

Imagination, Memory, and Myth: Dickens' Religious Vision

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Dickens responded to the emerging religious crisis in the early 19th century by confronting the schism between religion and the imagination, creating in the process a new prophetic vision based on the traditional mythic patterns of popular culture, yet relevant to a Victorian audience – a Christian myth for the bourgeois man. Moving from its early manifestation in The Old Curiosity Shop to later novels such as Little Dorrit, Dickens' myth describes the attempt to reconcile the opposing states of innocence and experience, innocence representing the desire to remain unformed, pure, and primitive, and experience representing the necessity of moving forward into the immanent world of social reality and change.

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In choosing to write about the religious in Dickens, I have not limited myself to what might normally be thought of as religion - his doctrinal beliefs, or his weekly church attendance, for example. Such habits have already been well documented. Dennis Walder, for instance, has identified Dickens as a "liberal Protestant with radical, Romantic leaningsⁱ" and while this may be true, it does not, in my opinion, address the question of Dickens' "religion" in the broadest sense of that word, and risks missing its crucial essence. Dickens' prophetic vision should not be reduced to his use of religious language. It is obvious that Dickens is capable of using almost any form of language which suits his purposes. In his Appeal to Fallen Women, for instance, he does a fair imitation of Jonathan Edwards: "And by that dreadful day, and by the Judgment that will follow it, and by the recollection you are certain to have then, when it is too late, of the offer that is made to you now, when it is NOT too late, I implore you to think of it, and weigh it well!" (repr. in Oliver Twist [Norton Critical Edition] pp. 382). There is a very real sense in which this kind of language actually indicates something important about Dickens, yet nobody would argue that Dickens and hell-fire Calvinism ought to be readily conjoined. To a certain extent, it is perhaps too easy to take Dickens' expressions of piety at face value. What strikes me as a more convincing and reliable approximation of faith in Dickens are the structures of meaning created by the novels themselves. I would agree with Chesterton that Dickens' novels are in essence a single, tremendous masterpieceⁱⁱ (to be taken seriously, I believe I must call it an *oeuvre*), and that they constitute a comprehensive, thematic argument for the recreation of meaning in response to the crisis of Victorian society.

In regarding this as a religious issue, I am relying on a characteristically Romantic unity between religion and literature. Blake, for instance, saw his poetry as no less a prophetic oracle than those uttered by Ezekiel and Isaiah, and belonging to the same tradition. Critically speaking, a religious narrative such as Christianity functions

in much the same way as a Dickens novel. Both are crisis narratives: they arise in response to the recognition of a specific problem, such as death. And in both cases, the mode of discourse is parabolic: the narratives do not operate through direct address, but instead resolve themselves through a process of identification. The identification between reader and character invites the reader to "inhabit" the riddle of the text and in this way experience, along with the character, the process of salvationⁱⁱⁱ. Thus, I have frequently used the term "salvation" to describe this process in Dickens, with no intended irony. Salvation is what Danté finds at the end of The Divine Comedy. It is what Christian finds at the end of Pilgrim's Progress. And it is what Arthur Clennam finds at the end of Little Dorrit.

To put it simply, any meaning Dickens' novels might have attempted to create could not have existed apart from the issue of religion. The entire spectrum of religious, economic, and political activity in early Victorian society was characterized by the contradictions implied by the revival of religion, through the Evangelical movement, and the emphasis on progress and reason which it accompanied^{iv}. Evangelicalism had revived Christianity in England, breathing life into the mechanical, Deistic clock of the 18th century and giving rise to a powerful, nationalistic optimism^v. Evangelical conviction formed an unlikely but fruitful partnership with Benthamite Utilitarianism, and resulted in the great spirit of institutional liberalism which shaped Dickens' consciousness in the 1830's^{vi}. The New Poor Law of 1834, for instance, can be traced to the climate of "inquiry, legislation, execution, inspection, and report," the buzz-words which describe the Evangelical faith in formulae, data, and bureaucracy to accomplish reform. However, signs of instability underscored this trend. For instance, the great challenge of the Tractarians in the 1840's raised serious questions about the ultimate viability and direction of a religious spirit which denied tradition and authority in favor of reason and progress^{vii}. By 1848, the Chartist movement, infused with the spirit, if not the letter, of Evangelical determination^{viii}, had failed in its

revolutionary mission of universal suffrage, and the seams of Victorian society - Augustan rationalism on the one hand, fervent Christianity on the other - were going their own way^{ix}.

Thus, the Church was in a state of peril, having yoked itself to the forces of science, reason, and progress which were shortly to disown it. Evangelicalism would survive, but if Christianity were to remain constituted in primarily Evangelical terms, it would be destined to gradually fade from the national scene, unable to compete with the rising tide of secular naturalism. Thus, it is Dickens' purpose, as astutely identified by Walder, "to reconcile Christianity with the intellectual tendencies of the age and so save religion and the Church" (pp. 175), a task which meant reconstructing religion along its original foundations of mythology and imagination.

Hence, the Romantic tradition. A generation earlier, Blake had powerfully articulated the exhausted state of British society. Blake's apocalyptic vision of the spiritually draining effects of capitalism directly anticipates Dickens' most dramatic illustrations. To both poets, the relentless progression of intellectual and technological forces had sapped British society of its lifeblood, its vital, imaginative character. Blake's response explodes the manacles of natural religion, in particular, the cult of deism which dominated the late eighteenth century. The act of poetry would produce the apocalyptic energy necessary to obliterate society - the revolution of which Blake was a prophet - and remake it free of the constraints of reason. This vision stretches beyond the merely social and becomes a universal mode of crisis and resolution, structured in cosmic, supernatural terms.

Dickens' social vision has, at its core, the same desperation and vastness of scope which drives Blake's call for revolution. No novelist described so vividly the state of decay into which Victorian society had fallen, or the current of depraved evil which pulsed beneath the surface of gentility. This is where Dickens began his career, with novels such as Oliver Twist and The Old Curiosity Shop, and it is equally

characteristic of the later works such as Little Dorrit and Great Expectations. Yet, Dickens resisted Blake's call to revolution, and despite the persistent attempts of Marxist readers, cannot be easily compressed into such ideologically driven interpretation^x. Dickens' radicalism is, in the end, a different force than Blake's, although no less subversive. For both, however, the result is the same: the Christian tradition remains in place, realigned with the essential source of its being, the mythic energy which underlies all true art and religion.

It is this tendency of Dickens to express his metaphysical beliefs in social terms that has led those such as Walder to accuse Dickens of humanism. It is easy to forget Dickens' post-Romantic context and simply regard his stubborn desire to work out a place for spiritual authenticity within the structures of Victorian society as mere humanism, or even the kind of naturalism advocated by a later generation. Such a classification has raised accusations of religious parasitism. There is a sense that Dickens is not quite being honest, or is perhaps unwilling to admit his true lack of religious feeling. This, despite the fact that Dickens apparently saw no contradiction between the energy of Romanticism and the structures of Christianity - a union which has generally been rather coolly regarded by those who claim the latter belief for their own. Humphry House is typical of critics who apparently lack either the will or the ability to see an affirmative religious process occurring in Dickens: "His practical humanist kind of Christianity hardly touched the fringes of what is called religious experience, and his work shows no indication of any powerful feeling connected with a genuinely religious object,"^{xi} The genesis of this mistaken statement derives from two misconceptions. The first is that Dickens' religion is practical and humanist. This is probably true to the extent that all religion must be practical and humanist, or it would not survive. Humanism constitutes one level - the first - of Dickens' religious belief, but as we have seen, to imagine Dickens as simply a humanist is to deny the entire metaphysical arc of his imagination. The second misconception lies in the phrase

"religious object," which I suspect was defined differently by Dickens than by House. Dickens' religion did not begin at the door of the church, and therefore whatever powerful feelings for "religious objects" he might have harbored should not be determined by arbitrary classifications which he often deliberately reversed.

The refusal of a critic such as House to consider the possibility that Dickens actually felt deeply about religious issues is a curious trend running through Dickens criticism, echoed by A. O. J. Cockshut, who comes away from Little Dorrit with the impression that "while religion may be all right in theory, it is generally evil in its practical working"^{xii} One can only wonder at this assessment of such a deeply religious novel, but it seems to arise from the persistent tendency to separate Dickens into either of the categories he united in his fiction.

This position, as both visionary and humanist, has led to a certain type of invective which is reserved for those who manage to offend two opposing parties. Naturalists, who won the day in the 19th century, take the opportunity to demonstrate the limitless potential of bourgeois snobbery, deriding Dickens' sometimes groping attempts to put into words an imaginative vision which can barely be articulated, suspicious of anything with such popular, wide-spread appeal. Evangelical Christians choose to see the other side of Dickens, hesitating at his universalist language and unhidden promotion of ethical religion. Neither can see that the Dickens paradox emerges from attempting to unite these seemingly disparate camps. Dickens' imagination is primarily integrative, and therefore takes as its goal the unification of levels of meaning: as in all religion, the lives of ordinary people take on extraordinary, even supernatural, significance. This accounts for the disconcerting paranoia of Oliver Twist, for instance. There really is no good reason why Oliver *matters* so much - why, indeed, the entire universe conspires for his soul, except that in Dickens, a soul is not, as it is in George Eliot's humanism, a mere finite unit whose relative importance can only be exaggerated. Instead, the fate of a single soul is a skirmish in the ultimate

drama between good and evil, and the "ordinary" level of human affairs becomes a reflection of this infinite, eternal battle. This fact should give pause to those who wish to make bed-fellows out of Dickens and Eliot. It is just this kind of egotism which Eliot gives as Bulstrode's defining characteristic in Middlemarch. Eliot correctly saw it as the underlying belief - in her opinion, fallacy - behind all religious thinking.

Thus, Dickens' fiction tends to follow the patterns of religious narratives. In fact, the case can be argued that this does not go far enough - that the novels are not only religious, but Christian. This is not a "reclaim Dickens for Christianity" project, attempting to make use of the fact that Uriah is an unusual name to encounter in Victorian England. Rather, I would argue that, insofar as literature and religion are forms of each other, Dickens' novels and Christianity are the same *type* of literature, that they emerge from the same essential source, and that Dickens was aware of this. The Dickens universe is truly a kingdom of God turned upside down, in which shepherds speak as prophets, babes instruct the wise, and the question of what good can come from Nazareth becomes the most important of all. The dramatic, supernatural claims of Christianity will never settle with naturalists; neither will Dickens' bizarre, excessive modes of symbolism and narrative. Both are inherently revolutionary, and the strange, unaccounted success of both these traditions might ultimately be traced to the same source, which is the tendency of popular mythology to unite the ethical and social with the supernatural, and in doing so, to integrate visionary fantasy with realism^{xiii}.

In Christianity, these categories are known as immanence and transcendence, in philosophy, the ideal and the actual. The extent to which they are essentially unified is demonstrated by the typological connection between the finite and infinite. To bind on earth is to bind in heaven. To give a cup of water in this life is to guarantee a reward in the next. To call a brother a fool is to guarantee future punishment. These are Dickensian relationships. The Christian story, itself the kind of popular narrative

Dickens approved of, heightens this relationship into a state of such tension that the character of God is actually split in half, a paradox which culminates in the story of the crucifixion. Thus, both Dickens' novels and Christianity create the effect of investing the world of ordinary affairs with significance, containing the infinite within terms which are applicable and meaningful to the common man. As a result, both have not only survived, but flourished, and have out-last-ed their skeptical rivals^{xiv}.

It is not so much that readers are unfamiliar with this intention. But Christianity is not a novel, and its most natural descendants are drama and poetry^{xv}. Thus, Dickens puzzles because he does not fit into our ideas about what a novelist should be doing. Like King Lear, his great novels are too big for the stage. Indeed, we might only understand Dickens if we imagine what Milton or Blake might have come up with if they had tried to write a novel. As Henry James has told us, novels are supposed to be intensely focused on a narrowly defined human situation, and they should be written from an immense and impersonal distance; anything else risks being distasteful. Poetry is the personal form. It is poetry which allows the artist to pour out his soul in a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, to innovate with strange cadences, to build gigantic, sublime climaxes which seem to spring from some metaphysical source. Dickens, therefore, must have missed his true calling, and his place as a writer of novels must therefore be marked by a giant asterisk by those who determine what intellectuals ought to be reading.

Dickens has strayed from his true, secondary position as an inferior artist and infiltrated the preferred form of the "Great Tradition." He must be punished for this^{xvi}. Yet, this "low tradition" is the art of the people. It is the expression of popular religion. It is, by and large, the voice of humanity. To a Romantic such as Dickens, it is art devoted to its most natural and truest calling: it is the imagination engaged with the divine. The often clinical calculations of humanistic objectivity take a backseat to the subjective, transcendent experience of the poet fashioning coherent patterns of

meaning from the chaotic materials of human experience. This is the essence of *story* - and in it, Dickens finds his answer to the problems of his age.

I began to study Dickens for this reason, because I believe the contradictions and motivations he embodies symbolize much of the internal turmoil experienced in the Victorian era, and that this era in turn has much to tell us as we deal with similar issues today. Like the Victorians, who responded to the looming advances of modernism with the opposing forces of Romanticism and evangelical retrenchment, the late 20th century has turned to the new Romanticism of post-modernism and, once again, to evangelical fervor, to deal with the same threat. New Age spirituality and throngs of Promise Keeping, teary-eyed men are only new incarnations of an old insecurity, with which the Victorians were so famously familiar.

In this, my interest in Dickens gains a personal motivation. For those of us who oppose the modern project, in its many virulent forms, Dickens is a powerful ally: on the edge of the 21st century, he has never seemed so relevant. If we find ourselves frustrated by the spread of capitalism, we recognize Mr. Merdle from the business page of yesterday's New York Times. If we are concerned about the reductive and dehumanizing tendencies of science, it is because Mr. Bumble is alive and well. If we seek to reclaim tradition and a sense of the past, in a world which survives by erasing history even as it happens, then Little Nell's journey still speaks to us today. Thus, Dickens speaks uniquely to our era. He has been there already, and by studying Dickens we can get a sense of our options, what they cost, and what meaning they can give us as this century draws to a close.

The more closely I have read Dickens, the more I have become convinced that he anticipated our age. Dickens was truly a Victorian prophet; in his novels, the world of 20th century literature was already being formed. Northrop Frye has described this relationship in terms of absurdity: Kafka, Joyce, and others recognized that Dickens' great insight was into the inherently absurd nature of modernity^{xvii}. His novels are

concerned with the bizarre, the ridiculous, the macabre. Critics who tediously assert that Dickens is implausible are wasting their time. Implausibility in Dickens has a very specific purpose. It may be true that life is not like a Dickens novel, but that is only because life is not a story. Dickens makes us aware, once again, of the power and the possibility of story to connect us to a deep past, and in so doing, to engage us with a larger reality, to somehow bracket or contain the developments of modernism within the context of these universal patterns that we impose on life to give it meaning. In this project, Dickens is only reminding us of what we once knew, and called religion, and is reclaiming that great realm of the absurd from the nihilists who would call it meaninglessness. One should not discredit the possibility of nihilism peeking through most of Dickens' optimistic moments, but for Dickens, I believe the absurdity of literature was not a disempowering or a nihilistic proposition, but one which ultimately afforded great solace, and constituted his religious vision.

I have examined three novels in detail: The Old Curiosity Shop, David Copperfield, and Little Dorrit, and made reference to two others, Oliver Twist and Great Expectations. I have chosen these novels because they represent distinct - perhaps critical - stages in the process of Dickens' thinking. My methodology has made use of Steven Marcus' observation that Dickens' novels are analogical, in the sense that the novels are both self-contained and intertextual systems of comparison. Thus, I believe the novels only become complete when they are read as relational. This, of course, speaks to the general controversy as to the "unity" (or lack thereof) in Dickens^{xviii}. Why does Dickens insist on including the story of Martha in *David Copperfield*, for instance? Why is Miss Wade in *Little Dorrit*? These characters have no function in terms of a traditional linear plot, which is to say that the novels could just as easily have concluded without them. Yet, the density of Dickens' novels leads us to assume the importance of all of the characters as somehow constituting variations

of each other. Only when they are compared can they be seen in their proper context as variations on the underlying theme of the novel.

Therefore, let us examine the following novels and determine in what ways these ideas are confirmed, and in what ways they are modified.

1) *Oliver Twist*. Dickens' second novel is an aborted *Bildungsroman*, meaning Dickens intended to address the relationship between childhood and adult existence before realizing that he was utterly incapable of reconciling those two worlds at this stage in his career. In this failure, the novel evinces a remarkable paranoia which results from the fact that adults are vicious, demonic predators from which children are virtually incapable of defending themselves. Only the beneficent actions of a few generous adults save Oliver from the imminent threat of total annihilation which generates the novel's malevolent atmosphere. In Oliver Twist, Dickens gives us the paradox that childhood is the condition that we must be saved from, while at the same time constituting the only source of salvation. This is the Romantic, and Christian, paradigm from which Dickens' salvational construct emerges.^{xix}

2) *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It has been called Dickens' "least successful novel^{xx}" been derided for its mawkish sentimentality, psychoanalyzed for evidences of pedophilia and sadomasochism, and generally been claimed as a trophy for those who wish to embarrass Dickens as both an artist and a man^{xxi}. There is no question that it has deserved all of those things. Nevertheless, the novel is fascinating because it concentrates Dickens into his essential elements. The nightmare world of OCS gives the reader a string of connections which are varied and questioned throughout Dickens' career: childhood, women, death, purity, and the Christian church all form in this novel into a bizarre redemptive complex which opposes the destructive forces of masculinity, sexuality, time, will, and greed. Oliver reappears here, but Dickens this time recognizes the relationship between the static, eternally youthful condition which Oliver cannot grow out of, and death^{xxii}. The question of death is directly addressed in

this book as it is in almost no other, and the implications for Dickens' comprehensive religious project stretch throughout the canon.

