its powers of particularization as by its powers of generalization," Lionel Trilling came close to realizing that the only truly moral endeavor in the novel is that of rendering the general particular and the particular general, of translating the invisible into a visible frame of reference. In his introduction to Bleak House J. Hillis Miller remarks that "as a blueprint is an image in another form of the building for which it is a plan, so Bleak House transfers England into another realm, the realm of the fictional imagination." While Miller concludes that such a blueprint exists to investigate the (social) reality it depicts, the same activity, directed to different ends, thrives in Little Dorrit, as much through the efforts of individual characters as through those of Dickens himself. Beyond the fog and indeterminacy of its plot, the novel takes on the shape of a moral blueprint, and the representations the true artists in the book make to themselves and to others emerge as moral paradigms designed to show not the shadows of tangible experience, but rather the underlying moral reality
ascertainable only after an imaginative penetration of the great
curtain of empirical "fact."

One of the most striking affinities between Clennam and Amy
Dorrit resides in the disparity between the material circumstances
that have always surrounded them and the alternative moral framework
each constructs and realizes by investing faith in it. Both
Clennam and Amy come of age in settings as horrifying morally as they
are aesthetically, but both are forced to use those settings as
templates for the moral worlds they create and occupy. Consequently,
the ethical codes they develop bear telling structural similarities
to those around them: what Amy and Clennam do is to convert those
codes into versions of themselves by seeing something present but
not explicit in them. As the New Testament may be interpreted as a
fulfillment of the Old which adopts many of its central tenets and
yet represents a reality that transcends them, so Arthur and Amy at
once represent and convert the experiential givens that surround them.
"As Mr. F. himself said if seeing is believing not seeing is believing
too" (p. 589).

The resemblance between the nightmarish world of Arthur Clennam's
childhood and the circumstances surrounding Mrs. Clennam's own
upbringing is telling. "'You do not know what it is,!' Mrs. Clennam
informs Blandois, "'to be brought up strictly and straitly. I was so
brought up. Mine was no youth of sinful gaiety and pleasure. Mine
were days of wholesome repression, punishment, and fear. The corruption
of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the
terrors that surround us -- these were the themes of my childhood"
(p. 843). Virtually the same "fiery environment" also forms her stepson's.
character -- in exactly the opposite shape. Clennam's "nature had been disappointed from the dawn of its perceptions" (p. 72); he recalls his past as a "legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification" (p. 69), all presenting to him an apparent reality that perfectly corroborates Mrs. Clennam's creed. At the same time, however, "the fierce dark teaching of his childhood had never sunk into his heart" (p. 368), and the moral universe Clennam inhabits seems to owe nothing whatever to experience; indeed, with respect to perceptible circumstance it is patently unreal, a seeming conversion of actuality into its fictive opposite suspiciously like William Dorrit's genteel fictions, or those of Society.

On closer examination, certain likenesses furthermore emerge between the inferno of Clennam's existence and the moral blueprint he makes to represent it. Clennam describes his parents' religion as "'a gloomy sacrifice of tastes and sympathies that were never their own, offered up as part of a bargain for the security of their possessions'" (p. 59); the world according to Mrs. Clennam observes a system of checks and balances. In Arthur Clennam's imaginative version of that world, retribution becomes its double, restitution: "duty on earth, restitution on earth, action on earth" (p. 368), and the repayment (rather than the forgiveness) of debt all inform Clennam's imaginative architectonic. Less than evident is the dissimilarity between Clennam's consciousness of the necessity of repaying debt and Mrs. Clennam's notion that she has been "appointed" to enforce the vengeful justice of her God. Here, Arthur's and Mrs. Clennam's disparate responses to the "D.N.F." engraved on the watchcase again prove instructive, for whereas Mrs. Clennam's reading
is narrow and reductive, informed by her ultimately unimaginative perception of the world around her, Clennam — able to conceive "of all the gentle and good things his life had been without" (p. 206) — also is capable of reading openly and imaginatively, and of constructing out of the scattered, ambiguous, visible elements of experience (e.g., "D.N.F.") the reality (here the fact of mutual human debt) latent within them.

An even more profound discernment characterizes Amy's ultimately imaginative orientation to reality. Dickens provides the Child of the Marshalsea a visible template seemingly antithetical to the moral system she copies from it:

With no earthly friend to help her, or so much as see her, but the one so strangely assorted; with no knowledge even of the common daily tone and habits of the common members of the free community who are not shut up in prisons; born and bred in a social condition, false even with reference to the falsest condition outside the walls; drinking from infancy of a well whose waters had their own peculiar taste . . . the Child of the Marshalsea began her womanly life (p. 111).

Yet the "baby whose first draught of air had been tinged with Doctor Haggage's brandy" almost immediately sees beyond the spurious and degenerate world that surrounds her, "perceiv[ing] that it was not the habit of all the world to live locked up in narrow yards" (p. 108). Like Clennam, Amy seems merely to convert experience into something other than what it is, formulating an ethos -- and an aesthetic -- based on standards of delicacy and decency seemingly absent from the Marshalsea except in a form essentially debased. A closer look at what Amy in fact perceives, however, reveals that it is precisely because
the prison defines her frame of reference that she is able to see beyond it; hers emerges as at once the least limited and the most circumscribed sensibility in the novel. In Book One as well as in Book Two Amy regards the world through real and, when those are not available, through fictive prison bars, and her conception of mutual and unpayable human indebtedness likewise remains constant regardless of whether or not she finds herself in the tangible prison that objectifies that fact.

In simplest terms, the acquisition of moral knowledge is in *Little Dorrit* an imaginative act, for it is only through imagination that surfaces may be penetrated and consequently understood in terms of the reality that subsumes them. The first condition of goodness for George Eliot was to love; for Dickens the first condition of goodness is to imagine. Eventually, of course, imagination and love becomes indistinguishable: Fanny, for instance, finds Amy's "subject" to be love (p. 649), and chafes at "the Art of it -- that she was always being placed [by Amy] in the position of being forgiven, whether she liked it or not" (p. 646). Love for Fanny is also a fiction, but it is a fiction of a very different order, for to think of devotion at all is, for the elder of the two Dorrit sisters, to "think lightly and eloquently about degenerate impossibilities" (p. 649).

Half trope and half theme, "vision" in *Little Dorrit* unites both moral and imaginative perception. Whereas Society's metaphorical myopia, and William Dorrit's figurative blindness, underscore their spiritual and aesthetic obtuseness -- their inability or refusal to discriminate between ugliness and beauty either in a physical or in a metaphysical sense -- Amy, Daniel Doyce, and at last Arthur Clennam
see clearly. The "vision" metaphor acquires most significance in the context of the relation between the ego and what Dickens seems to define as the art of seeing. Here at last unambiguous distinctions emerge between "good" and "bad" imaginative perceptions. Society concentrates on being seen; Amy on becoming invisible. Society makes a concerted effort not to see; Amy and Doyce strive only to see, and, in seeing, to make others see. For Society moral and imaginative perception -- vision -- are egocentric and self-promoting acts designed to acquire and to possess; for the true artists in the novel, seeing itself is sympathetic and self-effacing. The social implications are painfully obvious, for the imaginative conversions and representations indispensable to the comprehension of experience become potentially either charitable or cupiditious. The spiritual implications are similarly apparent, for the same acts of fictionalization become potentially either fideistic or perfidious.

With unconscious irony Henry Gowan confesses to a possible "defect in my mental vision" (p. 561). Indeed, Gowan exemplifies the moral myopia that occludes artistic vision and prevents the prospective artist from imbuing what he represents with the moral beauty that would endow it with reality. Gowan is scarcely alone in his shortsightedness. Merdle "looked out of nine windows in succession and appeared to see nine wastes of space" (p. 449); Blandois's eyes "had no depth or change; they glittered, and they opened and shut. So far, and waiving their use to himself, a clockmaker could have made a better pair" (p. 41). Fanny "in her mind's eye" can see only "the fair bosom that beat in unison with the exaltation of her thoughts,"
competing with the bosom that had been famous so long, outshining it, and deposing it" (p. 672). Like Mrs. Merdle, always to be found "with a glass at her eye," and like Edmund Sparkler, perpetually "with a glass at his eye," and like Barnacle Junior, who "had a superior eye-glass dangling round his neck, but unfortunately had such flat orbits to his eyes, and such limp little eyelids that it wouldn't stick in when he put it up" (p. 149), William Dorrit provides "an illustration of the axiom that there are no such stone-blind men as those who will not see" (p. 326). Indeed, Little Dorrit begins with an image of seeing that is not seeing -- with "fixedly staring and glaring" Marseilles, where, although nothing escapes surveillance, neither is anything definitely seen. Appearance, as one chapter title suggests, continually moves toward disappearance, reflecting the impossibility of acute direct perception and the necessity of its indirect, and imaginative, counterpart.

One has only to think of Mrs. General's standard comment upon the Italian vagrants ("'They should not be looked at. Nothing unpleasant should ever be looked at'" [p. 530]) to grasp the extent to which Society cultivates the great art how not to see it. At first glance, the pretense seems internally inconsistent, for at the same time that Society's main imaginative impulse directs itself toward not seeing anything even remotely suggestive of a moral reality, the Merdle coterie also desires to be seen, and continually insinuates itself into its own foreground. Whereas for Amy to be is to perceive, for Society (which claims as its high priestess the "observed of all observers," Mrs. Merdle) to be is to be perceived. Indeed, Society's identity is inextricably bound up with its visibility; from its point
of view, the invisible simply does not exist.