3) *David Copperfield*. In this novel, Dickens finally proves capable of dramatizing the problem of childhood into a *Bildungsroman*, a story about the way in which a child grows up and finds his place in society. Oliver and Nell are revisited, but Dickens is now fully conscious of the fallacy of his earlier treatment of this theme. As in *Oliver Twist*, the question of class must be addressed, but its consequences - the possibility that maturation may lead to the very death of the soul which it is Dickens' intention to prevent - are clearly developed. Thus, *David Copperfield* can be seen as another attempt to tell the story of Nell in terms which are meaningfully affirmative.

4) *Little Dorrit*. *Old Curiosity Shop* and *David Copperfield* were both in some senses responses to crises: *OCS* to the death of Dickens' sister in law, Mary Hogarth, and *David Copperfield* to his personal and public desire to systematize, mythologize, and sanitize the story of his life. *Little Dorrit* is, I believe, also a crisis novel, and it is most to our purposes that it is a crisis of faith^{xxiii}. The novel has historically been criticized for its so-called "gloom", (and has therefore been used in a somewhat odd way by the Chestertonian enthusiasts who protest when they have a serious novel that it is too serious), but that is really its point. *Little Dorrit* comes closest to achieving as a novel that moment when nihilism peeks its head into Dickens world, and can therefore be seen as most prophetically anticipating the 20th century (I do not believe *The Wasteland* could have been written without it). To regard this interpretation as wholly constituting the significance of the book, however, is to totally misread the courageous authenticity of its ending. *Little Dorrit* confronts the problem generated by *David Copperfield*: Arthur Clennam's life is a failed *Bildungsroman*. He has indeed made the choice to grow up, and has been assailed by its worst consequences. The story of Arthur dramatizes the entire parabolic nature of Dickens' vision for Victorian society.

Arthur's eventual salvation completes the journey begun by Oliver and Little Nell, reconciling the demands of reason with faith, mature existence with childhood.

5) *Great Expectations*. Little Dorrit amounts to a full-scale assault on Victorian society, in Dickens' most excessive, metaphysical style. Great Expectations continues this skepticism, but in a more ironic, controlled mode. The novel combines the plot of David Copperfield with the skepticism of Little Dorrit, taking up the idea of the miraculous inheritance which comes all the way down from Oliver Twist and deepening it into a skepticism which infiltrates the foundations of Victorian society. In this, Great Expectations fully retracts the attempts at social compromise characteristic of the middle-period Dickens.

ⁱ Walder, "Dickens and Religion," 1981, pp.1 (Preface)

ⁱⁱ Chesterton, G.K., "Charles Dickens: A Critical Study," 1906, pp. 80-81

ⁱⁱⁱ Janet Larson, "Dickens and the Broken Scripture," 1985, pp. 55

^{iv} George Young calls Victorian history, "the story of the English mind employing the energy imparted by Evangelical conviction to rid itself of the restraints which Evangelicalism had laid on the senses and the intellect," a description which could stand as a thematic statement of Dickens' career.

^v Elisabeth Jay notes, "Mid nineteenth-century England thought of itself as a religious society. The intellectual atmosphere of the period cannot be fully appreciated without recognizing this...Mid eighteenth-century England, however, had been very different" ("The Oxford and Evangelical Movements," Introduction, 1983, pp. 1).

^{vi} Demonstrated so effectively by Oliver Twist, in which the rigid deterministic paradox of Calvinism combines with the ruthless efficiency of Malthusian economics to form a world-view which is aggressively threatening to everyone it encounters. Young emphasizes the connection between the two schools of thought: "The parallel operation of Evangelicalism and Utilitarianism cannot be ignored" ("Portrait of an Age," pp. 30).

^{vii} Jay comments, "The founders of the Oxford Movement perceived two arenas for spiritual warfare: Rationalism, or liberalism as it was more commonly called in the 1830's, and popular Evangelicalism. To be more precise they recognized certain inadequacies in the Evangelical response to Rationalism...Newman's consistent teaching...was to defend the primacy of faith in religion" ("Oxford and Evangelical Movements," pp. 9-10).

^{viii} Humphry House cites examples of the close relationship between the reform movements, such as Chartism, and evangelicalism: "These are not exceptional instances of sectarian fanaticism or mere eccentricity: the whole movement was saturated with religious, Christian feeling" ("The Dickens World," 1941, pp. 107).

^{ix} Young describes this condition as "a double paradox which its critics, within and without, called hypocrisy. Its practical ideals were at odds with its religious professions, and its religious beliefs were at issue with its intelligence" ("Portrait of an Age," pp. 34).

^x George Bernard Shaw thought Dickens was the vanguard of the Revolution: "This is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris, Carpenter, rising up against civilization itself as against a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible, and that it is not merely Tom All Alone's that must be demolished and abolished...but our entire social system" ("Introduction to Hard Times," 1912).

^{xi} "The Dickens World," pp. 131

^{xii} Cockshut is quite insistent that there is no such thing as religion in Little Dorrit: "It would seem that [Dickens] regarded religion as separate from the normal process of life - a kind of reserve area of feeling, a repository of pure and noble sentiments and of kindly moral impulses. So, if he was depressed or worried...he probably assumed...that religious thoughts were not appropriate to the situation" (Cockshut, A.O.J. "Imagination and Dickens," 1961, pp. 153).

^{xiii} Geoffrey Thurley recognizes this pattern in Oliver Twist: "It is not so much that we can see the sequence of events making up the narrative in 'two ways', or on two planes, as that we cannot fully

understand them unless both the social and the spiritual aspects are taken into account together" ("The Dickens Myth," 1976, pp. 38).

^{xiv} Chesterton describes this as a difference between fiction and mythology, calling Dickens the last and possibly greatest of the mythologists. "Fiction means the common things as seen by the uncommon people. Fairy tales means the uncommon things as seen by the common people" ("Dickens: A Critical Study," pp. 84).

^{xv} J. Hillis Miller describes the novel as a "post-Christian form of literature, a form which assumes that God is distant or dead" ("Three Problems of Fictional Form," printed in "Experience in the Novel," 1968, pp. 25).

^{xvi} Henry James says memorably, "We should, accordingly, call him the greatest of superficial novelists. We are aware that this definition confines him to an inferior rank in the department of letters which he adorns, but we accept this consequence of our proposition. It were, in our opinion, an offence against humanity to place Mr. Dickens among the greatest novelists" ("The Nation," I, 1865, pp. 786-787).

^{xvii} "For literary criticism the formulating of the theory of the absurd should not be left entirely to disillusioned theologians. In literature it is design, the forming and the shaping power, that is absurd. Real life does not start or stop; it never ties up loose ends; it never manifests meaning or purpose except by blind accident; it is never comic or tragic, ironic or romantic, or anything else that has a shape. Whatever gives form and pattern to fiction, whatever technical skill keeps us turning the pages to get to the end, is absurd, and contradicts our sense of reality" ("Dickens and the Comedy of Humors," printed in "Experience in the Novel," pp. 80).

^{xviii} George Orwell, for one, does not see any significant unity in Dickens' novels: "He is all fragments, all details – rotten architecture, but wonderful gargoyles" ("Inside the Whale," 1940)

^{xix} Steven Marcus, "From Pickwick to Dombey," 1965, pp. 129

^{xx} Aldous Huxley says, "There was something rather wrong with a man who could take this lachrymose and tremulous pleasure in adult infantility...A writer who can tearfully adore these stout or cadaverous old babies, snugly ensconced in their mental and economic womb-substitutes and sucking, between false teeth, their thumbs, must have something seriously amiss with his emotional constitution" ("Vulgarity in Literature," 1930, pp. 54-55)

^{xxi} "Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 51

^{xxi} Lionel Trilling assesses Dickens' mental condition at the time of *Little Dorrit*: "We may say of Dickens that...he was at a crisis of the will which is expressed in the characters and forces of the novel, in the extremity of its bitterness against the social will, in its vision of peace and selflessness" ("Introduction to *Little Dorrit*," printed in "The Opposing Self," 1950)

The Problem Clearly Stated: Childhood as a Form of Death in

The Old Curiosity Shop

"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Gospel of Matthew, 18:3).

"Ah Sun-flower! weary of time, / Who countest the steps of the Sun: / Seeking after that sweet golden clime / Where the travellers journey is done" (Ah! Sun-flower, William Blake)

Dickens' fourth novel came into being, appropriately, through a conjoining of fiction and reality. The death of his sister-in-law Mary Hogarth at the tender age of 17, three years earlier, forever transformed Mary into a Dickens' character: she became the blueprint for all of his later suffering, idealized heroines. Mary is a kind of angelic guide throughout Dickens' novels, returning again and again in different forms. She is Rose Maylie, Little Nell, Agnes Wickfield, Minnie Meagles, and Little Dorrit. Her antitheses - the women she did not become - also run throughout: Nancy, Martha, Rosa Dartle, Miss Wade, Fanny Dorrit. Her death was one of the most traumatic events of Dickens' adult life, and seemed to precipitate a kind of crisis of faith in which the Victorian consciousness of death became intensely personal. Surely this event did not suddenly give Dickens an awareness of death which lasted the rest of his life, but it might be said to have catalyzed itⁱ. This awareness can be seen as the most fundamental problem addressed by Dickens: his novels dramatize a quest for meaning, and the ultimate destroyer of meaning is death.

Old Curiosity Shop has an unusual genesis which accounts for the framing narrative of the opening three chapters. The novel was originally intended to be one of

a series of short stories in Dickens' miscellany periodical, Master Humphrey's Clock; however, circumstances led to the expansion of the tale replacing the planned seriesⁱⁱ. For this reason, the novel begins with a strange prologue narrated from the first person perspective of "Master Humphrey," a character whose late-night London walks grew out of Dickens' own nocturnal ambulations. This framing tale in some ways initiates the novel's autobiographical and meditative moods. Master Humphrey's ramble through the streets evokes the sensation of a mind rummaging loosely through its contents; the strange images of the walk, and especially, its continual return to the topic of mortality, is symptomatic of Dickens' obsession with Mary Hogarth's death at this time. Pausing near the Thames, he muses, "Where some...pause with heavier loads than they, remembering to have heard or read in some old time that drowning was not a hard death, but of all means of suicide the easiest and the best" (6). Whatever psychosis such speculation reveals is likely connected to his evident insomnia. In his restlessness, he connects his inability to sleep with a living death: "Think of a sick man...listening to the footsteps...the endless stream of life that will not stop, pouring on, on, on, through all his restless dreams, as if he were condemned to lie dead but conscious, in a noisy churchyard, and had no hope of rest for centuries to come" (6). These are the words of a tormented soul. Master Humphrey seeks salvation from this condition, and thus, his walks take the form of a quest. He is compelled to search for some truth about the human condition which is a function of darkness: "The glare and hurry of broad noon are not adapted to idle pursuits like mine; a glimpse of passing faces caught by the light of a street lamp or a shop window is often better for my purpose than their full revelation in the daylight" (6).

If the novel, which "arose out of one of these rambles" (7), does in fact fulfill the purpose to which Master Humphrey alludes, then it is the answer to a search for the meaning of mortality, and the sudden appearance of Little Nell becomes an allegorical or dream solution to the riddle of death. At the same time, the phrasing of the tale as a

chance encounter gives the novel a sense of perplexing exteriority; Master Humphrey does not understand the significance of his dream, nor does he interpret it. The death of Little Nell is the solution created by Master Humphrey's dream, but constitutes in itself another riddle.

Master Humphrey implies this when he admits that Little Nell "seemed to exist in a kind of allegory" and that this condition is part of the persistent hold she exerts on his imagination. The allegory also extends to her bizarre surroundings, particularly the curiosity shop which gives the novel its title: "Suits of mail standing like ghosts in armour here and there, fantastic carvings brought from monkish cloisters, rusty weapons of various kinds, distorted figures...tapestry and strange furniture that might have been designed in dreams" (10). This surreal jumble of artifacts brings together the ancient medieval classes of clergy, soldier, and nobility, all crammed into the great forgotten attic of time. The curiosity shop is a kind of storage shed for the past, in which outdated customs and beliefs are stored as useless artifacts.

Almost buried among the other artifacts is the grandfather: "wonderfully suited to the place; he might have groped among old churches and tombs and deserted houses and gathered all the spoils with his own hands" (10). He is a living relic, using archaic pronouns and carrying with him the worn, decrepit atmosphere of the shop. The sinister nature of the entire endeavor is implied in the final phrase, which foreshadows the grandfather's vices and links together the curiosity shop with its curator. The grandfather is the guardian of the past, a miser, a thief, and an obscene collector whose obsession is to plunder the worthless and forgotten relics of the past age.

The decision to retain the story's title, even following the expansion of the original story (in which the shop figures prominently), into a full-scale novel in which it virtually disappears, indicates that the setting of the curiosity shop has an important thematic implication for the novel. This is all the more significant given the nature of Dickens' early writing and this novel in particular: its non-linearity and non-realism

render theme as the only unifying element. The events of the story are not connected by logical motivation or chronology, but rather by thematic analogues, of which the curiosity shop is the first and possibly most important. Thus, the shop will be reconstructed and varied throughout the novel as Master Humphrey's dream shapes the question of mortality into different forms. The grouping together of "old churches, tombs, and deserted houses" as metaphorical extensions of the shop provides a key to the significance of the shop in its all of its permutations. All three settings are, in the novel, symbols of death; they represent a mode of existence which transcends time and reason. This mode can be seen as signifying both mind and society. As mind, it is the setting in which Master Humphrey's dream plays out, a dream world which will serve as the answer to his question and allow him, finally, to sleep. It is fraught with decay and cluttered with bizarre irrelevancies, its very nature tending towards death and the archaic. As society, it indicates that humanity itself exists in a kind of living death, of the nightmare sort described by Master Humphrey.

This could also be said of the characters, who are themselves organically related to their environment. The grandfather, for instance, is the personification of the shop: "There was nothing in the whole collection but was in keeping with himself; nothing that looked older or more worn than he" (10). He is, therefore, an extension of the environment, a possibility generated by the condition of the mind that has produced him. Little Nell, of course, is clearly differentiated from her grandfather in this regard. While he arises out of the shop like a phantom, Nell inhabits it like a fairy, "the only pure, fresh, youthful object in the throng" (19). Her tiny size and liveness are quickly understood as supernatural phenomena: "I saw a little bed that a fairy might have slept in, it looked so very small and was so prettily arranged" (10). This sense of dislocation becomes the predominant way in which Little Nell is described. Whereas other characters mimic or grow out of the curiosity shop, Nell is completely foreign to it. Master Humphrey understands this inherently: "And alone in the midst of all this

lumber and decay, and ugly age, the beautiful child in her gentle slumber, smiling through her light and sunny dreams" (20). Little Nell, it is clear, does not belong in this novel, a fact which ultimately becomes its central theme.

Therefore, Nell and her grandfather are differentiated in terms of their relationship to their environment. Nell, on the one hand, is a dramatic anomaly in the curiosity shop, while her grandfather is merely part of the furniture. The bizarre introduction of Quilp adds another dimension to this system. Quilp, like Nell, is not of this world; his own wife wonders "if he were really a human creature" (46), and he refers to his dwelling as "the ogre's castle" (522). Whereas Nell is described in terms of a fairy, however, Quilp is a being from the underworld, a dwarf. His "restless, sly, and cunning" black eyes, "discolored fangs," and coarse hands are indicative of a powerful corporeality, juxtaposed against Nell's small, "beautifully modelled" ethereality (82). Quilp seems to be in all places at once: he appears suddenly in the curiosity shop, on the top of Mrs. Nubble's carriage, in the wax-works museum, and in the tavern window as Kit passes. Thus, Quilp is dramatically present, while Nell inevitably diminishes towards absence. Further, while Nell's immaturity is linked with her essentially pre-sexual nature, Quilp conveys a sexual appetite of epic proportions. His undisguised lust for Nell is both repulsive and symptomatic of a child-like fantasy which makes no concessions to social decorum: "To be Mrs. Quilp the second, when Mrs. Quilp the first is dead, sweet Nell...to be my wife, my little cherry-cheeked, red-lipped wife" (53). This primitive sexuality is linked to a kind of bestial urge: "...besides gratifying at the same time that taste for doing something fantastic and monkey-like, which on all occasions had strong possession of him" (82). Quilp's voracious, pre-civilized appetites are not limited to sex, but extend to food as well: "He ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on...and with extraordinary greediness, drank boiling tea without winking..." (46). He seems even capable of devouring people: he sits down to eat "in a cannibal-like manner"

(522), and smacks his lips as if his wife is "actually a sweet-meat" (41). Thus, in all things, Quilp demonstrates the immanence and corporeality of the utterly egocentric, and in the mind-paradigm, he is the id itself.

On the other hand, Quilp is as alien to the curiosity shop environment as Nell. For instance, while both Nell and her grandfather waste away, Quilp is the picture of health. His frivolity and exuberance mock the grandfather's antiquity: he sports a constant "ghastly grin" (27), and he leaps, skips, and dances about in perpetual motion, combining humor and cruelty in an endless performance of visual innuendoes. Quilp is a stage villain, a throwback to the long vice tradition which found its Victorian expression in the anti-heroes of Gothic romances. Such a creation has no place amongst the crumbling, solemn relics of the curiosity shop, a fact borne out by Quilp's own long journey away from the curiosity shop world.

Quilp and Nell, therefore, share a common source; they are variations on the same characterⁱⁱⁱ. In fact, they *are* the same character, split apart at the deep level of the unconscious mind. The novel phrases the question of evil in absolute terms: good and evil are fundamentally distinct, and therefore, the essentially decayed nature of society means that salvation can only be imagined as a rejection of the world itself. In this, the novel conveys a Platonic universe, in which the perfected soul must inevitably tend towards the more stable, outer spheres, and away from the instability of earth. Physical matter, or the body, is inherently unstable and antagonistic to the pure spirit; thus, as the spirit tends towards its natural state, it ultimately rejects the body entirely, a process which ends in death. The inability of the novel to bring together Quilp and Nell into a whole person generates the mechanism of the parable, and salvation is figured as a progression which leads to death.