Because Society makes up the "Eye of the Great World" (p. 655) whose cynosure it covets, all its perceptions are ultimately self-perceptions, and all of its imaginative acts involve nothing more than the singularly unimaginative translation of the world into its own mirror image. As the object, rather than the subject, of its own scrutiny, Society must necessarily fail in artistic terms, for willing to perceive nothing other than itself, and so to create nothing other than what it sees (i.e., itself), Society can believe in nothing other than itself — which is to say that it perforce believes in nothing. Such a moral and aesthetic condition links Society explicitly with Henry Gowan, who likewise neither perceives nor believes in anything other than himself, and identifies its failures of imagination with Gowan's artistic shortcomings.

Dickens's main concern remains that of figuring forth the unseen, and he does so in part by showing invisibility to be a function more of subject than of object. The world seems evanescent and finally even non-existent because characters refuse to see it in its true form, or because they force it to conform to false or limited frames of reference which are themselves nothing more than aspects of the visible world to which they are applied. Upon his liberation from the Marshalsea, for example, William Dorrit "now saw everything through their wealth" (p. 670); Fanny Dorrit can only watch her father-in-law through "waters of vexation" that "had the effect of making the famous Mr. Merdle, in going down the street, appear to leap, and waltz, and gyrate" (p. 767). Mrs. Clennam finds "the world
... narrowed to these dimensions" (p. 231); and Mrs. General strains all of Italy through her own spurious sieve, "taking all of the colour out of everything, as Nature and Art had taken it out of herself; writing Prunes and Prisms in Mr. Eustace's text, wherever she could lay a hand; looking everywhere for Mr. Eustace and company, and seeing nothing else; scratching up the driest little bones of antiquity and bolting them without any human visitings" (p. 671).

Mrs. General's response to the Roman ruins epitomizes Social perception, which shows itself to be a sterile transformation of circumstance into a narrow and artificial model of it. Though fictive, such a mode of orientation to experience is also patently unimaginative, not only because of its narrowness, but also because of its refusal to take into account the human element ("visitings"). The way Amy Dorrit comprehends the same scene reveals a diametrically opposite mode of perception. Like Mrs. General, Amy makes sense of the "ruins of the vast old Amphitheatre, of the old Temples, of the old commemorative Arches, of the old trodden highways, of the old tombs" by seeing them imaginatively, that is, by placing them in an invisible context. But whereas Mrs. General's epistemic technique is to establish and maintain an aesthetic distance between herself and what she sees, and to diminish what she sees by divorcing it from the world of feeling, Amy locates what she sees within a wider moral scheme that is intrinsically human -- and at the same time subordinates herself to the object of perception. The ruins, "besides being what they were, to her were ruins of the old Marshalsea -- ruins of her own old life -- ruins of the faces and forms that of old peopled it -- ruins of its loves, hopes, cares, and joys" (p. 671). Viewing ancient
Rome in terms of an expanded and intensely human frame of reference allows Amy to see it as it truly is, as one of "two ruined spheres of action and suffering" (p. 671) which unite present and past and bestow on them an identity attainable only in the context of human action. Although Fanny dismisses her as "Miss Bat" and "little mole, . . . the blindest of the blind" (p. 645), Amy clearly is capable of the deepest, most complex and penetrating vision in the novel.

The same stereoptic quality characterizes her response to Italy in general. Amy's emerges as a kind of converging double vision which encompasses the depth, breadth and height of human experience, as well as the affective texture that, once apprehended, bestows upon life the reality and visibility it otherwise lacks. Necessarily imaginative, the primary act of mind is more imaginative in Little Dorrit than in any other character in the novel. Thus Amy spends most of her unhappy Italian sojourn simply watching: "she would musingly watch [the river] running as if, in the general vision, it might run dry, and show her the prison, and herself" (p. 520). Correspondingly, what she sees inevitably dwarfs Amy's already "little figure." Standing on the hotel balcony, "Little Dorrit was little indeed" (p. 520), and threatens at any moment to vanish altogether. At the same time, however, Amy is no smaller or less significant than she appears to be at the beginning of the novel, when she "come[s] out like a little ghost, and vanish[es] away without a sound" (p. 127).

Although Affery regards her as "nothing, . . . a whim of [Mrs. Clennam's]" (p. 80), Little Dorrit's evasiveness differs dramatically from that of Mr. Merdle, who similarly shrinks and subsides whenever
he finds "himself observed or listened to." Merdle seems always about to disappear because he is himself nothing; Amy precisely because she is something. Merdle's role with respect to the world around him, like that of Midas with respect to the world around him, is essentially to reify it; Amy's role is to realize everything she touches. The true nature of Amy's invisibility discloses itself near the end of the novel, when Clennam recognizes her as the "vanishing-point" in "his own poor story":

Everything in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had travelled thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before it; it was the centre of interest in his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond, there was nothing but mere waste and darkened sky (p. 802).