Instability is indicated primarily through the themes introduced by Master Humphrey, restlessness and change. The old curiosity shop, despite its perpetual odor of death, is such a place: for instance, the grandfather, following his illness, finds

himself fatigued by "the noise and motion in the streets" (100). He gazes through the window at a patch of nature, a welcome relief "to one who had been tossing on a restless bed so long" (102), suggesting "quiet places afar off, and rest, and peace" (102). His hopeful idea of escape is based on a desire "to lie down at night beneath an open sky like that yonder", rather than "close rooms which are always full of care and weary dreams" (103). Little Nell also finds herself lying awake at night, contemplating mortality: "The child sat...often far into the night, alone and thoughtful... Looking out into the street again, [she] would perhaps see a man passing with a coffin on his back..." (79). In fact, no character connected to the shop ever sleeps. Like Master Humphrey, Nell, her grandfather, Quilp, all remain awake at night, often wandering the streets. The curiosity shop - and the world it represents - is not simply a place of death, but a place of living death, the essence of Master Humphrey's insomniac nightmare which leads so easily to suicidal fantasy.

The contradictions engendered by the possibility of continuing to exist in a hellish medium between life and death extend to the center of the novel's salvation paradox. The novel's only solution to the problem of death is death. Thus, the quest for salvation in the form of stasis is repeatedly counteracted by the resurfacing, at each possible moment, of the curiosity shop, a nightmare world where death cannot satisfy. Dickens cannot help but see this, and the critical failure of the novel occurs as the novelist responds by depicting death in increasingly more vulgar terms, resulting in a gruesome, morbid infatuation which is commonly defined as sentimentality.

This can be seen in the first stage of the journey, which operates along the axis of a quest for freedom. Master Humphrey's caged birds, held against their will and against nature, are included in this structure: "Poor bird! the only neighbouring thing at all akin to the other little captives, some of whom...make old clerks who pass them on their road to business, wonder what has filled their breasts with visions of the country" (7). The symbol of light shortly incurs: "sparkling sunbeams dancing on chamber

windows...shed light even into dreams, and chased away the shadow of the night" (122) as a counter to this nightmare, which is always associated with darkness. Light brings freedom as well: "The nobler beasts stood motionless behind their bars, and gazed on fluttering boughs and sunshine... Men in their dungeons stretched their cramped cold limbs..." (123). To Nell and her grandfather, who have also been captive, "Nothing reminded them, otherwise than by contrast, of the monotony and constraint they had left behind..." (106). The result is a foreshadowing of the perfect stability sought by the travelers: "There was something solemn in the long, deserted streets, from which like bodies without souls all habitual character and expression had departed, leaving but one dead uniform repose, that made them all alike" (123). The problematic tendency of the novel is neatly contained in this passage. Nell and her grandfather experience the light and freedom they desire, conditions which are easily juxtaposed against the morbid finality of "dead uniform repose."

The underlying reality behind the beatific vision is in fact, quickly revealed; the morning light vanishes, replaced by the hellish suburbs of the poor: "Damp, rotten houses, many to let, many yet building, many half built and mouldering away..." (124). This setting reintroduces the restlessness and claustrophobia of inner London, recalling the curiosity shop in its overwhelming sense of decay and its reappropriation of wasted and forgotten materials: "brick-fields, skirting gardens paled with staves of old casks, or timber pillaged from houses burnt down and blackened and blistered by the flames" (124). In particular, the churches here offer only false thinking and exploitation: "Small dissenting chapels to teach, with no lack of illustration, the miseries of Earth, and plenty of new churches, erected with a little superfluous wealth, to show the way to Heaven" (124). The symbol resonates with irony, as Nell and her grandfather are pilgrims seeking exactly what the church ought to offer; however, its failure is evident in the squalor which surrounds it.

The Christian church, of course, is linked to the curiosity shop by way of the metaphor, "Old churches, tombs, and deserted houses," noted as the natural condition of the grandfather. As Nell and her grandfather move further from London, this metaphor intensifies, and the church emerges as the central point of tension in the novel's salvation structure. Clearly, the church has somehow failed in its mission. Like the curiosity shop, it is a place of death and nightmares. Yet, as a soul seeking death, Nell is drawn to it.

The church of chapter sixteen is old and gray, covered in ivy which serves the sad purpose of adorning the corpses with "the first wreaths they had ever won" (131). It is the home of the dead; more than this, however, it is the place where the dead are eaten: "The clergyman's horse...was cropping the grass; at once deriving orthodox consolation from the dead parishioners, and enforcing last Sunday's text that this was what all flesh came to" (131). The satire brands the church as a bizarre recycling center, in which its role as caretaker for the dead is figured as an act of cannibalism. Furthering this image is the introduction of a troupe of Punch and Judy players, perched among the tombstones. The allegorical significance is clear: their false appearances and charlatantry indicate the true nature of the church which gives them birth, while their placement in the graveyard indicates that they are another incarnation of the living dead who haunt the streets of London.

Mirroring these frauds, Nell encounters a flock of rooks whose nonsensical cacophony is a parody of the theological debate Dickens despised: "Then another spoke, and then another; and each time the first, aggravated by contradiction, insisted on his case more strongly" (137). The constant motion of the birds, "all this noisy contention amidst a skimming to and fro, and lighting on fresh branches and frequent change of place" contrasts with the stillness of the dead: [they] satirised the old restlessness of those who lay so still beneath the moss and turf below, and the useless strife in which they had worn away their lives" (137). In life, the church has seen only

useless bickering and turmoil, and death is the only gift it has to give its parishioners. As Nell continues through the graveyard, she encounters the interior of the church, a pathetic reminder of past days: "There were the seats where the poor old people sat, worn spare, and yellow like themselves...Everything told of long use and quiet slow decay; the very bell-rope was frayed into a fringe, and hoary with old age" (137). The thread connecting the church of the London poor through this rural church is a lost battle against death and time. In both cases, the struggle of the poor is in evidence, and in both cases, it is depicted as ultimately futile and meaningless. Only the rooks remain as embarrassing reminders of the struggle for life.

The final meditation on death in this setting occurs as a conversation which Nell has with a woman whose husband is buried in the graveyard. Standing over the grave, Nell mistakes the old woman for the young man's mother, forgetting the lapse of fifty-five years, and is corrected by the woman, who reminds her that "Death doesn't change us more than life, my dear" (138). In this paradigm, stasis and immortality conjoin. The woman elaborates on this philosophy by explaining that as she has grown older, she has learned to pleasure in her husband's eternal youth, "an exalting of his strength and manly beauty as compared with her own weakness and decay" (138). From this, she consoles herself with the belief that they will meet in another world, and that through his death, the moment of her youth has also become detached from herself and preserved eternally alongside of him. Thus, her relationship to death has changed: "When she first came to that place...she had hoped that her heart was breaking as it seemed to be...But that time passed by, and although she continued to be sad when she came there, still she could bear to come, and so went on until it was pain no longer, but a solemn pleasure, and a duty she had learnt to like" (138). This recalls Nell's own attraction to the cemetery: "She felt a curious kind of pleasure in lingering among these houses of the dead, and read the inscriptions on the tombs of the good people...passing on from one to the other with increasing interest" (136).

The woman's speech and its relationship to the church setting provides a key to the novel, a possible answer to the riddle of death. The woman offers as a solution the possibility of immortality through transcendence. Her husband is spared the corroding effects of time which are manifested everywhere in the church environment. This belief has so altered her conception of death that visiting the grave has become "a solemn pleasure." In terms of Little Nell's own impending death, it is easy to imagine Kit arriving at her graveside years later and rejoicing that she was spared the process of aging - preserving, in essence, her purity and youthfulness through her early departure. However, this gives rise to the novel's bizarre sub-textual reading, in which Nell's rejection of the world and Quilp leads to an affirmation of death as a sacramental act which Dickens cannot really sustain. The possibility exists for a kind of death worship, in which life itself is subjugated to its ultimate fulfillment in death. Dickens is clearly aware of this problem, which splits his story down the middle. Thus, the church is presented as simultaneously a place for liars, in the Punch and Judy players, jabbering idiots, in the rooks, and an overwhelming sense of loss and grief, in the image of the moldering seats. It is a measure of the false note the novel achieves that anyone could take a "solemn pleasure" in visiting this place, but Master Humphrey has succeeded too well in convincing himself that death is not only acceptable, but desirable.

As Nell's journey continues, this difficulty becomes more pronounced. Nell's next lesson comes by way of the schoolmaster episode, in which Nell and her grandfather sojourn with a young teacher. The movement from the old woman's husband, dead in his youth, to the actual death of a child, represents a progression on the novel's thematic continuum towards the climactic scene of Nell's death. Dickens establishes the tone of the episode by reintroducing the metaphor of the bird, which serves as a kind of divine guide for Nell along her journey: "See what a pleasant path; and there's the bird - the same bird - now he flies to another tree, and stays to sing.

Come!" (189). The freedom of the bird is allied with the increasing immanence of nature: "the further they pressed into the deep green shade, the more they felt that the tranquil mind of God was there, and shed its peace on them" (189). Thus, the travelers are portrayed as moving towards a deep unity with nature which will result in freedom and stasis.

This is developed through the interactions of a grieving schoolmaster, his pupils, and his dying young student. The schoolmaster foreshadows the melancholy listlessness of the hero of Little Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, in his utter preoccupation with the things of the other world: "In the midst of the din sat the poor schoolmaster, the very image of meekness and simplicity, vainly attempting to fix his mind upon the duties of the day, and to forget his little friend...[but] his thoughts were rambling" (196). The dying young pupil reflects this movement away from energy and life: "His hair still hung in curls about his face, and his eyes were very bright; but their light was of Heaven, not earth" (200). Thus, the relationship between schoolmaster and pupil recalls the churchyard in its total rejection of the world through the medium of death. Nature, however, provides a consolatory hope: "'You remember the garden, Harry,' whispered the schoolmaster...'and how pleasant it used to be in the evening time? You must make haste to visit it again, for I think the flowers have missed you...'" (200).

The episode frames the question of death around the question of nature, which conditions the range of responses to death among the inhabitants of the village. However, just as the appearance of the London suburbs modified the initial transcendence of the early morning, this village modifies the expectations of Little Nell symbolized by the bird - a development which continues the cycle of expectation and disappointment, within the context of the linear progression of the journey.

Thus, while the schoolmaster's thoughts stray towards death, his students are possessed by a deep urge towards life: "Oh! how some of these fellows longed to be outside, and how they looked at the open door and window, as if they half meditated

rushing violently out, plunging into the woods, and being wild boys and savages from that time forth" (197). The intense, vibrant depictions of nature in this passage are a marked contrast to Nell's association of nature and tranquillity. Further, the uncultivated wildness of nature is juxtaposed against the controlled garden envisioned by the schoolmaster as his dying pupil's destination.

Clearly, the schoolmaster cannot reconcile these two poles. In the village, they are radically distinct. The schoolmaster warns the pupils, "You must promise me first...that you'll not be noisy, or at least, if you are, that you'll go away and be so - away out of the village, I mean. I'm sure you wouldn't disturb your old playmate and companion" (198). Harry attempts such a reconciliation, but does not even have the strength to wave a handkerchief to his old friends at play on the green. The separation into these categories of life and death is typical of this novel, which cannot conjoin the immanent nature-relationship of the wild students with the transcendent view of nature held by Harry and the schoolmaster, and thus restore Harry to life.

Nell's reflection on Harry's death demonstrates this dichotomy. Her grief is genuine and cannot be ameliorated by the novel's strange infatuation with death. The novelist makes excuses for Nell's apparent failure to understand, commenting that she "thought as a child herself, and did not perhaps sufficiently consider to what a bright and happy existence those who die young are borne, and how in death they lose the pain of seeing others die around them" (202). It is obvious from this concession that the consolatory logic of the novel has failed. In her dream, however, Nell witnesses Harry "not confined and covered up, but mingling with angels, and smiling happily" (202). This image recalls Blake's Songs of Innocence, which frame the call to revolution around the latent energy found within unconditioned, and unspoiled, childhood. Dickens' visionary romanticism in this episode emerges from the largely desolate tendencies of the novel and presents itself as its most convincing consolatory mood. In the village environment, Dickens finds a new application of the mythic,

primal energy manifested in the figure of Quilp; thus, Nell's dream suggests the faintest hope of resurrection - full Christian redemption - for the departed scholar.

The introduction of Mrs. Jarley and the wax-works museum abruptly changes the tone of the novel. In its return to urbanity, this setting leaves behind the mournful sacramentalism of the churchyard and the revolutionary romanticism of the village, replacing both with a more overt incarnation of the curiosity shop. The waxworks museum transforms the shop's outlandish collection of armor, monkish carvings, and tapestries into a mock kingdom, presided over by Mrs. Jarley as a satirical queen.

Mrs. Jarley's royal pretensions are abundant. For instance, she is referred to as "The delight of the Nobility and Gentry and the patronized of Royalty" (216). She also expresses shock at Nell's sojourn among the Punch and Judy players: "Nell feared she felt her having been induced to bestow her protection and conversation upon one so poor, to be an outrage upon her dignity that nothing could repair" (211). With an equally straight face, she defends her wax-works enterprise from attack: "Every expectation held out in the handbills is realised to the utmost, and the whole forms an effect of imposing brilliancy hitherto unrivalled in this kingdom" (213). Thus, her mannerisms and condescensions place her in the class of comic Dickensian characters, such as Mr. Micawber from David Copperfield, who elevate themselves through grandiloquence.

This becomes the principle theme of the wax works episode, which implicates the class system and its trappings within the domain of the curiosity shop. Thus, the royal kingdom is less a brilliant exhibition than an archaic accumulation of historical relics, preserved in the novel's characteristic nightmare state between life and death. Mrs. Jarley herself admits that the wax-works are a commentary on the condition of their observers: "Always the same, with a constantly unchanging air of coldness and gentility...I won't go so far as to say, that, as it is, I've seen wax-work quite like life, but I've certainly seen some life that was exactly like wax-work" (211). The coldness

and gentility referred to by Mrs. Jarley is manifested in its comic dimension through her own pretensions; its melodramatic incarnation can be seen in the deliberate cruelty of Miss Monflathers, who publicly mocks Nell as a "wax-work child" (244). In both cases, the concept of gentility is satirized as a derivative of the wax works, a stagnant illusion which is the hallmark of the living dead.

Mrs. Jarley's observation is true in other ways as well. For instance, the theme of sleeplessness, so pervasive in urban London, is reintroduced as a parallel condition to the ever-waking wax works. Nell lies awake at night in fear of Quilp, while she speculates that Mrs. Jarley "must have been dreaming of lying awake" (217) - a close cousin to Master Humphrey's original image of the tortured insomniac. The line between wax and flesh diminishes until it is almost non-existent: Nell's grandfather is seen by the town children as "a cunning device in wax" (218), and Nell's fear of Quilp parallels her fear of the wax works, to the extent that "she would almost believe he had removed the figure and stood within the clothes" (226). The wax work parallel extends to seemingly inanimate objects as well. For instance, Nell gazes at an empty niche and wonders of the departed statue "what strange people it must have looked down upon when it stood there" (214); later, Quilp appears in the moonlight "like some monstrous image that had come down from its niche" (216).

Thus, this ironic relationship, in which the wax works can be said to act as parodies of their observers, extends throughout the town as a growing ambiguity between animate and inanimate. The clocks have "drowsy faces", "heavy lazy hands," and "cracked voices" (218); the house-fronts are described as "withered faces carved upon the beams, and staring down into the street" (218). The cumulative effect of this disturbing vision is nearly excruciating: the novel's themes of living death and voyeurism are amplified into an animistic, paranoid vision where every object stares at every other object, trapped into a nightmare stasis of time and space: "The very dogs

were all asleep, and the flies, drunk with moist sugar in the grocer's shop, forgot their wings and briskness, and baked to death in dusty corners of the window" (218).

The significance of time in this system becomes increasingly evident as the wax works are described. Just as Mrs. Jarley is a parodic anachronism, a pretender to a forgotten class, her collection also manifests the satiric chaos inherent in the attempt to reconstruct and animate the historical past. Thus, Mrs. Jarley's comic historical narrative: "[That] is an unfortunate Maid of Honor in the Time of Queen Elizabeth, who died from pricking her finger in consequence of working upon a Sunday...[that] is Jasper Packlemerton of atrocious memory, who courted and married fourteen wives" (222). George also makes absurd use of history, as when he announces, "The weight o' the pair...would be a trifle under that of Oliver Cromwell" (208), eliciting Nell's surprise at his historical knowledge. The total absurdity conveyed by the wax works as history is demonstrated by Mrs. Jarley's economical switching of roles: "Mr. Pitt in a nightcap and bedgown, and without his boots, represented the poet Cowper with perfect exactness; and Mary Queen of Scots in a dark wig, white shirt-collar, and male attire, was such a complete image of Lord Byron that the ladies quite screamed when they saw it" (225). The jumbled effect of the curiosity shop has carried over to the town: in both settings, the historical past is not usable as a means of salvation, remaining in the present only as a ridiculous reminder of faded glory. In this sense, the wax works parallel the interior of the church glimpsed by Nell, signifying in both cases the end of time as a meaningful category for redemptive purposes.

This is realized in both comic and dramatic terms. Mrs. Jarley easily transforms into Mrs. Monflathers, and the transvestite wax works take on new and hideous dimensions at night: "There were so many of them with their great glassy eyes - and, as they stood one behind the other all about her bed, they looked so like living creatures, and yet so unlike in their grim stillness and silence, that she had a kind of terror of them for their own sakes" (226). Therefore, the wax works episode

dramatizes the inherent instability of the novel, demonstrating the tendency of the stasis as consolation mode to ossify into a terrifying prison which in turn propels a deeper urge for death.