In many ways, Little Dorrit itself focuses on the vanishing-point passage, and Richard Stang does not mistakenly find Amy the vanishing point "in the same sense Cordelia would be considered the vanishing point in the design that is King Lear." Stang continues: "Here Dickens uses the language of realistic perspective painting as practiced since Piero della Francesca, painting that aimed to give the illusion of real space rather than the sort of highly stylized and grotesque vision of the preceding passage describing the English tourists." The correspondence between the vanishing point in Renaissance art and its Dickensian counterpart might usefully be pursued. Da Vinci's "perspective of disappearance" required the artist to identify, with mirrors, the point at which all background faded into nothingness; transferring such a point to his own canvas,
the artist could enhance the reality of what he depicted. Just as Dickens makes Amy Dorrit the vanishing point in his canvas, so Amy comes to occupy the same position in the canvas of Arthur Clennam's perceptions. As the "vanishing-point" Amy -- precisely because of her ability to melt into the background -- makes the unseen seen, eventually endowing the invisible with identity, dimension, and, ultimately, reality.

The vanishing-point passage derives significance from areas other than those which establish the nature of Amy's relation to her surroundings, for it also announces Clennam's ascension to the mode of artistic perception Little Dorrit both practices and personifies. In Clennam Dickens dramatizes the education of the imagination. Throughout the narrative, the imaginative conversions Clennam makes serve only partially as foils for the techniques of fictionalization whereby other characters in the novel either destructively or self-destructively orient themselves to reality. Although Clennam's fancy often works in bono, many of the ways in which he confronts experience resemble nothing so strongly as those with which Mrs. Clennam and Society alter the external world. It is only during his imprisonment that Clennam learns definitely not only Showalter's "right kind of remembering" but equally, if not more, important, the right kind of imagining which allows him at last to attain the moral and artistic status only Amy Dorrit and Daniel Doyce claim consistently.

In the present sense, Larson mistakenly supposes that Doyce "finally reflects Dickens's skepticism toward the Romantic artist" because he
has no apprentices. 37 To draw such a conclusion is not just to read much too allegorically the relation between Doyce as inventor and Doyce as artist (Doycean invention is art) but further to overlook Clennam's own role as Doyce's apprentice. Quite simply, Clennam learns the mode of vision which allows Dickens to describe Doyce thus:

He had the power, often to be found in union with such a character, of explaining what he himself perceived, and meant, with the direct force and distinctness with which it struck his own mind. . . . There was something almost ludicrous in the complete irreconcilability of a vague, conventional notion that he must be a visionary man with the precise, sagacious travelling of his eye and thumb over the plans. . . . His dismissal of himself from his description was hardly less remarkable. He never said, I discovered this adaptation or invented that combination; but showed the whole thing as if the Divine artificer had made it and he had happened to find it (p. 570).

Throughout his characterization of Doyce, Dickens stresses that the inventor is not only a Maker-see but that he is a Maker-see because he is primarily a seer -- a "visionary man" whose representations of reality depend first upon an imaginative perception of that reality and second upon an investment of faith in it. Doyce's emerges as exactly the same sort of acuity which allows Amy Dorrit to see "in [Clennam] what no one else could see" (p. 432). That acuity consists in an ability to grasp the nature of what cannot be seen but only represented, and indeed which can be known directly only through faith -- "the evidence," as St. Paul had it, "of things not seen." Thus Doyce regards the work of the "Divine artificer" with "a pleasant touch of respect, . . . mingled with [a] quiet admiration
of it . . . so calmly convinced he was that it was established on ir-
refragable laws" (p. 570). Amy likewise allows her faith, for example
in her father's former self, to contradict what seems to be true of him,
saying to herself "in a burst of sorrow and compassion 'No, no, I have
never seen him in my life!'" (p. 276).

By contrast, an absence of faith appears to cripple Clennam's mode
of imaginative apprehension from the beginning. Fancy provides him a
means of escape from experience, and Clennam consciously resists the
possibility that fancy may also be used to comprehend experience. His
relation to Flora Finching reflects his infidelity to his own
imaginative perceptions, "for while all that was hard and stern in his
recollection, remained Reality on being proved -- was obdurate to the
sight and touch, and relaxed nothing of its old indomitable grimness --
the one tender recollection of his experience would not bear the same
test, and melted away" (p. 206). Clennam's subsequent fictions
likewise falsify rather than verify the morally real, because implicitly
they verify only what is visible, and because they quite literally
presuppose an investment of faith in nothing. The Nobody fictions
provide a perfect case in point, and resemble far more the mental
machinations which allow Society to convert what it perceives into
emptiness and anonymity than, for example, Little Dorrit's imaginative
transpositions of Italy and the Marshalsea, or Daniel Doyce's talent
for rendering the invisible visible.

Yet Clennam's initial failure consciously to invest moral confidence
in what he grasps imaginatively should not be confused with a simple
lack of faith, for it is less the case that Clennam lacks faith itself
than that he lacks either the will or the ability to acknowledge the
convictions he does possess: "He was a dreamer in such wise, because he was a man who had, deep-rooted in his nature, a belief in all the gentle and good things his life had been without" (p. 206). Amy's love for Clennam emerges as synecdoche for the invisible moral reality that can only be grasped imaginatively; throughout most of the novel, Clennam's attempts to invest his faith in the shabbier fabric of experience the world seems to offer him (objectified in the misbegotten Merdle investments) preclude the creativity and intelligence of vision that would allow him to perceive and acknowledge that reality. Thus "he heard the thrill in [Amy's] voice, he saw her earnest face, he saw her clear true eyes . . . and the remotest suspicion of the truth never dawned upon his mind. No. He saw the devoted little creature with her worn shoes, in her common dress, in her jail-home; . . . and the light of her domestic story made all else dark to him" (p. 433).

During his long imprisonment and illness, Clennam ceases gradually to evade experience by translating it into the fanciful constructions which underscored his affinity with William Dorrit. Instead, he learns to substitute for the immediate reality of the prison the underlying moral reality which encompasses and qualifies it, and which can only be known while he is "dozing and dreaming without power of reckoning time." The fusion of dream and fact that informs Little Dorrit's return reflects the extent to which imaginative constructs have become for Clennam not just a means of tolerating the burdensome bell he hears at the beginning of the novel, or the painful fact that Pet Meagles is not in love with him, but, above all, modes of apprehending comprehensively and accurately a moral actuality that can be known in no other way. Little Dorrit appears to step out of Clennam's own fantasy: "the door of his room
seemed to open to a light touch, and ... a quiet figure seemed to stand there, with a black mantle on it. It seemed to draw the mantle off and drop it on the ground, and then seemed to be his Little Dorrit in her old, worn dress. It seemed to tremble and to clasp its hands, and to smile, and to burst into tears" (pp. 824-25). But at the same time Clennam also recognizes Amy to be "a living presence," and no longer simply the "heroine" of a "domestic story." The virtually invisible Little Dorrit becomes visible in her true form only after "the Pupil of the Marshalsea" has cultivated his own mental vision, suspended disbelief, and learned to extend the frontiers of his own imagination. Amy, in other words, is not the only necessary angel to descend at the end of Little Dorrit.

In addition to the imaginative faith almost entirely absent from his earlier attempts to orient himself to reality, Clennam learns what might be called imaginative charity. Throughout Little Dorrit Clennam-esque fancy defines itself in terms of its inwardsness; almost to the last, Clennam shares his extraordinarily private fictions with no one. Consequently, they intensify the chronic melancholy that imprisons and threatens to destroy him. Like the Nobody fictions, the Flora Finching fictions of his youth demonstrate Clennam's imaginative isolation in middle age:

In his youth he had ardently loved this woman, and had heaped upon her all the locked-up wealth of his affection and imagination. That wealth had been, in his desert home, like Robinson Crusoe's money; exchangeable with no one, lying idle in the dark to rust until he poured it out for her. Ever since that memorable time he had, until the night of his arrival, as completely dismissed her from any association with his Present or Future as if
she had been dead. . . [H]e had kept
the old fancy of the Past unchanged, in
its old sacred place (p. 191).

This doomed hoarding of fictions parallels those of Chivery, with
his secret epitaphs, and Affery, with her uncommunicated "dreams," and
it counterpoints the outwardness of Amy's and Doyce's imaginative
lives. Doyce's designs automatically objectify his own recognitions:

for him to see is, again in Browning's terms, simultaneously to see
and to impart the gift of seeing to the rest. Amy reflects even more
clearly the Pauline willingness to communicate that is indispensable
to the truly artistic vision. Story, in fact, turns out to be one
of the few currencies Amy possesses, and she dispenses it freely.
Four examples will illustrate the principle of narrative charity Amy
embodies -- a principle which sets her apart from Affery, who steadfastly
keeps her dreams to herself even when to articulate them would be to
dispel some of the circumstantial murk that permeates the house of
Clennam.

The scene in which Amy introduces Maggy to Clennam seems minor
enough until one begins to examine its narrative texture, for in it
Amy tells Maggy's "history," adopting the "tone of telling a child's
story" (p. 143), and concluding the pathetic tale on a note of utterly
false cheer: "'And that,' said Little Dorrit, clapping the two great
hands together, 'is Maggy's history as Maggy knows!'" In the course
of the story, Amy at once fictionalizes and realizes experience;
indeed, she can only impart the truth of Maggy's situation in the guise
of a fiction, for in this case story emerges as the only conscionable
mode of communication, and one which preserves Maggy's dignity at the
same time that it manages to convey to Clennam the story within the story, and the actual horror of Maggy's past.