Nell's solution to her night-terrors is emblematic of the novel's movement as a whole. She would sit "at the open window and feel a companionship in the bright stars...and then she would think of poor Kit and all his kindness, until the tears came into her eyes" (226). The sentiment expresses the bipolar nature of the novel; Nell finds comfort in the thought of transcendent nature-union, figured in the image of the stars, and then qualifies this thought by returning to Kit, the novel's symbol of earthly pleasures and existence. This same dichotomy is present in the strange interlude with the sisters, which transposes the voyeur theme into an image not of predation, but of loneliness, and serves to emphasize the impossible distance between Nell and renewed human companionship. The novel again makes use of the star image to emphasize Nell's true home: "[she] found new stars burst upon her view, and more beyond...until the whole great expanse sparkled with shining spheres...eternal in their numbers as in their changeless and incorruptible existence" (323). Nell, it is quite clear, is destined to become one of these stars, yet the novel's assertion of this fact does not ameliorate the plaintive tragedy implicit in Nell's secret observation of the sisters.

As if to intensify this distance, and thus conclusively demonstrate that the world simply is not worthy of Nell, the penultimate episode in her journey is a trip to hell. The factory world is the underground furnace which powers the flow of mythic energy, resulting in human life. Nell has somehow reached the hidden underground wellsprings of human consciousness, the engine of civilization and industry, and the natural environment of Quilp^{iv}. This furnace is an extraordinary creation from which, it seems, the Dickensian paradox must emerge. It is indeed hell, "echoing to the roof with the beating of red-hot metal plunged in water, and a hundred strange unearthly noises never heard elsewhere; in this gloomy place, moving like demons among the

flame and smoke..." (342). Yet, this is the eternal furnace; it is the imagination symbolized, and the source of the Dickens universe. More than this, it is the greatest of all stories, the story of humanity. The keeper of the fire informs Nell, "'It has been alive as long as I have...It's like a book to me...the only book I ever learned to read; and many an old story it tells me...You don't know many strange faces and different scenes I trace in the red-hot coals. It's my memory, that fire, and it shows me all my life" (344). Thus, the fire of humanity is stoked at the ultimate cost, and in this novel, that cost is the life of Nell. In a world powered by such an engine, Nell cannot remain, and hence she moves on to her awaited appointment in the sky.

The stage set, Dickens triumphantly prepares to dispose of his heroine. Nell travels to her death in style, riding in what appears to be a hearse: "What a soothing, luxurious, drowsy way of travelling, to lie inside that slowly moving mountain...all made pleasantly indistinct by the thick awning, which seemed made for lazy listening under, till one fell asleep! The very going to sleep, still with an indistinct idea, as the head jogged to and fro upon the pillow, of moving onward with no trouble or fatigue..." (360). This sets the tone for the most prolonged, agonizing death scene of the century, a funeral procession which stretches for a numbing two hundred pages.

The novel has been moving towards a setting where the themes of nature, time, memory, and stasis can be brought together into a great hymn to death, and it is a key to Dickens' religious vision that this setting is a church. The Church exists in Old Curiosity Shop both as a product of the general process of decline and decay, and as the instrument in that process. The condition of its own decline reflects the voluminous weight of death surrounding it: "The aged walls, where strange shadows came and went with every flickering of the fire - the solemn presence, within, of that decay which falls on senseless things the most enduring in their nature; and, without, and round about on every side, of Death" (403). Everything touched by the church tends towards decay: "The very light...seemed old and grey; and the air, redolent of

earth and mould, seemed laden with decay purified by time...all - marble, stone, iron, wood, and dust, one common monument of ruin" (412). The implications of this are not lost on Nell: "A quiet, happy place - a place to live and learn to die in!" (401). Just as death itself is described in terms of both problem and solution, the Church, which is the house of death, is both a product of the materialism dilemma and the answer to it.

This aspect of the Christian church accounts for the tragic atmosphere experienced by Nell outside of London. Necessarily correlating to this, however, is the role of the Church as the guardian of death. Old Curiosity Shop in many ways reflects a medieval world view, and the Church it describes performs a medieval role, guarding the gateway to the other world. The Church is the sacramental intermediary which alone can safely transport souls such as Nell's from this world of pain, suffering, and movement into the Platonic realm of perfect stability. Thus, Nell arrives in this strange setting, having entirely transcended both time and reason, and prepares to offer herself up as a sacrificial lamb for the regeneration and continuance of human existence: "When Death strikes down the innocent and young, for every fragile form from which he lets the panting spirit free, a hundred virtues rise, in shapes of mercy, charity, and love, to walk the world, and bless it...In the Destroyer's steps there spring up bright creations that defy his power, and his dark path becomes a way of light to Heaven" (563).

Further, the Church is the point of Platonic stasis Nell has been seeking: "It was another world, where sin and sorrow never came; a tranquil place of rest, where nothing evil entered" (416). The Church, therefore, is the only environment which can accommodate Nell, the pure soul; however, the incessant presence of death at every corner is a reminder that all visitors are only temporary residents. The novel which begins with insomnia ends with sleep, which finally becomes possible in the church. Nell ruminates, "Die who would, it would still remain the same; these sights and

sounds would still go on as happily as ever. It would be no pain to sleep among them" (403). Her grandfather as well indicates that the cause of the living death - the restless sleep - has passed: "Hush! ...no more talk of the dream, and all the miseries it brought. There are no dreams here. Tis a quiet place, and they keep away...we must forget such things if we would be tranquil here" (422).

The Church is also the gateway into the past. The novel seeks an answer to the inherently modern condition of the living death - life deprived of all meaning and purpose - by moving back in time, seeking to recapture a pre-modern state of being which antedates the fall into time and into reason. The church, like the wax works museum and the curiosity shop, exists outside of time, functioning as a cosmic warehouse for the entire narrative of history. Like the flame in the furnace, the church contains every deed ever committed, and every story ever told, encompassing the lives of saints, knights, and monks in an unearthly environment where "even change was old" (400). In his role as historian of the church, the bachelor is compiling the one great story; he is the sage at the end of the world who records human history in the Book of Life. His authority as the keeper of Story extends to the role of bestowing salvation; he determines, for instance, of a certain figure, "that if ever baron went to heaven, that baron was then at peace" (415). Likewise, he withholds salvation from certain figures, ruling that they should be "buried deep, and never brought to light again" (416). In this paradigm, salvation is equated with remembrance, and only those deemed worthy are granted this status. This symbolic office of the bachelor is therefore linked to Nell's eventual fate, her enshrinement into legend. Nell's gradual absorption into the atmosphere of the church is a critical element of the salvational structure of the novel; the withdrawal from the dynamic mode of existence, through death, is ameliorated by the coincident accession into story, the mythical past which ensures immortality and transcendence.

It is for this purpose that Dickens turns to the concept of memory, with all of its Romantic significance. This subject motivates the black humor of the burial conversations, as Nell and the sexton discuss the irony of fresh grave flowers: "At first they tend them, morning, noon, and night; they soon begin to come less frequently...I have known the briefest summer flowers outlive them...[yet] as I take it, tis a good sign for the happiness of the living. And so it is. It's nature" (419). The idea of forgetfulness as a form of consolation does not appeal to Nell, who is in a position to feel personally about the issue, and her objection prompts this alternative from the schoolmaster: "'An infant, a prattling child, dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it; and play its part, through them, in the redeeming action of the world...for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection, would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves!" (422). Memory, therefore, underlies the transformative power of story, enabling the blessed to survive beyond the grave. To this end, the novel closes with the phrase: "so do things pass away, like a tale that is told!" (575).

Finally, in its stewardship over death, the Christian church also serves as the link between humanity and nature. The deep union with nature desired by Nell in the village is realized within the surrounding grounds of the church, which form a veritable city of graves. Nell takes an internship as a grave-digger; she strolls about the graves in the morning, weeds them, and watches them dug. Nell refers to the graveyard as "a garden", which conveys the essential purpose of the graves in the church environment. This lesson is conveyed by a young, grieving boy: "The child answered...it was a garden - his brother's. It was greener, he said, than all the other gardens, and the birds loved it better because he had been used to feed them" (409). The implications of this last phrase run close to the heart of the garden metaphor: the buried corpses have achieved a true unity with nature, feeding and nourishing the abundant grassiness which forms such a large aspect of the church landscape. As Nell gazes over this scene

from the church tower, she seems to come to an understanding of this relationship: "Oh! the glory of the sudden burst of light; the freshness of the fields and woods, stretching away on every side and meeting the bright blue sky...the smoke...seemed to rise upward from the green earth...It was like passing from death to life; it was drawing nearer Heaven" (414). This is as close as the Nell story can come to resurrection. Through death, Nell's essence can be united with nature, and can live on through the natural world'.

Thus, Dickens has constructed an enormous, powerful set-piece with which to culminate the themes of his novel. In many ways, the church setting succeeds as an imaginative endeavor. However, the critical verdict on this conclusion is one of the most unanimous and scathing of its kind: the church fails, because Dickens cannot really believe in his hymn to death. Therefore, the entire project degenerates into a massive self-deception, resulting in the novel's characteristic tone of gross morbidity and sentimentality.

This is evidenced in the church setting in two ways. First, despite Dickens' efforts to present the church as the instrument of salvation, with the power to transform death into the wholly beautiful, shades of the nightmare death remain. Old men gather around Nell's grave "whose eyes were dim and senses failing...the deaf, the blind, the lame, the palsied, the living dead in many shapes and forms, to see the closing of that early grave" (561). Thus, Dickens cannot entirely vanquish the voyeuristic, phantasmagoric parade which forms the persistent sub-text to Nell's quest for death. The symbol of the well is another hold-over from the version of death presented by the curiosity shop. The sexton describes the well as a death-trap which produces a sound "of being so far deep and so far down, that your heart leaps into your mouth, and you start away as if you were falling in...What is it but a grave!" (411). The well as a symbol is a stark contrast to the celestial depictions of death encountered elsewhere in the church setting.

Further, the infatuation with death reaches the point of psychosis in Nell's constant sojourn among the graves. Despite the attempt to portray death as a heavenly phenomena, it is clear that Dickens cannot quite get his mind off of the bodies in the ground: "Some of those dreamless sleepers lay close within the shadow of the church - touching the wall, as if they clung to it for comfort and protection...Perhaps not one of the unprisoned souls had been able quite to separate itself in living thought from its old companion." (404). This recalls Dickens' strange reaction to his realization that he would not be buried next to Mary Hogarth: "The desire to be buried next to her is as strong upon me now, as it was five years ago; and I *know* (for I don't think there ever was love like that I could bear her) that it will never diminish...It is but an idea. I neither think nor hope (God forbid) that our spirits would ever mingle *there*...[yet] It seems like losing her a second time."^{vi} Thus, the nature of Dickens' confusion is clear: the consolatory rhetoric of the novel has gone awry and has resulted in a bizarre, unpalatable intimacy with death which comes close to necrophilia.

The novel has one other recourse to this difficulty, carried out in the parallel stories of Kit and Dick. Both of these characters represent attempts by Dickens to offer an alternative to the Nell-Quilp paradigm; the world is not really so bad as to dispose of its angelic visitors, Dickens seems to be mouthing. Whereas Nell's story indicates that the only real solution to grief and pain is to sleep forever, Kit bravely forges a life within the confines of ordinary existence. Nowhere is the Dickens paradox more apparent or more badly handled than in the execution of this story. Dickens has attempted to fuse an utterly puerile, cloying affirmation of life onto his tale of negation and apocalypse, and the result is a disaster which proves every bit as embarrassing as his unholy midnight sojourns to the graveside of Little Nell.

Kit's story is a compressed version of the *bildungsroman* genre of David Copperfield and Great Expectations. Like Nell's Platonic world, this genre assumes a bipolar universe in which good and evil are separated into clear categories. The good

find salvation, however, not through negation or absence, but through the persistent application of determination and adherence to social norms. Therefore, the movement of the *bildungsroman* is affirmative, ultimately framing salvation in terms of family, occupation, and sincere religious devotion. Thus, Kit finds his calling, establishes familial relationships, persists through misunderstanding, and is rewarded. This structure is central to much of Dickens' work, and at its most successful, such as in Great Expectations, it reaches heights of genius. In Kit's story, however, as in the infamous ending to David Copperfield, Dickens becomes uncertain about the critical corollary to this structure, the question of loss. The *bildungsroman* genre moves along a two-way axis in which youth, innocence, and frivolity are exchanged for the realities of mature existence; thus, the comedy of the genre is inherently balanced by the necessity of sacrifice. The act of assimilating the hero into society itself becomes a moral issue when the very nature of society and the kind of assimilation it demands is called into question. In Old Curiosity Shop, however, such questions are radically displaced onto the Nell story, and the irony which is necessary to successfully suspend the comic ending deflates into a fawning attempt to whistle in the darkness of Nell's death.

The points at which this occurs are numerous. For instance, Nell has no family save for her predatory grandfather. All attempts to bring her into a community eventually fail. Her very nature is transitory; Nell cannot be reduced to the status of a relation, let alone be compelled to produce descendants. Yet, Dickens' faith in family is legendary and thus, the novel must resort to a kind of immaculate conception in order to produce one. The prose which describes this ideal family is evidence of Dickens' imaginative failure: "His household gods are of flesh and blood, with no alloy of silver, gold, or precious stone; he has no property but in the affections of his own heart; and when they endear bare floors and walls, despite of rags and toil and scanty meals, that man has his love of home from God, and his rude hut becomes a solemn

place. Oh! if those who rule the destinies of nations would but remember this..."

(293). Given the literary power of the novel in other areas, the presence of such a remarkably bad piece of writing is indicative of a strained attempt to force the novel into a mode rendered impossible by the nature of Nell's isolated, lonely journey.

The role of art in Kit's world is likewise redemptive, presenting a strong - and unconvincing - contrast to Nell's experience with the Punch and Judy players. Kit's mother objects to the concept of the theatre: "I hope plays mayn't be sinful, Kit, but I'm a'most afraid" (175). Not satisfied with Kit's impassioned defense, on the grounds that "there's [no] harm in looking as cheerful and being as cheerful as our poor circumstances will permit" (175), the Garlands and the Nubbles embark on a holiday theatre adventure characterized by motion and humanity, both signs of evil in the Platonic universe. The rough audience members vanquished by Kit are the kinds of creations who cheat and lie when encountered by Nell, but are regarded in this case as "a capital joke, and an essential part of the entertainment" (304). The theatre arouses physical sensations, causing Barbara a "flutter of delight", and compelling her mother to beat her umbrella on the floor in ecstasy. The outing is accompanied, as it must be in Dickens, by a feast, in which the glories of food and wine are extolled, and concludes with the fittingly jocose line, "they all trudged merrily home together" (307).

Thus, art plays a pivotal role in the salvational construct, connected with eating, drinking, and other pleasures which become redemptive when enacted by the blessed characters. In contrast, art in the Platonic universe serves only to disguise the inherently destructive nature of the material universe through transformation and deception. Thus, the interaction with the Punch and Judy players is based upon the notion of "delusion" (133), and leads to the novel's equivalent of Vanity Fair, the racetrack. The essence of this delusion is given by Mr. Codlin, "the misanthrope", whose performance makes "a dismal feint of being [Punch's] most intimate private friend...and [believing] that he was at all times and under every circumstance the same

intelligent and joyful person that the spectators then beheld him" (135). The inherent instability of art is the target; art cannot be trusted because its constantly shifting essence is the antithesis of the pure Platonic condition.

Likewise, food in this setting is regarded with suspicion: Nell nearly always refuses sustenance in deference to her grandfather, refusing "to touch anything in which he was not the first and greatest sharer (134). Even laughter is out of place: "Among the laughter none was more loud and frequent than the old man's. Nell's was unheard, for she, poor child, with her head drooping on his shoulder, had fallen asleep..." (135). The contrast to Kit, who laughs like a comic book character for no reason at all - "Just hear this! Ha ha ha! An't that as nat'ral as walking, and as good for the health? Ha ha ha!" (175) - could not be more pronounced.

Finally, the religious visions of Kit and Nell differ substantially. The Christian church in Nell's universe exists to consummate her self-sacrifice, transforming death into a ritual sacrament. The Little Bethel episodes demonstrate the predatory nature of the Church in Kit's theology, which is focused around an earthy humanism and seems unconcerned with matters of infinity. As a wholly temporal being, Kit represents the ethical and immanent dimension of Christianity, while Nell inevitably tends towards transcendence. Nell's true home is the infinite, rendering the Christian church a logical gateway along that path.

It is likely that only Dickens would have attempted to form the two stories of Kit and Nell into one novel; they are utterly irreconcilable, existing in mutual antagonism. The ending to Kit's story is unconvincing because Kit's jejune marriage to Barbara cannot distract the reader's attention long enough from the remaining gap between himself and Nell, the negation of life and its affirmation. Therefore, the Kit story fails as an attempt to work out a full Christian soteriology, which would involve resurrection and the return to worldly existence. Instead, the two halves of Christianity remain separate, and on their own, ineffective^{vii}.

Old Curiosity Shop is in many ways a work of genius. Or rather, as a work of failed genius, the degree and the magnitude of its failure creates an enormous seed bed for Dickens' later work. Dickens will try again, over the course of his career, to overcome the problem of death by fusing the Romantic devices of memory and myth into the framework and history of Christianity. The bifurcation of the story also persists throughout the Dickens' canon: later works will again attempt to forge an affirmative relationship with society, despite the continued presence of Quilp, hiding underneath the table at every convivial feast. Fortunately, Old Curiosity Shop effectively ends Dickens' hysterical obsession with the death of children; later treatments of the same theme fall within rational artistic boundaries. Ten years later, in David Copperfield, Nell will grow up.