Many zealous critics have scrutinized the curious "Tale of the Princess," yet the story resists elucidation, suggesting its own centrality to the theme of narrative that runs through Little Dorrit (it is after all the only explicit story in the novel) without yielding up the exact nature of its relation to the rest of the book. Randolph Splitter dismisses the story as "a sentimental fairy tale about [Little Dorrit's] secret Prince Charming";\textsuperscript{38} for Larson, the telling of the tale constitutes an "escape into a confessional story . . . both necessary and finally unsuccessful in opening a new way of salvation for the suffering soul" and indicating "only the failure of narrative in the face of realities in which 'princesses know more than fairy tales promise.'"\textsuperscript{39} Carlisle finds the story nothing more than Amy Dorrit's "grotesque comment on her sense of identity: she becomes a corpse united to a shadow."\textsuperscript{40}

In fact, the tale's psychological value to Little Dorrit (for Barbara Hardy the story is "uttered . . . reticently, in release and relief")\textsuperscript{41} remains secondary to its significance to the concept of fictionalization Dickens figures forth in the course of the novel. The tale, like all of Little Dorrit's narratives, is designed to reveal the structure of reality -- in this case, the nature of Amy's feeling for Arthur Clennam. It does so through indirection, by translating affective facts into images which reflect their true identity in a way overt, factual statement could not. Amy's love for Clennam can only be apprehended imaginatively; abstract and invisible,
it refuses to be known except in a series of fictive reflections of itself. If love may be taken as one of the moral realities which can only be communicated and comprehended through techniques of fictionalization, the story's function becomes apparent. As an equally imaginative and communicative act, narrative emerges as a truly moral mode of discourse: the "Tale of the Princess" illustrates the mechanisms of indirection whereby fiction confronts reality, absorbs it, and at last gives it up again in its true form.

The story is far more successful than Larson supposes in imparting to Maggy the truths it illuminates. Maggy herself can only comprehend Little Dorrit's meaning by translating it into her own private lexicon, which equates love with "chicking" and "the Hospital." Perceiving the absence of love to afflict Little Dorrit's "tiny woman," Maggy proposes that "they ought to have took her to the Hospital, . . . and then she'd have got over it" (p. 342). More to the point, the story mirrors exactly the actual spiritual states of the characters it translates into their fictional counterparts. Arthur Clennam, by this time immersed in the Nobody fictions, is a shadow, and the story furthermore recognizes the fate both of hoarded fictions and of those who hoard them.

Amy's two letters to Clennam most clearly mirror the right use of the imagination as a mode of moral knowledge. They emphasize the comprehensiveness and empathy of vision possible only through a conscientious application of the imagination. The letters themselves are stories which reveal only through indirection a number of moral realities, the state of Pet's marriage to Gowan and Amy's feeling for Clennam chief among them. In the letters Amy adopts a number of points
of view — most notably those of Clennam ("I had only been watchful for you, and had only noticed what I think I have noticed, because I was quickened by your own interest in it" [p. 608]) and Pet ("I fancy I don't look at it with my own eyes, but with hers" [p. 605]) -- each time surrendering herself to the alternative points of view that allow her to envision and correspondingly to reveal the truth about what she sees.

   Indeed, Amy's meditations take the steadfastly subjunctive mood by which Clennam represents to himself the moral realities he comes to believe in at the end of the novel. "I could not keep it out of my mind," Amy writes, "that if I was Mrs. Gowan ... I should feel that I was rather lonely and lost, for the want of some one who was steadfast and firm in purpose. I even thought she felt this want a little, almost without knowing it. But mind you are not made uneasy by this, for she was 'very well and very happy.' And she looked most beautiful" (p. 521). The narrative mode, and the imaginative transpositions it requires in order to exist, allow Amy to reveal the stable pattern underlying the ambiguous texture of fact that has presented itself to her. A multiplicity of perspectives, each attained through an imaginative projection of self into other, ultimately reveals the truth. Amy looks simultaneously through Clennam's eyes, through Pet's eyes, through her own "I," and through the eternal frame of reference, the prison bars. The act is as sympathetic as it is imaginative, as moral as it is fictional.

   Mutatis mutandis, Little Dorrit itself deliberately assumes a number of perspectives, in striking contrast to the other "dark novels," Bleak House and Great Expectations, with their rigorous adherence to
one or two discrete points of view. Dickens's monthly number plans for Little Dorrit reveal a determination to incorporate into the story as many points of view as possible. Devising the "Moving in Society" chapter, for example, Dickens decides that everything will be "indistinctly seen, as Little Dorrit saw it"; his notes for the "History of a Self-Tormentor" read: "From her own point of view. Dissect it"; approaching the end of the novel, Dickens resolves to "tell the whole story, working it out as much as possible through Mrs. Clennam herself." Little Dorrit comprises a dizzying number of perspectives, becoming a tale told by everybody and by nobody -- exactly as everybody and yet nobody sees the events it describes. At the same time, the novel acknowledges the dependence of all moral determinations upon point of view, suggesting that the angle of perception (like the angle of incidence) inevitably determines the meaning of what is seen (the angle of reflection).

Dickens begins one of the critical chapters in Book One, "Little Dorrit's Party," by remarking that "this history must sometimes see with Little Dorrit's eyes, and shall begin that course by seeing [Arthur Clennam]" (p. 208). The subsequent narrative, which includes the imaginative conversion of the stars into dancers at a party, emphasizes the contingency of meaning upon the orientation of the observer and, more important, upon the comprehensiveness of his point of view. Reality becomes an inevitably subjective phenomenon whose subjectivity can be vanquished only when it calls attention to itself and in calling attention to itself ironically extends itself. Thus Little Dorrit's view of Clennam's "dim room" is informed not only by the "courtly ideas, . . . costly ideas, . . . picturesque ideas" noted above, but also by "desolate
ideas, . . . teeming ideas" which "made the room dimmer than it was in Little Dorrit's eyes as they timidly saw it from the door" (p. 208). The comprehensiveness of Amy Dorrit's vision, in short, transcends its own subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Little Dorrit continues to stress the apparent relativity of meaning. At the convent of the Saint Bernard, William Dorrit insists "that the space was so -- ha -- hum -- so very contracted. More than that, it was always the same, always the same" (p. 493). The host, on the contrary, suffers no sense of confinement whatever -- "almost all objects had their various points of view, Monsieur, and he did not see this poor life of his from the same point of view. Monsieur was not used to confinement" (p. 493). Clearly Dorrit and the host occupy opposing imaginative poles, each identified by the extent to which perspectives are imaginatively widened, or imaginatively narrowed, as the case might be. Dorrit's inability to see the convent except in terms of his own history of confinement counterpoints the host's imaginative flexibility and the comprehensiveness of his mental vision: "Monsieur could not easily place himself in the position of a person who had not the power to choose, I will go here to-morrow, or there next day; I will pass these barriers, I will enlarge those bounds. Monsieur could not realize, perhaps, how the mind accommodated itself to such things in the force of necessity" (p. 494).

The irony, of course, is that "Monsieur" has spent the first half of the novel "in the position of a person who had not the power to choose"; his failure to recall that "position" underscores his imaginative feebleness. Finally, Ferdinand Barnacle's visit to the imprisoned and afflicted Arthur Clennam includes a most enlightening
discourse on moral optics and their relation to the Circumlocution Office, whose identity the engaging young Barnacle correctly finds to depend on the perspective from which it is studied. "'You don't regard it from the right point of view,'" Barnacle tells Clennam. "It is the point of view that is the essential thing. Regard our place from the point of view that we only ask you to leave us alone, and we are as capital a Department as you'll find anywhere. . . . Look at it from the right point of view and there you have us -- official and effectual!" (p. 804).

The "right point of view" Barnacle proposes is of course very much the wrong point of view, but his glib assertions to the contrary bring to the surface the questions about "right" and "wrong" perspective which underlie Little Dorrit from the beginning. There would seem to exist no definite standard to determine which perceptions are wrong and which right: all perceptions -- all imaginative orientations to reality -- their inevitability notwithstanding, must be held suspect. (In terms of modern literary theory, all texts are indeterminate in meaning and all interpretations are therefore equally valid.) Clennam's ultimate response to Little Dorrit would seem to reinforce such a notion, for it too appears to confirm moral and aesthetic relativity: "The same deep timid earnestness that he had always seen in her, and never without emotion, he saw still. If it had any new meaning that smote him to the heart, the change was in his perception, not in her" (p. 826). A closer examination of the passage, however, especially in the context of the ideas of comprehensiveness of vision and imaginative extension Dickens develops in the course of the novel, discovers not what Larson calls "the puzzlement of the artist trying
to speak 'the plain truth' in a world of 'twilight judgments, mists and obscurities' where fiction seems inevitable and inevitably morally ambiguous," but rather an affirmation of truly artistic vision, and of the 'right perception' it brings with it.

Although insistent upon a multiplicity of points of view, Dickens never truly denies the possibility of right perspective, often confirming that possibility in negative terms which illustrate the wrongness of certain points of view. All such moral and aesthetic vantage points nevertheless share at least two common features: they are egocentric and they are correspondingly limited and self-imprisoning. Mrs. Clennam's perspective, for example, amounts to an absence of perspective, an imaginative confinement reflected in a moral and aesthetic universe so "narrowed" that its sole occupant loses all ability to conceive of the world outside her room. Miss Wade prides herself on her observational acuity ("From a very early age I have detected what those about me thought they hid from me" [p. 725]), but her "history" demonstrates nothing so clearly as the narrowness, rigidity, and perverse narcissism that control her imaginative life.