ⁱ Marcus, "From Pickwick to Dombey," pp. 132

ⁱⁱ *ibid.*, pp. 130-31

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid.*, pp. 151

^{iv} Frye characterizes the novels as continually arbitrating between the hidden and the visible. The hidden world is "the world of an invincible Eros, the power strong enough to force a happy ending on the story...pushing all the obstructing humors out of the way, or killing them if they will not get out of the way" ("Dickens and the Comedy of Humors", printed in "Experience in the Novel," pp. 79)

^v Geoffrey Thurley notes the religious significance of the nature theme: "That the theme, thus stated, is Christian should not cause surprise. Dickens' Christianity, like Dostoevsky's, is radically allied to his artistic purposes, his entire message of purity, radiance, and charity. Fertility, though, suggests an equally pagan, anthropological interpretation...Nell's acclamation of spring form[s] part of a fable of sacrifice and regeneration, death and re-birth, which can be read, or rather felt, as both Christian and as pagan" ("The Dickens Myth," 1976, pp. 64)

^{vi} Marcus, "From Pickwick to Dombey," pp. 135.

^{vii} Joseph Gold also reads Kit and Nell as polarized dimensions of Christianity: "Kit's story is set against that of Nell, the pun on knell, the story of sacrifice and crucifixion, the other, death-side of the Christ story in which the universal Mass, the Human Being incarnate is murdered by custom, ritual, logic, rationalization, and blindness" (Gold, "Charles Dickens: Radical Moralism," 1972, pp. 111).

Dickens' Adolescence: Society As Meaning in David Copperfield

"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be as wise as serpents and as innocent as doves" (Gospel of Matthew 10:16).

"Piper sit thee down and write / In a book that all may read - / So he vanish'd from my sight. / And I plucked a hollow reed" (*Introduction, Songs of Innocence*, William Blake)

A. O. J. Cockshut has described David Copperfield as a typical *Bildungsroman*: "the story of a young man growing up and gradually shedding his illusions and being assimilated to society's ways." This statement simplifies and misreads not only David Copperfield, but the entire *Bildungsroman* genre. In fact, David Copperfield is not about a young man shedding his illusions and being assimilated to society's ways. It is about the way in which a young man can *not* shed his illusions and still be successfully integrated into social existence.

Perhaps the most useful point of comparison outside of Dickens' own work are Blake's Songs of Innocence and Experience. These parallel sets of poems overtly produce the same effect that David Copperfield produces implicitly, juxtaposing the states of innocence and experience against each other. In the light of experience, innocence can be read as nothing more than a naïve, inchoate jumble. Applying Cockshut's reading to Blake, the force of experience demands that innocence shed its illusions, if only for the purpose of fully comprehending the enormity of the modern plight. Thus, experience can be read as a satire on innocence, revealing the limitations implicit in that condition. However, innocence is also a satire on experience. Innocence demonstrates the power of the unformed, unspoiled mind, the child-consciousness, for the purpose of deconstructing the restraints of reason imposed on the modern self. Innocence

is capable of a remarkable clarity of vision which is lost to those who insist on affirming only experience. Therefore, Blake's project consists of attempting to recapture the lost condition of innocence, revising it in the light of experience and putting both to work at once in the transformation of consciousness.

The development of this concept in David Copperfield can be seen further by a comparison with Old Curiosity Shop. The intensely personal nature of both novels arises out of their common crisis: death, and in particular, the death of the past. Of course, David Copperfield is not a consolation in the same sense as Old Curiosity Shop. Anyone can see that David Copperfield is not mourning the death of a child, but celebrating the birth of a man. I would argue that there is very little difference between these two acts, and that the distance between the novels is largely a matter of the mature Dickens unifying Nell and Kit into a single character, meaningfully linking the duality between death and life, innocence and experience. The crises of David Copperfield and Old Curiosity Shop are virtually identical. Both novels are underlaid with loss: the past must vanish, children must either die or become adults, facts must replace fantasy, and behind it all lies the persistent threat of chaos. Innocence is fleeting.

Each character in David Copperfield is confronted with this fact. Some cling to innocence beyond its season, and choose endless childhood or its cousin, death. These are the characters who simply refuse to shed their illusions, *carte blanche*. Others shed them too thoroughly, losing the essentially imaginative quality of childhood which creates, in adults, the artistic faculty. The world of Dickens is rife with characters who have made this decision. In fact, Dickens' entire world might be said to have shed its illusions, resulting, however, not in any sort of enlightened harmony, but in the total breakdown and death of a people. Against this specter of failed maturity - a civilization that has itself lost its mythical innocence - both Old Curiosity Shop and David Copperfield *return*: to the past, to childhood, and to the imagination, in an attempt to transform the past into something which can serve the redemptive needs of the presentⁱⁱ.

Old Curiosity Shop, it has been seen, largely fails in this endeavor. The novel is divided against itself in the stories of Kit and Nell; the past cannot be redeemed, and sacrificing Nell to the god of memory as a ritual act is simply too bizarre, and too morbid, to be successful. Ultimately, Nell gains only a dubious place in legend alongside the half-forgotten suits of armor and rotting prayer-books. David's salvational quest, however, is structured around the possibility of discovering this idyll in a form which allows him to exist simultaneously both inside and outside the world, regaining his lost innocence in a manner which co-exists with social identity.

Thus, the act of recollection does not radically divide the past and the future, but joins them together: "I think that most grown men who are remarkable in this respect [of memory], may with greater propriety be said not to have lost the faculty, than to have acquired it; the rather, as I generally observe such men to retain a certain freshness, and gentleness, and capacity of being pleased, which are also an inheritance they have preserved from their childhood" (11). Memory becomes the affirmative, creative act which, rather than tending towards isolation and the rejection of society, engenders the formation of community. The motion of salvation in the novel is towards the development of an artistic vision which can create and sustain social relationships. In turn, this leads to the process of self-realization; the narrator David comes into existence through his relationship to his community and their shared history, which is created by his ability to recall and narrate the events of the novelⁱⁱⁱ.

The novel must also be seen as re-working the concerns of Oliver Twist. Dickens' second novel explores the role of class in determining salvation: the crisis of Oliver Twist is dependent on the imminent possibilities of annihilation and dislocation implicit in the loss of social identity. Oliver must locate himself in relation to his parents, and in doing so, create a meaningful, secure space within the social structure, or face the terrifying threat of destruction^{iv}. The combination of these two strands in David Copperfield - the desire to return to childhood as a solution to the modern condition, and the consequent

crisis of selfhood which such an action implies - motivates the first episode of the novel, in which David is forced out of his amniotic, undefined state and into a quest for social identity.

David's very early relationship to his mother and to Peggotty represents the essence of childhood innocence. This world is the pastoral idyll aspired to by Nell, transcending time and reason: "A great wind arises, and the summer is gone in a moment" (13); "It seems to me, at this distance of time, as if it were the next day when Peggotty broached the striking and adventurous proposition...but it was probably about two months afterwards" (22). The ambiguous, non-linearity of the setting is emphasized by periods of intermittent half-sleep: "Peggotty continued to stand motionless in the middle of the room, and my mother resuming her singing, I fell asleep, though I was not so sound asleep but that I could hear voices, without hearing what they said" (16). This in turn leads to a heightening of Dickens' principle mode of absurdity, his characteristically literal metaphors: "I had reached that stage of sleepiness when Peggotty seemed to swell and grow immensely large" (14).

Reason is absent, as evidenced by the reversal in the relationships between children and adults, and masters and servants. David, for instance, often appears as the teacher: his lesson to Peggotty about crocodiles demonstrates the imaginative, surrealistic absurdity which characterizes the Blunderstone setting: "We returned to those monsters, with fresh wakefulness on my part, and we left their eggs in the sand for the sun to hatch; and we ran away from them, and baffled them by constantly turning...and in short, we ran the whole crocodile gauntlet" (15). Peggotty, in turn, instructs Clara, who is the most child-like of the three. David's intimacy with his mother is also striking. As in the Songs of Innocence, the child has hardly yet formed a concept of himself separate from his mother.

The atmosphere is intensified on David's trip to Yarmouth. The fantastic setting of the boat-house, described in the fairy tale terms of "Aladdin's palace, roc's egg and all"

(25), gives the setting a sense of total unreality. Yarmouth is literally a child's fantasy, or as David puts it, "like enchantment" (27). Like the churches of OCS, the boat-house has a peculiarly ancient quality which Dickens associates with religion. In this case, it is evoked by Old Testament paintings on the walls: "Abraham in red going to sacrifice Isaac in blue, and Daniel in yellow cast into a den of green lions (26). The garish colors seems to suggest that David has stepped into some kind of living coloring book.

The sense of abiding age dovetails with the notion of Yarmouth as a place of eternal youth. Using language reminiscent of the nostalgic opening to The Winter's Tale, David relates, "The days sported by us, as if Time had not grown up himself yet, but were a child too, and always at play" (32). Yarmouth's characteristic egalitarianism derives from this condition: "As to any sense of inequality, or youthfulness, or other difficulty in our way, Em'ly and I had no such trouble, because we had no future" (32). Finally, the emotional quality of this existence is also characterized by pure innocence. David's love for Emily is comparable to the kind of love he has for his mother: "I am sure I loved that baby quite as truly, quite as tenderly, with greater purity, and more disinterestedness, than can enter into the best love of a later time of life, high and ennobling as it is" (32). The dream-like qualities of this condition are in every way the opposite of the social realities encountered later by David. The tendencies towards absurdity, equality, and pure love are all characteristics which belong to childhood, and must be maintained by the maturing David through the imagination.

Thus, David Copperfield begins where Old Curiosity Shop leaves off: in the midst of a pastoral setting which reflects the conditions of a primitive, non-rational existence. This is the world known to Christians as "the Kingdom of God": it is the place where literature and belief are born. Bakhtin termed it "carnival", meaning a world of reversal and unreason, characterized by the overturning of the rational world. In various ways, David attempts to rediscover this order throughout the novel. The character of the adult as child is a significant theme in Dickens, and like most of his radical formulations, it

contains both a comic and a tragic dimension. Clara is such a character: her childishness enables the existence of carnival, and brings about its downfall through her egotistical naiveté. Both Quilp and Nell's grandfather are also members of this tradition, and both demonstrate its sinister possibilities. Quilp possesses the fanatical egotism of an infant gone wild: his character is dominated by the childish need for possession. Likewise, the grandfather abuses and manipulates Nell with the logic of a child, infantile and stubborn. The possibility for such manipulation in David Copperfield undercuts the innocence and beauty of the Blunderstone world with an ironic edge. Indeed, as OCS demonstrated, this setting is inherently temporary. Visitors must either continue on their way to death, as Clara shortly does, or confront the intrusion of civilization, with all of its concomitant implications. And, as Oliver Twist suggests, the *tabula rasa* of childhood ("the blank of my infancy" [12]) can also be seen as a terrifying, threatening emptiness which can only be filled in by socialization.

The method by which Dickens chooses to bring about the fall of this world and initiate David's process of maturation is telling: he introduces a father. Thus, like Oliver, David can only properly come into existence through the discovery of his parentage. David himself follows this line of thinking when he speculates in Chapter 1, "and the light upon the window of our room shone out upon the earthly bourne of all such travelers, and the mound above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been" (11). David means this in a very obvious sense: without a father, there is no story to tell. Yet, the degree to which it comes to underline the salvational structure of the novel is striking. In a large sense, David's search for identity depends upon his relation to various fathers encountered throughout the novel'. And, unlike his mother, David has no choice but to be propelled into - rather than out of - the world. Therefore, the entrance of Murdstone precipitates the novel's first fall, and it is accompanied, as it is in OCS, by death.

David's fear of fathers is abundantly evident. As with the orphan Pip in Great Expectations, David's father is little more than a headstone: "One Sunday night my mother reads to Peggotty and me in there, how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. And I am so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take me out of bed, and show me the quiet churchyard..." (12). When David first hears from Peggotty that he "has a Pa", his immediate reaction is terror that his father has come back from the dead. David inherently understands that the nature of his world, in particular, his unchallenged intimacy with his mother, is derived from the lack of a father, and thus, the threat which Murdstone presents. Murdstone immediately sets about living up to all of David's fears, rectifying the disturbing lack of masculinity, modernity, and reason. In his actions, he restores the natural order: adults become separate from children, masters rule over servants, and fantasy is replaced by the solid rigidity of Victorian Calvinism. The Murdstone's perspective on childhood is clear: "As to any recreation with other children of my age, I had very little of that; for the gloomy theology of the Murdstones made all children out to be a swarm of little vipers...and held that they contaminated one another" (47). Thus, the Murdstones demonstrate their opposition to Dickens' entire artistic project, and David Copperfield in particular. Carnival is officially overturned in favor of the rational working order.

Murdstone's speech is peppered with phrases such as "firmness" and "improvement." These two qualities delineate his philosophy of patriarchy, in which he rightly sees little difference between Clara and her son. This state of affairs foreshadows David's own later attempts at domestic harmony: "Yes, I had a satisfaction in the thought of marrying an inexperienced and artless person, and forming her character, and infusing into it some amount of that firmness and decision of which it stood in need" (43). The striking similarity between this speech and words later spoken by David in relation to Dora reveals a partial source for David's difficulties with masculine figures: the more of himself he recognizes, the stronger his dislike grows.

Thus, Murdstone tells Clara, "I have often been flogged myself" (49), to which he presumably responded initially with the same feelings of resentment, self-pity, hatred, jealousy, and stupor which David exhibits throughout the course of his relationship to Mr. Murdstone. The possibility of a connection between David and Mr. Murdstone demonstrates a remarkable advancement for Dickens in terms of infusing the salvational quest with an underlying irony. Oliver, for instance, exists in a miraculous bubble of gentility which the novel devotes its entire imaginative power to maintaining in the face of impossible odds. Oliver cannot be corrupted, and the novel has only one possible outcome - a fact which quickly develops its own ironic significance. David Copperfield, however, develops the salvational quest into a vastly more expansive enterprise, transcending the claustrophobic tunnels of Oliver Twist with an unparalleled horizontal depth. The novel breathes the fresh air of free will, and David's path to meaning becomes only one possibility among a myriad of potential selves, demonstrated by the rich profusion of characters who vary and satirize David's traits in one form or another^{vi}.

Therefore, if David and Mr. Murdstone share an essential quality, which might be called masculinity, the novel then presents the question of what happens to David which prevents him from becoming another Murdstone. The answer is given in David's response to Murdstone's treatment. Initially, David simply seems to be repeating the cycle of anger and violence. He is as jealous of Murdstone as Murdstone is of him, a fact which he admits when he records, "[Murdstone] seemed to be very fond of my mother - I am afraid I liked him none the better for that - and she was very fond of him" (40). He criticizes Murdstone for attempting to form Clara's mind, though it is exactly the kind of project he is likely to engage in. He feels sorry for himself, which leads to hatred: "A word of encouragement and explanation, of pity for my childish ignorance, of welcome home...might have made me respect instead of hate him" (40). The result is that he becomes "sullen, dull, and dogged" (48), which leads to alienation and near stupefaction.

David's salvation from this destructive cycle, however, is delivered in the form of the attic library - not coincidentally, assembled by his father. Through the books in the attic, David says, he gained hope: "They kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time" (48). David's imagination is preserved and stimulated by the books, to the extent that he is able to purge his emotional troubles by impersonating his favorite characters and "putting Mr. and Miss Murdstone into all the bad ones" (48). The books give David a sense of heroism and autonomy: "The Captain never lost dignity, from having his ears boxed with the Latin Grammar. I did; but the Captain was a Captain and a hero..." (48). Thus, David demonstrates a capacity which is utterly antithetical to Murdstone's grim, rationalist vision: the capacity for imagination. In doing so, David is able to recreate the fallen carnival world, and restore the inherently pure and innocent order of childhood.

The second form of response occurs as a result of David's imprisonment. During the imprisonment, the qualities of unreality and timelessness which infused unfallen Blunderstone are altered to become the kind of nightmare stasis which permeates OCS: "The length of those five days I can convey no idea of to any one. They occupy the place of years in my remembrance...the uncertain pace of the hours, especially at night, when I would wake thinking it was morning, and find that the family were not yet gone to bed, and that all the length of night had yet to come..." (51). David emerges from this crisis through the unexpected ministrations of Peggotty, who restores, after a fashion, the lost intimacy David had with his mother: "From that night there grew up in my breast, a feeling for Peggotty, which I cannot very well define. She did not replace my mother; no one could do that; but she came into a vacancy in my heart, which closed upon her, and I felt towards her something I have never felt for any other human being" (53).

Out of the crisis with Murdstone, therefore, David discovers the salvific qualities of imagination and community, which becomes the fundamental pattern of crisis and response in the novel. Murdstone "murders" the young David so that a new David can

emerge, stronger and fortified by the gains of experience. This unifies the Kit-Nell duality into a single individual, with the same logic: the death of innocence occurs to bring about the life of experience. The introduction of Steerforth into the novel is another variation on the Murdstone crisis. Like Murdstone, Steerforth is an image of masculinity for David, a possible outcome for David's process of maturation. In the Steerforth-Murdstone paradigm, David takes on the role, and the qualities, of his mother. David's susceptibility to physical beauty and power is evident from the first appearance of Murdstone: "This, his regular eyebrows, and the rich white, and black, and brown, of his complexion...made me think him, in spite of my misgivings, a very handsome man. I have no doubt that my poor dear mother thought him so too" (19). David understands in a deep sense the attraction Murdstone has for his mother, and replicates that attraction in his relationship to Steerforth: "I thought of him very much after I went to bed, and raised myself, I recollect, to look at him where he lay in the moonlight, with his handsome face turned up, and his head reclining easily on his arm. He was a person of great power in my eyes" (76). Like his mother, David is forced to create from his blank child-world structures of meaning; the introduction of a powerful, physically attractive masculine presence dovetails perfectly with his emotional needs. The results are also the same: Clara turns over her keys and her control of the house; David turns over his autonomy in the form of money. Steerforth's manipulation of David's naiveté results in the midnight revel, which possesses such emotional power for David that it resonates all the way into the moment of the recounting.

David's reaction to the crisis of identity imposed by Steerforth is similar to his reaction in the Murdstone situation. Whereas David used his imagination as a means of escaping, or subverting Murdstone, however, the story-telling sessions shared by David with Steerforth and his schoolmates are instead a means of establishing intimacy and community. In both cases, David's imagination is the faculty which allows him to maintain his essentially artistic qualities, the key factor in his continuation along the

pattern of salvation set by the novel. David describes such qualities here as "romantic and dreamy" (81): they are his creative and emotionally sensitive nature.

Given this, however, the circumstance points to one of the fundamental weaknesses of the novel. Bert Hornback tells us that "the imagination can create wisdom which is above judging"^{viii} (Hornback, The Hero of My Life, pp. 7). Nothing could be further from the truth. The imagination in David Copperfield is a *moral* faculty; it is a faculty of judgment. Thus, it is not simply the undisciplined yearnings of an imaginative boy which the novel posits as the means of salvation. Rather, it is the gradual cultivation of the imagination, through the process of maturation, which gives David his unique ability to exist both as a child and an adult. At several points in the novel, most notably the Dora crisis, David's tendency to romanticize - to use his imagination in a deceptive way - is emphasized as a destructive tendency. Thus, the novel points towards the development of a perceptive artistic vision which differentiates false from true creation.

There is no question that David fails to exercise this vision in his relationship to Steerforth. Steerforth's power and charisma are too much for David to overcome, despite the tremendous acts of betrayal and corruption which generate the novel's conclusion. The dialectic between innocence and experience, which satirizes innocence at the same time that it appeals to innocence as the avenue to salvation, is undermined by David's worship of Steerforth, indicating the possible failure of experience as a teacher. His quality of naiveté, which allows him to maintain and focus his imagination into adulthood, and thus provides him with the essential means of salvation, prevents him from properly recognizing Steerforth for who he is: a morally bankrupt scoundrel who manipulates and abuses his disciples at every opportunity. David's undiscerning hero worship of Steerforth is demonstrably evident. For instance, he enviously recalls the compliment bestowed on Traddles after Traddles takes Steerforth's beating for him, defensively argues for the purity of his love for Steerforth: "I was moved by no interested or selfish motive, nor was I moved by fear of him. I admired and loved him, and his

approval was return enough. It was so precious to me that I look back on these trifles now, with an aching heart" (80); and he bandies about his favored relationship to Steerforth like a trophy. Finally, he fails his artistic stewardship in the Steerforth-Mell episode. Despite Steerforth's shameful abuse of Mr. Mell, David finds himself drawn by his power: "I could not help thinking even in that interval, I remember, what a noble fellow he was in appearance, and how homely and plain Mr. Mell looked opposed to him" (84). In all this, and throughout the novel, Steerforth embodies a perversion of the Byronic ideal which transforms Romantic heroism into a form of self-conscious egotism which lacks all substance and honesty. This reading is confirmed by Agnes, who is infallible: "I judge him, partly from your account of him, Trotwood, and your character, and the influence he has over you" (313). Rosa Dartle, who knows Steerforth better than anyone, says "James Steerforth has a false and corrupting heart." Thus, at a critical point in the narrative of artistic growth, David's imaginative vision fails him, calling into question the fundamental success of the novel's structure of salvation.

This possible failure points to a deeper issue in the novel: the question of class. The blank which begins to be filled in by Murdstone's appearance is inextricably linked in David's mind with his heritage, an equation which involves both parents and class. It is difficult to underestimate the extent to which this idea obsessed Dickens at the time of David Copperfield. Biographical criticism has traditionally seen the novel as an attempt by Dickens to justify and mythologize his own social standing. The understanding of the novel as partly auto-biographical has perhaps been exaggerated, but it seems impossible to make a complete separation between David's and Dickens' quest for gentility^{viii}. At the same time that Dickens sought to justify his gentility, he utilized the myth of the self-made man, with which he had become fascinated through his reading of Fielding. In Oliver Twist, he combines the two stories into the changeling myth, in which a miraculous force guides Oliver from dispossession and poverty into his deserved inheritance. Thus, Oliver Twist combines the mythology of two eras, affirming both the

traditional aristocratic hierarchy and the capitalist myth which Dickens relied upon for his own justification. David Copperfield represents a modification of the class structure of Oliver Twist, but not a fundamental departure from it. David does not discover that he is the displaced heir of a true gentleman, kept from that knowledge by a conniving brother. However, he is still guided, even obsessed, by the question of class. The difficulty obviously arises from the fact that to attempt to create a self, as David is doing, must also imply self-justification. In the Steerforth episode, the two projects visibly collapse into each other. David cannot create a sense of self-hood independent of his knowledge of himself as a gentleman in accordance with the mandates of traditional society. Therefore, in its attempt to work out a definition of self which is fully conscious of its relationship to society, the novel discloses its bourgeois tendencies, and in doing so, commits itself to bad faith.

This fuels David's adoration of Steerforth. Like his mother, David is drawn to social standing; for David, Steerforth is a kind of projection, representing his highest status aspirations. The Steerforth-David relationship varies Murdstone's role as father-figure: Steerforth is David's ideal self, while Murdstone is David's ultimate negative self-image, the nightmare masculine outcome he can only avoid through the exercising of his imagination. David's failure of vision is to recognize that both Murdstone and Steerforth share an essentially common source in the abuse of masculine power for the purposes of domination.

The plot structure of David Copperfield, much maligned by critics, actually serves as a useful, even brilliant means of illuminating the novel's various themes. The choice to sandwich the Salem House events between visits to Blunderstone dramatizes both the differences and the similarities between the two worlds. Thus, Steerforth's relationship to David is juxtaposed against Murdstone's treatment of Clara, and the death of Clara as a result of that treatment becomes a foreshadowing of Steerforth's later role in the novel. David's attempts at socialization occur in contrast with the gradual loss of his childhood

world; with Clara's death, it disappears forever. The episode begins with a thematic statement from Mrs. Creakle: "You are too young to know how the world changes every day...and how the people in it pass away. But we all have to learn it, David; some of us when we are young, some of us when we are old, some of us at all times of our lives" (106). Like Nell, David learns something about death and loss from each stop along his journey. In this case, Mrs. Creakle is standing as the first guardian along that path, and she responds with the kind of ideal empathy required by David.

However, the reaction of others to Clara's death indicates that the fundamental role of death is not to engender community, but isolation. Only Peggotty responds - as she does during the Murdstone crisis - with sympathy and renewed intimacy. In contrast, the episode with Omer, Draper, Tailor, etc. indicates an important shift from the death of Nell in OCS. Nell's death constitutes the focus of the narrative. It creates the basis for Nell's story, and thus motivates and underlies the community which arises as a result. David Copperfield, while equally insistent on the reality and importance of death, describes death as instead a limiter on the ability of narrative to create meaning. The death of David's mother - the symbolic end of his childhood - has no effect on the outside parties. Instead, their world continues revolving at its normal pace, complete with young love and the demands of business. Mr. Omer is not interested in any ultimate meaning associated with life or death: "Fashions are like human beings. They come in, nobody knows when, why, or how; and they go out, nobody knows when, why, or how" (108). For Omer, Minnie, and Joram, the ride to the funeral is a social occasion. Minnie dresses up like the excited girl she is: "She put her thimble and scissors in her pocket, and stuck a needle threaded with black thread neatly in the bosom of her gown, and put on her outer clothing smartly, at a little glass behind the door, in which I saw the reflection of her pleased face" (110). The ultimate result of their attitude is a sense of dislocation for David, in which he feels utterly disconnected from human companionship: "I do not think I have ever experienced so strange a feeling in my life...as that of being with them,

remembering how they had been employed, and seeing them enjoy the ride. I was not angry with them; I was more afraid of them, as if I were cast away among creatures with whom I had no community of nature" (110). Thus, death in its natural condition leads to a separation between those involved in its drama and those who are not. Omer, etc. are not part of the performance enacted by David outside of the school-house, when he acts the role of the mourner. Death places a limit on the ability of the artist to create inclusion through performance and narrative. Murdstone's reaction to Clara's death also creates a new gap between himself and David. His grief is genuine: he sits at the fireside, "weeping silently" (111), but the emotion only separates him from his only companions, David and his sister. Likewise, Miss Murdstone takes "a choice pleasure in exhibiting what she called her self-command, and her firmness, and her strength of mind...being moved by nothing" (111).

Death cannot be redeemed by the church, either. The once-powerful image of the church, transposed from OCS, here offers no consolation. The clergyman's voice sounds "remote in the open air", and his quotation from the Gospel of John falls on deaf ears. David has not yet discovered the mediator of his Christian faith, and to this point in the novel, the church has little power. David's recollections of his early Christian life are of innocent child-like distraction, replaced by the terrifying Evangelical Calvinism of the Murdstones. Thus, Dickens' attempts at consolation through Christian rhetoric are limited here to a passing reference to the time when "all forgotten things will reappear" (113).

David does, however, find a means of consolation. Clara is really an earlier creation of Dickens, and her death brings Dickens back to his memories of Mary Hogarth, fifteen years earlier: "I remembered her, from that instant, only as the young mother of my earliest impressions, who had been used to wind her bright curls round and round her finger, and to dance with me at twilight in the parlor...In her death, she winged her way back to her calm, untroubled youth, and cancelled all the rest" (115). Clara, like

Nell, finds eternal youth in death, and this youth is for Dickens his own lost infancy:

"The mother who lay in the grave, was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed forever on her bosom^{ix}" (115). The loss of innocence which the novel posits as necessary for salvation becomes the consoling force in the crisis of death, creating for David a moment of eternal intimacy which sustains him through his grief.

The real crisis of Clara's death does not become evident until after the interlude at Yarmouth. This interlude is a reprise of David's prelapsarian childhood, welcomed by David as another means of recapturing the conditions lost by the death of his mother: "If anything, short of being in a different relation to every one about me, Peggotty excepted, could have given me a sense of pleasure at that time, it would have been this project of all others" (117). At Yarmouth, David devotes himself to the task of forgetting the cold lessons of logic taught by Murdstone and re-enacting his purest fantasies: "What happiness (I thought) if we were married, and were going away anywhere to live among the trees and in the fields, never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever, rambling hand in hand through sunshine and among flowery meadows, laying down our heads on moss at night, in a sweet sleep of purity and peace, and buried by the birds when we were dead!" (127). This is the OCS fantasy one last time, and if Dickens, like David, is about to outgrow it, then he is going to send it off with enough emotional significance and power to serve as the underlying force, the true desire, of the rest of his work. It is a remarkable, enduring vision whose significance for Dickens and for his era cannot be underestimated.

David, of course, discovers that even at Yarmouth, this dream is no longer practical. Emily has somehow changed, having grown taller, more elusive, and coy: "Wild and full of childish whims as Em'ly was, she was more of a little woman than I had supposed" (123). Her unaccounted, feminine interest in David's enthusiastic recounting of Steerforth's virtues elicits confusion on David's part; Emily, like David, is about to

leave behind the pastoral fantasy world forever, and David only half-understands what is going on. Thus, the Yarmouth world still maintains its power for David, but it too has begun to be infiltrated by the conditions of modernism. It cannot hold Emily for long, and it cannot give David the security he wants.

David returns to Blunderstone, therefore, and inherits, at an early age, the beginnings of the neurosis which later infects Arthur Clennam. This is principally characterized by isolation, the natural result for David of losing both the intimacy and pure love which resulted from his relationship with his mother, and the socializing pressures of Salem House: "I fell at once into a solitary condition, - apart from all friendly notice, apart from the society of all other boys of my own age, apart from all companionship but my own spiritless thoughts" (128). The result of this is a condition which strikingly anticipates Arthur Clennam. David comments on "the waste of any promise I had given"; his general agenda consists of "loiter[ing] about the house and neighborhood quite disregarded. Finally, he degenerates into a state of mind which can barely be considered functional: "I had been out, one day, loitering somewhere, in the listless, meditative manner that my way of life engendered" (129).

Following his exile to the wine bottle factory, David reveals the source of his mental atrophy: "No words can express the secret agony of my soul as I sunk into this companionship...[I] felt my hopes of growing up to be a learned and distinguished man, crushed in my bosom. The deep remembrance of the sense I had, of being utterly without hope now; of the shame I felt in my position" (133). Like Arthur, David is burdened by shame, guilt, and thwarted ambition. His lack of community, both in terms of familial and social relationships, has undermined his sense of self to such an extent that he has almost ceased to exist. Biographical criticism, dating all the way back to Forster, has long emphasized the connection between the wine factory and Dickens' childhood experience in the boot-blackening warehouse^x. Dickens famously commented that the trauma inflicted him to such an extent that he still deliberately avoided the area around

the factory even into his later years - past the time when his oldest child could speak. It is clear that he infuses this episode with the full impact of that emotional experience, down to his outrage as to how "a child of excellent abilities, and with strong powers of observation, quick, eager, delicate, and soon hurt bodily or mentally" should have been so easily "thrown away" (132). It is no past issue for David; the rats and degradation of the wine-house are "not of many years ago, in my mind, but of the present instant" (132). He closes the incident by stating, "No one has ever raised that curtain since. I have lifted it for a moment, even in this narrative, with a reluctant hand, and dropped it gladly. The remembrance of that life is fraught with so much pain to me, with so much mental suffering and want of hope, that I have never had the courage even to examine how long I was doomed to lead it." (184).

This is the heart of the class issue in the novel, demonstrating the degree to which Dickens at this point in his career connected class and salvation. David faces the threat of damnation - extinction in this novel, as it is in Oliver Twist - in the wine factory episode because his prospects of becoming a gentleman were being permanently threatened. David Copperfield, of course, represents the peak of this definition of salvation. From this novel onwards, Dickens begins to deepen his skepticism of class and society, until Great Expectations grows out of the subtextual tensions implicit in this *Bildungsroman* plot.

Thus, when David's salvation arrives, it does so in a problematic format. David is saved by the appearance of a new form of father: Mr. Micawber. Micawber is a significant variation on masculinity in the novel, but he shares some common traits with both Murdstone and Steerforth. Like Steerforth, Micawber is a master of language and persuasion. Steerforth brilliantly and effortlessly conveys whatever images he believes will best advance his agenda; Micawber also devotes the considerable resources of his art to the development of a social persona. Micawber also recalls Murdstone in his marital relations. Although the Micawber's relationship is primarily comic, Mrs. Micawber's

long-suffering devotion, punctuated by her tag phrase, "I never will desert Mr. Micawber" suggests the kind of inequality which has the potential to deepen into tragedy. Micawber is saved from this fate through the same avenue that saves David: art and the imagination. In the Dickens tradition, Micawber combines the traits of Mrs. Jarley and Dick Swiveller; he is what Dick Swiveller might have become had he not miraculously received his inheritance, and his mock gentility recalls Mrs. Jarley's elaborate pretensions of royalty.

Like his previous fathers, Micawber presents David with both a crisis and a basis from which to rebuild his sense of self. The crisis imposed by Micawber results from the analogical nature of the masculine characters, who all find an essential source of their being in David. This fact, it has been observed, is at turns discomfiting and thrilling to David, who hates Murdstone for their similarity and worships Steerforth for the same similarity. In Micawber, David sees a persuasive, eloquent artist who deals with his dislocation in society by creating elaborate linguistic constructions - by engaging in the production of fantasy, of lies, and of literature. Micawber is David's great artistic rival, and the worlds he creates are second only to David's own. Micawber ends David's self-imposed exile through infusing the blankness of David's existence with his qualities of fantasy and imagination, David's traditional source of consolation.

Indeed, Micawber might be regarded as David's childhood library come to life, a possibility which gradually permeates the narrative until it creates a strange unity between fiction and history. For instance, when David meets the turnkey, he immediately comprehends the situation in the context of his old books: "When at last I did see a turnkey (poor little fellow that I was!), and thought how, when Roderick Random was in a debtors' prison, there was a man there with nothing on him but an old rug, the turnkey swam before my dimmed eyes and my beating heart" (142). The debtor referred to as "Captain Hopkins" (recalling the Captain of David's childhood) assumes Micawber's fictional air, assisting him in the debtor petition with phrases such as "The people's

representatives in Parliament assembled", which leads Micawber to listen with "a little of an author's vanity" (145). Thus, the entire prison takes on Micawber's spirit of fiction deliberately spun in the face of poverty. David acknowledges the close relationship between this and his own project when he states, "I set down this remembrance here, because it is an instance to myself of the manner in which I fitted my old books to my altered life, and made stories for myself, out of the streets, and out of men and women; and how some main points in the character I shall unconsciously develop, I suppose, in writing my life, were gradually forming all the while" (144). Thus, David himself becomes a character in one of his stories, as Mr. Micawber plays the heroic lead in his own. The purpose of both projects is to create meaning out of "strange experiences and sordid things" (145).

The crisis that Micawber presents for David, however, lies in the unwelcome light he sheds on David's own pretensions and aspirations. David's early self-mocking recollections of his attempts at preserving his dignity through fantasy were acceptable to a very young boy with no other resource. However, even at the early age of ten, David is already developing a sense of his powers, as demonstrated in his acting the role of the mourner following the news of his mother's death. David firmly believes that he is bound for better things, and the presence of Micawber is an unwelcome commentary on David's own use of performance to further his social ambitions. Micawber is a tawdry, cheap actor who possesses, at each moment, the possibility for the kind of pathetic, self-delusional grandeur which eventually grows into William Dorrit^{xi}. David has no interest in realizing that Micawber is only a variation on himself, and that they are separated by nothing more than turns of fate.

It has been often observed, most notably by Chesterton, that William Dorrit's clear relationship to Micawber demonstrates the pessimism of the later novel^{xii}. Though the relationship is beyond dispute, it is also true that Dorrit is not *only* Micawber - he is David as well. The Dickens of Little Dorrit sees through this kind of scheming social

ambition, and translates it into some of the most devastating social criticism of the era. This connection is demonstrated by David's worries once he finally is re-established in school, through the charity of Betsey Trotwood: "My mind ran upon what they would think, if they knew of my familiar acquaintance with the King's Bench Prison? Was there anything about me which would reveal my proceedings in connexion with the Micawber family - all those pawnings, and sellings, and suppers - in spite of myself? Suppose some of the boys had seen me coming through Canterbury, way worn and ragged, and should find me out?" (195). David's fears resemble nothing so much as those of William Dorrit, listening at the door to hear if Chivery has given away the secret of his past. The connection is even more obvious when one considers that Dickens initially had Micawber in the Marshalsea, only later amended to the King's Bench.