Because Little Dorrit itself, like Amy Dorrit's fictions, incorporates numerous points of view, Miss Wade's "history" betrays its own limitations and ultimately its own utter inaccuracy as a mirror of reality, i.e., as an account of her past and an explanation of her present. One sees at once, for instance, that what Miss Wade interprets as "fair words and fair pretences" to be "penetrated below" (p. 728) are actually gestures of kindness. Yet little in the "History of a Self-Tormentor" itself (its title aside) distinguishes it from the work of a legitimately enraged imagination like that of Jane Eyre.
What exposes the illegitimacy of the "history" is in part the narrative technique of the novel in which it appears, which has already approached Miss Wade from a number of directions. The novel asks of its reader a comprehensiveness of vision which will permit him to reject Miss Wade's perceptions as false and limited. Indeed, Dickens went to great pains to weave the "history" into Little Dorrit, expressing to his biographer John Forster the intention of "mak[ing] the blo[ok of the book circulate through both." Precisely because the blood of the book circulates through both the main and the interpolated story, Miss Wade's narrative lends itself to a study of perspective in Little Dorrit: by presenting several points of view and demanding not that the reader choose among them, but rather that he take all of them into account, the novel transcends each of the discrete perspectives it encompasses and comments upon all of them so delicately and indirectly as to reveal unquestionably the psychological, social, and moral realities they express synecdochally.

Ultimately the novel forms its own comprehensive and multifarious point of view, which in its comprehensiveness and internal diversity -- in its imaginativeness -- represents a reality external to itself in a way most of the fictions it incorporates and describes could not hope to do. It is only by understanding Little Dorrit's own point of view, and the way it achieves that point of view through the sympathetic and imaginative adoption of a multiplicity of perspectives, that one can begin to accept the possibility that certain perceptions are indeed more right than others, and that what makes them so is the degree of artistic and imaginative integrity with which they have been achieved. For to take a number of points of view is necessarily an imaginative
feat, involving ultimately the creative conversion of perceived experience into something other than what it appears to be. Thus Dickens can not only state but further affirm that "none of us clearly know to whom or to what we are indebted in this wise, until some marked stop in the whirling wheel of life brings the right perception with it" (p. 787). When Amy Dorrit returns to Clennam he sees her less from an altogether novel perspective than from a more complex and inclusive and novelistic one: "The same deep timid earnestness he had always seen in her . . . he saw still."

The path from the acts of fictionalization whereby all characters in *Little Dorrit* orient themselves to experience, through the fictions which elucidate and communicate the nature of reality, to the determination that the frontiers of imagination are to be extended rather than denied is a steep and treacherous one indeed. Deliberately complex and ambiguous, the novel approaches from a number of perspectives a vision of human reality which at last can only be inferred imaginatively from the clues the narrative itself provides. Dickens's intention would seem to be less to announce the nature of reality by making a number of moral and social pronouncements upon the subject of mutual human indebtedness, or the necessity of love, than to explore and even to celebrate the avenues of imagination whereby the real is at last perceived.
NOTES

1 Barbara Hardy, Tellers and Listeners (London, 1975), p. 3.


3 Charles Dickens, Little Dorrit, p. 725. All citations from the novel are from the Penguin edition of Little Dorrit (Harmondsworth, 1967). Future references will be incorporated into the text.


8 Carlisle, p. 211.


10 Showalter, p. 25.


13 Stewart, p. 183.


18 Holloway, p. 27.


20 Carlisle, p. 197.


22 Carlisle, p. 198.


25 The converse is true of William Dorrit, who at the end of Book One acquires formally the fortune he has possessed unknowingly from the beginning.


29 Stewart, p. 182.

30 Showalter, p. 35.

31 Larson, p. 140.

32 Barrett, p. 214.

33 Showalter, p. 33.

34 Trilling, p. xv.


36 Stang, p. 156.

37 Larson, p. 163.

38 Splitter, p. 129.

39 Larson, p. 177.

41 Hardy, p. 173.

42 Herring, p. 34.

43 Herring, p. 50.

44 Herring, p. 60.


46 These of course stand in dramatic contrast to the comprehensiveness and affective richness of Amy Dorrit's perceptions, which affirm the possibility of "right perspective" in positive terms.

47 Dickens in Forster, p. 185.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Butt, John E. "The Topicality of Little Dorrit." University of Toronto Quarterly 29 (October, 1959), 1-10.


Nethercot, Arthur H. "Prunes and Miss Prism." Modern Drama 6 (May, 1963), 112-16.


Sadoff, Dianne F. "Storytelling and the Figure of the Father in Little Dorrit." PMLA 95, 234-45.


Smith, Grahame and Angela. "Dickens as a Popular Artist." Dickensian (September, 1971), 131-41.


VITA

Jayne Elizabeth Lewis