The final permutation of the David-Micawber relationship is realized in Great Expectations. David cannot accept Micawber as a father, as he cannot accept Murdstone, because of his recognition at his close relationship to both characters. Therefore, Micawber is eventually shipped to Australia, where he cannot bother the adult David except as nostalgia. Eventually, Micawber returns from Australia as Magwitch, to haunt Pip with the terrible secret of his own gentility^{xiii}. Thus, as Dickens' affirmation of society wanes, the subtextual possibilities of David Copperfield are gradually developed into a deeply skeptical criticism of social ambition and stolen gentility. At the time of David Copperfield, however, Dickens' commitment to society is at its height, and he portrays David as essentially justified in his elitist rejection of Micawber.

The dualistic nature of Micawber's character, which can be seen as either grand or grandiose, also demonstrates the novel's conflicted relationship with art. As has been noted, creation is not simply affirmed by the novel; rather, art as a form of perception is developed as a gradual result of the artist's maturation. Thus, while Micawber's art can be seen as creating structures of meaning and possibility for David, it can also be read as a potentially deceptive endeavor, which damages Micawber's creditors and his family

alike. David often describes the way in which both Micawbers can manipulate their emotions for the sake of appearances: "Mr. Micawber was waiting for me within the gate, and we went up to his room (top story but one) and cried very much...After which he borrowed a shilling of me for porter, gave me a written order on Mrs. Micawber for the amount, and cheered up" (142). The easy way in which the Micawbers move between despair and phlegmatic optimism can be seen as both emphasizing their capacity for performance - the kind of self-conscious performance often enacted by David himself - and as a limitation on that kind of performance for the actual resolution of social crises. Micawber often fails to *see* (as in his dealings with Uriah Heep); such failure constitutes the kind of blindness repeatedly referred to by Betsey Trotwood as a failure of artistic vision.

However, the novel is not only a *Bildungsroman* for David. Micawber's art also finds its vindication in the Heep climax. The denunciation of Heep is Micawber's masterpiece; Micawber fulfills Betsey's requirements for greatness by deploying the full range of his linguistic prowess in the unmasking of Heep's fictions. In doing so, his art transcends the merely visionary or aesthetic and enters the immanent mode of social reality. As it does throughout the novel, this leads to an affirmation of masculinity: "I will lead this life no longer. I am a wretched being, cut off from everything that makes life tolerable...Give me back my wife, give me back my family, substitute Micawber for the petty wretch who walks about in the boots at present on my feet" (607). This transformation is the motive behind Micawber's final success in Australia. As Mr. Peggotty relates, Micawber's optimistic predictions have finally been fulfilled. Something has actually turned up: "I never wish to meet a better gen'lman for turning to, with a will. I've seen that theer bald head of his, a perspiring in the sun, Mas'r Davy, 'till I a'most thowt it would have melted away. And now he's a Magistrate" (745). Micawber's art has accomplished its highest purpose, transforming the world to fit its own fantastic formulations.

David's arrival in Canterbury marks a change in tone from the preceding chapters, modifying the largely hopeless tone of the London episode into the novel's more characteristic socially affirmative optimism. Betsey Trotwood's mythic qualities (most frequently understood as those of a "good fairy") have been well-documented; she is certainly one of the most accomplished artists in the novel. The mysticism surrounding Betsey is emphasized as a function of David's birth. David imagines her leaving his house on the night of his birth "forever in the land of dreams and shadows, the tremendous region whence I had so lately travelled" (11), and describes her disappearance as "like a discontented fairy; or like one of those supernatural beings, whom it was popularly supposed I was entitled to see" (11). Thus, Betsey is the fairy godmother who casts the birth-spell on David, giving him the particular powers which appear in the story as the hand of fate^{xiv}.

These qualities are well known to the Canterbury locals. David's inquiry as to her whereabouts elicits: "One said she lived in the South Foreland Light, and had singed her whiskers by doing so; another, that she was made fast to the great buoy outside the harbor, and could only be visited at half-tide...a fourth, that she was seen to mount a broom, in the last high wind, and make direct for Calais" (161). In this way, art is aligned with its natural equivalent, magic, which plays an important role in Betsey's home. She and Mr. Dick both rely on a form of art which is almost incantational; the periodic utterances of "King Charles the First's Head" and "Janet! Donkeys!" seem to serve as linguistic talismans to ward off evil and restore the surreal, carnival atmosphere which permeates the novel's early chapters. As at Blunderstone, the hierarchies between children and adults, and masters and servants, are overturned. For instance, Mr. Dick is a variation on the adult as child character. David's confusion over his proper form of address and their subsequent, child-like friendship confirms the inherent equality between children and adults. Like many of Dickens' other characters in this tradition, Mr. Dick, in his madness, speaks a kind of truth. Betsey refers to Mr. Dick as "an old and intimate

friend. On whose judgment...I rely" (178). Betsey's decision as to David's fate is punctuated by continual questions posed to Mr. Dick, who gives answers which avoid the complications of adult thinking and are therefore both insane and logical.

Thus, Betsey recreates the carnival theme of David's childhood through a deliberate reversal of normal expectations. Unlike Clara, however, Betsey is no child. Indeed, she constantly refers to Clara as "that Baby" (168), usually in conjunction with her inability to perceive truth. While Clara creates carnival through immaturity - an unwillingness to engage in the process of maturation described by the novel, and thus remain, like Nell, in permanent childhood - Betsey's creation of the carnival world is deliberate, mature, and perceptive. It is appropriate, therefore, that Betsey should be the one to put the lie to the Murdstones. The Murdstones' arrival in Canterbury diminishes their once terrifying power into comic proportions. Betsey demystifies Murdstone's powers of masculinity with the penetrating clarity of her vision: "Do you think I can't understand you as well as if I had seen you...now that I *do* see and hear you... Who so smooth and silky as Mr. Murdstone at first! The poor, benighted innocent had never seen such a man. He was made of sweetness. He worshiped her... He was to be another father to him, and they were all to live together in a garden of roses, weren't they?" Such a speech renders Betsey as an internal narrator on the events of the novel. Like Flora in Little Dorrit, she cuts through the carefully constructed fictions of the novel's characters, deconstructing their literary worlds while simultaneously creating her own. Thus, Betsey's speech could also apply to David's relationship to Steerforth, and later, to his marriage to Dora. Betsey can call David blind because, as she demonstrates here, she sees so well.

Thus, while both Betsey and Micawber are accomplished artists, who share the common goal of creating safe, sacred spaces out of chaos, Betsey is principally differentiated from Micawber on the basis of the maturity of her vision. Micawber's fantasies have the desperation of delusion; they are a stark means of survival, portrayed

against the background of starvation and prison. Micawber's goal, ultimately, is to prevent himself from recognizing the desperation of his condition. Betsey, on the other hand, uses art as a means of discernment, and her ability to see through the false fronts created by others gives her art a power and assurance Micawber lacks.

On the strength of this vision, Betsey's home becomes a new, more permanent basis for David to recreate his sense of self from the disaster of the wine-factory episode. However, Betsey and Mr. Dick, both parent figures in their way, cannot provide the complete structure David needs. For that reason, he returns to school, taking up the challenges of Salem House in a new, more nurturing environment. David also has lost the intimacy of Yarmouth - Emily's ambition, not to mention adolescence, have led her to depart the pastoral world, and David's experiences in London permanently separated him from that original condition as well. Thus, David's capacity for pure love has been lost; in keeping with the structure of the novel, however, this loss must become a sacrifice, a preparation for a more mature form of love to follow.

The stage set, therefore, Dickens produces the necessary outlet for such emotion in the form of Agnes, henceforth the light of the rest of the novel. The introduction of Agnes accompanies an important transformation for David. Prior to her debut, the novel is curiously devoid of religious iconography. David has only the two enduring religious images from his childhood, neither particularly flattering to the institution of the Church. Even Clara's death, customarily an opportunity for Dickens to wax reverent, hardly affords a passing Christian reference. As David settles into Canterbury, however, the novel begins to take on a more overtly Christian tone. Partly, it must be simply difficult to write about life in Canterbury without periodically mentioning a spire dotting the horizon here or there, but there may be something symbolic about David's journey from the hopeless squalor of London to the seat of the Anglican church.

Thus, the reappearance of Dickens' old stomping grounds from OCS, the Christian church, develops as a theme in Canterbury, gradually supplanting the carnival

atmosphere of Betsey's home. David's first visit to the Wickfield residence reveals the connection. The house is "as quiet as a monastery, and almost as roomy" (190); it is filled with shade, "quaint windows", "old oak seats", and strange furniture. It is all "old nooks and corners", with the same "air of retirement and cleanliness that marked the house outside." Of course, houses in Dickens are only extensions of those who live in them, and Dickens connects this house to its occupant in a particularly deft stroke: "I cannot call to mind where or when, in my childhood, I had seen a stained glass window in a church. Nor do I recollect its subject. But I know that when I saw her turn round, in the grave light of the old staircase, and wait for us, above, I thought of that window; and that I associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards" (191). The resurfacing of this important word from OCS - tranquillity - indicates Dickens' continuing interest in the pastoral idyll. However, the metaphorical role which David here assigns to Agnes transforms the quality of sacredness, represented by the Church in OCS, into the shape of a person: "That quiet influence which was inseparable in my mind from Agnes, seemed to pervade even the city where she dwelt. The venerable cathedral towers...the ancient houses, the pastoral landscape of field, orchard, and garden; everywhere - on everything - I felt the same serener air, the same calm, thoughtful, softening spirit" (481). Agnes represents the tranquil, unmoving center which David Copperfield seeks to redeem; her function is to mediate this sign of divinity to the world at large. Thus, it is no surprise that Agnes assists Dora in the act of dying. Both Agnes and the Church of OCS perform the task of guiding the living into the land of the dead.

This personification represents a fundamental shift from the philosophy of place which governs OCS. Nell must journey to the site of the church because place and character in OCS are essentially identical, and must ultimately be united. This same imperative underlies Oliver's eventual departure to the mythical "little society" of Brownlow, whose condition of perfect happiness is contingent on its infinite distance

from the living world. The movement occurring in David Copperfield, however, is towards the ability of characters to create, through language and the imagination, environments in which they can be sustained, resulting in an internalization of place. Therefore, David does not have to continually abide in sacred space, whether at Blunderstone, Yarmouth, or Betsey's house, because Agnes personifies those qualities, transfusing them to David whenever they are required. Thus, on one level, the character of Agnes represents a persistent string of associations for Dickens between idealized women, the Christian church, and death. However, David Copperfield can be seen as advancing that system - what Dickens regards as the redemptive complex - by bringing it to life, integrating sacred space into the immanent reality of social existence: "I feel that there are goodness, peace, and truth, wherever Agnes is; and that the soft light of the colored window in the church, seen long ago, falls on her always, and on me when I am near her, and on everything around" (198). This process is of course dramatized by David's perpetual "blindness", his inability to perceive Agnes in her fullest, sexualized dimension. David, like Dickens, cannot initially imagine Agnes as anything more than a beatific angel; until his miraculous "conversion", David is incapable of accepting immanence and transcendence in the figure of a single person, or of integrating both modes into a single existence.

This duality is developed through the introduction of a counterpart for Agnes. Nell has her Quilp, Oliver his Fagin, and Amy Dorrit her Rigaud. The quest for sacred space must always be presented alongside the possibility that it will be violated. For this reason, Agnes is introduced in contrast to the enigmatic figure of Uriah Heep. Uriah has been a source of some controversy in the novel's critical history. David, as he admits from time to time, is an unreliable narrator, and his loathing of Uriah is problematic. Critics who have taken David's judgment at face value have gone so far as to call Uriah "always and uncompromisingly evil"^{xv}, yet David's habitual tendency towards surface judgments seems relevant here^{xvi}.

David's previously noted obsession with Agnes' purity is the driving force in the David-Agnes-Uriah relationship. If David makes a fundamental separation between his aspiring, socially ambitious side and his inner, emotional life, he realizes this separation in his perception of Agnes. He cannot aspire to Agnes in a sexual sense because Agnes is sacred space, and cannot be reduced to such dimensions. This is essentially the same paradigm which motivates OCS, with the character of David substituting for the author Dickens (or the universe he creates, with its necessary laws) in the earlier novel. David creates the universe of this novel just as Dickens creates OCS, and in both cases, the laws dictate that purity remains at a fixed distance from desire.

Thus, the Uriah-Agnes relationship recalls Quilp's pursuit of Nell: in both situations, the attempt by the male pursuer to subvert the declared laws of the novel emphasizes the virtue of the female character. David, of course, must submit to his own rules; his refusal to pursue Agnes, therefore is a refusal to play the role of Quilp. Likewise, he cannot allow Heep the luxury, for the same reason: "So much too loving and too good for any one that I could think of, was it possible that she was reserved to be the wife of such a wretch as this!" (327). Yet, David's laws are not universal, and it is difficult to imagine, in a world where he refuses to condemn Steerforth's seduction of Emily, David's total rejection of any and all suitors for Agnes. His opposition to Heep's project is more than just the impartial enforcement of his own laws: it is immense and instinctual.

As seen in David's relationship to Murdstone, David tends to hate the male characters who might be described as negative wish-projections, revealing in their relationship to David the most uncomfortable and unwanted similarities. David's graphic revulsion, the least qualified and most openly aggressive emotion in the novel, indicates a powerful association between himself and Heep. This occurs partially as a result of his opposition to Heep as an artist. Like the other masculine characters in the novel, Heep applies his creativity to the construction of a social identity, and like Murdstone,

Steerforth, and David, he puts this art to use in the pursuit of women. David and Heep both spin elaborate constructions which are intended to create a world where their sexual fantasies can be fulfilled. Again, however, David applies his rules selectively. Besides David himself, Steerforth is the novel's most effective seducer. Yet, David ultimately idealizes his transgression as a tragic flaw, while Uriah's dreams are regarded as nothing more than blasphemy.

The Uriah plot is developed in deliberate parallel to the establishment of David's career; both characters, as well, equate their professional objectives with the vision of family. Uriah and David both center their sense of self on an ultimate goal of achieving a comprehensive social equilibrium, which includes family. David, of course, has the continual support of his aunt, including her monetary contributions, while Uriah appears to be entirely self-supported. In part, the desire to distract from this imbalance may motivate the somewhat strained sub-plot of Betsey's feigned bankruptcy. If David does not truly rely on Betsey's charity, his worldly success does not suffer from the comparison with Uriah. Insofar as this kind of ambition is played out in his own life, David obviously regards it with the highest value. Heep's ambition is, however, essentially the mode of a scheming, ambitious self-promoter. In fact, it is worse than this: it is predatory. David's disgust for Heep is so primal that he can only characterize it in terms of bestiality. Heep is an animal to David, as demonstrated by his various descriptions of Heep as a snake, snail, fish, dog, bat, ape, baboon, and frog. In one of his most emotional moments, in which he describes being momentarily possessed by a murderous fantasy, he simply calls Heep "a red-headed animal" (326).

David's view of Heep's art is obviously justified to a certain extent. Heep creates through displacement, shifting the weight of his meanings onto others and thus avoiding responsibility for his own creations. This method leads David to think of his art as cunning, a categorization which gives substance to the snake metaphor and places Heep in a long line of villains who operate through this particular form of linguistic evasion.

Yet, David's assessment in this regard is countered by his inability to recognize that Heep's art is capable of fulfilling the novel's highest demands: it tells the truth. Like Betsey, Heep functions as an internal narrator, capable of moments of tremendous insight and clarity. For instance, after David openly denounces Heep, Uriah's perceptive manipulation of David's emotions leads David to lament, "He knew me better than I knew myself" (530). This is indeed the threat that Heep represents for David. As with Murdstone, David reacts instinctively because Heep's ambition - his attempted rise from nothing into a secure position of wealth and power - and his funneling of his sexual desires through the medium of art reminds David of himself.

This is why David reacts so violently to the revelation of Heep's desire for Agnes. Heep and Agnes are both projections for David; Agnes is the idealization of David's internal, unchanging center, while Heep is a negative projection of his finite, variable, social self. Therefore, Heep represents an entire side of David which must, at this point in the novel, be kept separate from his pure love for Agnes. The animosity against Heep dramatizes David's inability to reconcile his own class consciousness, the immanent world of social existence, with his transcendent longings. Thus, the presence of Heep as a counterpart to David's choice of a profession indicates the crisis of being which such a choice implies. The vanquishing of Heep allows David to take over Heep's place in the novel, leading to the David-Agnes marriage, which represents the final resolution of David's social crisis.

Before David can arrive at this moment of integration, however, in which innocence and experience are brought together, it is first necessary for David to encounter Dora, and in this attempt to recreate his love for his mother a final time, discover the ultimate inadequacy of innocence. David's relationship with Dora reworks the pastoral ideal of his childhood. David consciously evokes Yarmouth, for instance, when he says, "As to marriage, and fortune, and all that, I believe I was almost as innocently undesigning then, as when I loved little Em'ly" (336). Whereas Agnes lives in a

cathedral, and is permanently associated with a stained glass window, Dora is introduced in the garden, and is associated thereafter with flowers: "the scent of a geranium leaf, at this day, strikes me with a half comical half serious wonder as to what change has come over me in a moment; and then I see...a little black dog being held up, in two slender arms, against a bank of blossoms and bright leaves" (338). This is, of course, the garden of myth, from which David must fall: "I was wandering in a garden of Eden all the while, with Dora" (335). Ultimately, this metaphor develops into Dora's nickname, "the little blossom", whose qualities of fragrance and impermanence are the essential characteristics of innocence.

The flower metaphor comes to encapsulate Dora's character. For instance, while Agnes lives cloistered in Wickfield manor, Dora is almost incapable of being indoors: "It's so stupid at home...and Miss Murdstone is so absurd! She talks such nonsense about its being necessary for the day to be aired, before I come out. Aired! ...On a Sunday morning, when I don't practise, I must do something. So I told papa last night I *must* come out. Besides, it's the brightest time of the whole day" (337). Like a wild flower, Dora cannot be domesticated. Miss Mills evokes Nell when she refers to Dora as "a favorite child of nature. She is a thing of light, and airiness, and joy" (463). Like Nell, Dora's motion is towards freedom, rather than enclosure. Thus, the settings in which David and Dora conduct their romance are described in terms of the pastoral ideology of OCS: "At first we strayed to and fro among the trees: I with Dora's shy arm drawn through mine: and Heaven knows, folly as it all was, it would have been a happy fate to have been struck immortal with those foolish feelings, and have strayed among the trees forever!" (414). David's failed marriage to Dora conclusively demonstrates the fallacy of this desire for Dickens. Yet, it is the mythic source of Dickens' optimism, and the remainder of the novel represents Dickens' commitment to it as a source of meaning.

As in the idyllic conditions of his childhood, imagination and fantasy run amok. David's powers as an artist have reached a critical stage in their development; in his love

for Dora, David creates an entire mythic world with himself as its mock-hero. For instance, his immediate reaction to Dora is to describe himself as a "captive and a slave", and her as a "Fairy, or a Sylph...anything that no one ever saw, and everything that anybody ever wanted" (333). The settings of the romance are generated by imaginative fiat: "I don't know how long we were going, and to this hour I know as little where we went. Perhaps it was near Guildford. Perhaps some Arabian night magician opened up the place for the day, and shut it forever when we came away" (412). The romance is saturated by such references to enchantment, a fact which heightens and enables the mode of absurdity which characterizes David's imaginative endeavors. Thus, David describes himself in "blissful delirium", appearing "imbecile and idiotic" (336). He absurdly stakes himself out in front of Dora's house, "the moon-struck slave of Dora...romantically calling on the night, at intervals, to shield my Dora" (404-405). Throughout, David's imagination is capable of wild feats, as when he exaggerates his departure from Dora by imagining himself as a mariner, "and the ship to which I belonged had sailed away and left me on a desert island" (339). The romance plot takes on overtly mythical tones with the re-appearance of Miss Murdstone as a guardian for Dora. Just as she once barred the door between David and his mother, Miss Murdstone now stands as a guardian between himself and Dora. Her various fetters and locks, which remind David "of the fetters over a jail-door" (336), mark her as this mythical guardian^{xvii}. Similarly, Mr. Spenlow is also "an Ogre, or the Dragon of Wantley" (473), who stands in David's path. Thus, the romance develops around David as the kind of heroic tale which sustained him in his childhood, and continues to permeate his adult existence.

Satire and sentimentality run close together in this world. For instance, David's mock-idealization of Dora is a parody of his love for Agnes: "The greater the accumulation of deceit and trouble in the world, the brighter and the purer shone the star of Dora high above the world. I don't think I had any definite idea where Dora came from, or in what degree she was related to a higher order of beings; but I am quite sure I

should have scouted the notion of her being simply human..." (404). This is exactly the kind of sentimentality that Dickens engages in throughout his early work, yet in this situation, satire and sentimentality co-exist with no contradiction. The character of Julia Mills is an example of this. Julia is David's satiric parallel, whose Micawber-esque letters and comic sentimentality satirize not only David's relationship with Dora, but Dickens' entire nostalgic project: "Do not allow a trivial misunderstanding to wither the blossoms of spring, which, once put forth and blighted, cannot be renewed. I speak...from experience of the past - the remote irrevocable past." (413). Julia, like David, mythologizes both the past and the present.

Yet, the development of the relationship indicates the inherently tenuous nature of such a duality. David's satiric idealization must either resolve itself into satire or into serious feeling; it cannot remain both. As Betsey demonstrates, the ultimate criterion of aesthetic value is perception; artistic vision transcends the tendency towards false idealization. Betsey identifies David, the true artist, as essentially earnest, and argues that this quality must be reciprocated in a marriage: "Earnestness is what that Somebody must look for, to sustain and improve him, Trot. Deep, downright, faithful earnestness" (430). David himself describes the relationship as "unsubstantial, happy, foolish", indicating the lack of an authentic center to which Betsey alludes. Betsey describes this as a consequence of immaturity: "It is a girl and boy attachment, and girl and boy attachments very often - mind! I don't say always! - come to nothing" (430). These words come back to haunt David throughout his marriage, as he recognizes the essentially immature quality of the relationship.

This is primarily realized in David's inability to reconcile Dora to worldly existence: David's ambitious, socially constructed identity is permanently separated from Dora throughout their relationship. David says of the privilege of worshipping Dora, "it seemed to me the summit of human ambition - I am sure it was the summit of mine" (336), implying that his ambition for Dora is inversely related to his social goals. This

initially innocent duality gradually develops into the predominant crisis of the relationship. For instance, the scene in which David reveals to Dora his financial ruin is a comic foreshadowing of the serious problems ahead. David urges Dora to be practical, underestimating the degree to which this is actually impossible for Dora. When Dora faints under the stress, David says, "I thought I had killed her, this time" (462). This is close to what actually happens later in the novel.

The carnival, absurdist atmosphere which permeates the courtship continues into the marriage. Courtship, however, is its natural place, and David quickly realizes the inadequacy of this condition for the purpose of marriage. As David's frustration develops, his relationship with Dora is gradually transformed. During their courtship, Dora and David both act the roles of children. Dora's similarity to Clara recreates that ideal relationship, and the two relate to each other as child-man and child-mother. However, as David gradually assimilates himself into the social world, defining his sense of self more completely by his now-realized social position, the parallel shifts. David is now an adult, and Dora is his child-wife. This takes the novel full circle: David becomes the new Murdstone. David is now fully capable of understanding the problems which beset Murdstone as he attempted to "form the character" of his mother's immature mind. Nevertheless, he sets out upon the same task, and his failure is identical. David's speech is filled with futile attempts to coax Dora out of the fantasy world: "My precious wife...we must be serious sometimes...Now let us talk sensibly" (543). This, of course, is what David has mainly refused to do throughout the novel, but the realization is too late: "Now, my own Dora...you are very childish, and are talking nonsense" (543). David's realization of the impossibility of shaping Dora to his desires results in his decision to effectively keep this dissatisfaction to himself. The separation runs throughout his married life. He divides his public from his private life in an effort to prevent Dora from having to face the threat which the socialized, realist world presents. In doing so, he

signs his failure; Dora's recognition of the burden this places on David generates her own crisis, and like Clara, she resolves the conflict through death.

This constitutes for David the greatest crisis of identity in the novel. David's attempt to build his sense of self - his masculine identity - on imagination as such has resolutely failed; he has finally come to recognize his limitations as an artist: "By imperceptible degrees, it became a hopeless consciousness of all that I had lost - love, friendship, interest; of all that had been shattered - my first trust, my first affection, the whole airy castle of my life; of all that remained - a ruined blank and waste, lying wide around me, unbroken, to the dark horizon" (697). The reference to the castle anticipates William Dorrit's castle in the air: both characters have come to recognize the false nature of their own pretensions.

This crisis is symbolized by the novel's great set-piece, the storm at Yarmouth. In the symbol of the storm, the explosive, cosmic forces of the novel are released as chaos. In this, it can be compared with the first apocalypse of Little Dorrit, the Merdle crisis. Just as that explosion leads to illness and the near destruction of Arthur, the storm blows David completely out of social existence; it symbolizes the failure of all of his structures of meaning, leaving him in the *tabula rasa* of failed childhood. This is the state in which David wanders through Switzerland and Italy, in the chapter titled "Absence". Absence clearly indicates more than David's geographical distance from England; it is the metaphysical condition engendered by David's systematic failure to define himself through sustained relationships.

David's trip is essentially the same trip later taken by the Dorrits. In both cases, the journey is a sign of dislocation, generating only unreality and emptiness: "I see myself passing on among the novelties of foreign towns, palaces, cathedrals, temples, pictures, castles, tombs, fantastic streets - the old abiding places of History and Fancy - as a dreamer might; bearing my painful load through all, and hardly conscious of the objects as they fade before me" (697). The decay of the world around him demonstrates David's

total loss of faith in his imagination. No longer does he have the will to organize the elemental units of civilization into coherence, and the ensuing unreality of his surroundings is indicative of the annihilation of his essential self.

Thus, it is in the journey that the novel overtly recognizes its own tragic nature. The progression of loss, beginning with the first appearance of Murdstone and culminating in the death of Steerforth, is symbolized by the storm, the end of innocence. David is again faced with the threat originally posed by Murdstone: he must choose between accepting the world of experience or continuing down the path of self-denial which leads to death. In the storm, therefore, David's life is brought to an end; the journey holds within it both the possibilities of death and rebirth.

Because David Copperfield is a *Bildungsroman*, David makes the choice to live, and in this way, translates loss into gain. David's love for Dora, and the entire paradigm of innocence which she represents, becomes the medium for a new source of meaning. First, David recognizes, once again, the transcendence of the pastoral ideal: "In the quiet air, there was a sound of distant singing - shepherd voices; but, as one bright evening cloud floated midway along the mountain-side, I could almost have believed it came from there, and was not earthly music. All at once, in this serenity, great Nature spoke to me; and soothed me to lay my weary head down upon the grass, and weep as I had not wept yet, since Dora died!" (697). In this perception, David unites the sacred and pastoral environments; the world of nature becomes the world of tranquillity. This is the condition in which David receives the letter from Agnes which serves as the text on which he will rebuild his faith^{xviii}. Agnes' letter takes the novel as its subject, in particular, David's relation to it. Her interpretation of the novel as written by David seeks to reconstruct the patterns of meaning which it creates as a means of comprehending loss: "She knew...how such a nature as mine would turn affliction to good. She knew how trial and emotion would exalt and strengthen it...As the endurance of my childish days had done its part to make me what I was, so greater calamities would nerve me on, to be

better yet than I was; and so, as they had taught me, would I teach others" (698). Thus, Agnes takes the chaotic, failed project of the novel - David's life - and reconstructs it according to its original conception.

In this divine act of imagination, David recognizes Agnes as his source of inspiration and self-improvement: "I told her that I had been in sore need of her help; that without her I was not, and I never had been, what she thought me; but, that she inspired me to be that, and I would try" (699). This, in turn, leads to a renewal of community: "I admitted to my breast the human interest I had lately shrunk from. It was not long, before I had almost as many friends in the valley as in Yarmouth" (699). Finally, David's recommits himself to his calling as an artist: "After some rest and change, I fell to work, in my old ardent way, on a new fancy, which took strong possession of me. As I advanced in the execution of this task, I felt it more and more, and roused my utmost energies to do it well" (699). Thus, the pattern of the novel once again emerges as David's recourse in crisis. Art, community, and in Agnes, the abiding sense of the sacred coalesce in David's renewed commitment to the possibility of meaning: "Clasped in my embrace, I held the source of every worthy aspiration I had ever had; the centre of myself, the circle of my life, my own, my wife; my love of whom was founded on a rock!" (740).

The novel, then, would seem to have arrived at a conclusive and satisfying statement. Yet, the David-Agnes marriage is problematic. Indeed, the entire ending, including the visit to the "penitents", smacks of a certain smugness and complacency which violates the emotional authenticity generated by the Dora crisis. Betsey has identified the characteristic of true art as earnestness, yet there is very little earnest in David's description: "I had advanced in fame and fortune, my domestic joy was perfect, I had been married ten happy years" (741). The dialectic between innocence and experience arbitrates against the kind of closure this ending seeks to impose; in its rigid insistence on meaning at all costs, it disables the impact of the losses sustained by David

throughout the novel. David's self-satisfied entry into a society which produces Steerforths and Murdstones echoes the kind of bourgeois indifference which will become characteristic of the middle class characters in Little Dorrit. Thus, the ending to David Copperfield suffers from the same fate as that of OCS. Both novels strain themselves in an attempt to provide stable answers for an unstable text: life itself. In Little Dorrit, Dickens' relationship to society reaches a crisis. Through the genre of apocalyptic - full disclosure - Dickens imagines a more authentic mode of salvation which does not seek to transcend or deny the dark possibilities of social existence, but successfully incorporates them into its structure.

ⁱ "Imagination of Dickens," pp. 166

ⁱⁱ As Bert Hornback puts it, "Recollection as an act of imagination," (Hornback, "The Hero of My Life," pp. 1), emphasizing the subjective, creative nature of memory.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thurlley describes the self-consciousness of the narrative in terms of its awareness of this subjectivity: "Never, we may say, has the nature of the act of recollection been so convincingly exercised before us: in being so exercised, it becomes fully transparent and visible to itself" ("The Dickens Myth," pp. 137-38).

^{iv} J. Hillis Miller accounts for the terrifying urgency of Oliver Twist in terms of the way in which it makes use of childhood fears, particularly the fear of falling and the fear of suffocation. One could add, the fear of separation. Oliver *must* find his parents or face an unspeakable death. ("Charles Dickens: The World of his Novels," pp. 36).

^v George Ford notes the number of orphans and atypical families in the novel, a condition which applies significantly to both David and Steerforth: "No man is ever really a substitute for this boy's dead father. Micawber, who makes David a member of his own family for a period, does provide some warmth and charm, but he is the reverse of a good provider...Murdstone, of course, makes a travesty of the paternal role...[Aunt Betsey] is really more of a father to David than a mother" ("David Copperfield," printed in "The Dickens Critics," pp. 353).

^{vi} Christopher Mulvey sees David in relation to his contemporaries, Heep, Steerforth, and Traddles, who are "alike in that they take the ways David might have taken" ("David Copperfield: The Folk Story Structure," printed in *Dickens Studies Annual*, 1976, pp. 77).

^{vii} "The Hero of My Life," pp. 7

^{viii} Cockshut, for one, goes too far in virtually identifying David with Dickens: "*David Copperfield* goes bad at the point where retrospective reverie merges into disingenuous self-justification, thirsting for vengeance" ("Imagination of Dickens," pp. 126), but some degree of connection is obviously justified.

^{ix} In a comparative study, F.R. Leavis observes of this scene that there is "nothing finer in Tolstoy's novels, and it is 'Tolstoyan' before Tolstoy" ("Dickens the Novelist," 1970, pp. 50).

^x Badri Raina locates Dickens' class consciousness in relation to the famous blacking warehouse incident: "The accusations that Dickens levelled against his parents, his mother in particular - 'I never afterwards forgot, I never shall forget, I never can forget...' - did not derive from the fact that they obliged him to

work for a living but from his sense that in obliging him to work in *that* place and with *those* people they had shown themselves heinously oblivious and disregarding of his extraordinary merits" ("Dickens and the Dialectic of Growth," pp. 14).

^{xi} "Thurley comments on this darker side of Micawber, "His gentility is backed up by no private income, his tights are shabby, his whole demeanour is in some sense founded upon falsehood" ("The Dickens Myth," pp. 154).

^{xii} "The joyful Micawber, whose very despair was exultant, and the desolate Dorrit, whose very pride was pitiful, were the same man" ("Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens," pp. 180).

^{xiii} Raina reads Great Expectations as a fully conscious revision of David Copperfield, noting the connections between the main characters of both novels, including Micawber and Magwitch:

"Micawber's Edenic Australia translates into a place of banishment for Magwitch" ("Dickens and the Dialectic of Growth," pp. 109).

^{xiv} Joseph Gold emphasizes the circumstances of David's birth as the "magical" property which sustains him where others fail: "David is born with a caul, a proof against drowning, and it stands him in good stead...David is lucky, and whether it is the caul, or whether it is the artist's mind blending compassion and wisdom with understanding and the strength for honest self-exploration, he does not drown. David's is the story of the Self as moral survivor" ("Charles Dickens: Radical Moralism," pp. 177-78).

^{xv} "The Hero of My life," pp. 46

^{xvi} Raina interprets the David-Uriah relationship as the key to understanding David's character: "David and Heep are not opposites but essentially varying formulations of an identical drive. I think that we begin to be close to the structural center of the narrative if we see Steerforth and Heep together in relation to David, illuminated by David's projections onto them" ("Dickens and the Dialectic of Growth," pp. 97).

^{xvii} The reappearance of Jane Murdstone demonstrates the mythical connection between Dora and Clara, noted by Thurley: "In choosing Dora, David chooses his mother; it is no surprise, either to him, or to us, to find Jane Murdstone already ensconced at the virgin's side" ("The Dickens Myth," pp. 143).

^{xviii} Miller reads David's relationship to Agnes in the tradition of courtly love: "David has that relation to Agnes which a devout Christian has to God, the creator of his selfhood, without whom he would be nothing" ("Dickens: The World of His Novels," pp. 157).

Society Unmasked: Apocalypse and Rebirth in Little Dorrit

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"

(Gospel of Matthew, 5:5).

"If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern" (Marriage of Heaven and Hell, William Blake).

Dickens' work after David Copperfield is a conscious response to that novel: the collapse of the ending into bourgeois self-satisfaction resolves itself into a progressively deeper inquisition into the nature of the Victorian middle class. This, in turn, leads to a skepticism regarding the entire system of belief worked out by the novel, in particular, the ultimate union between the imagination and the bourgeoisie. To this end, Dickens once again imagines the world in the absolute terms of OCS, divided into clear, mythic categories of immanence and transcendence. The promise of Little Dorrit is to expose the bad faith of David Copperfield as a false solution, and in so doing, to recreate the self on its own terms.

Little Dorrit begins in the broken, chaotic aftermath of David's storm, fully conscious of the forces of death and evil which range beneath the surface of bourgeois society. The novel's quest is to unite this mythic, primal force of revelation with the imagination as a form of perception: the energy of the storm must become the means by which the false nature of the bourgeois is brought into the light of day. In this, Dickens' visionary tendencies find their full flower, and Blake's prophecy of apocalypse and regeneration - the breaking of the mind-forged manacles - is re-conceived with an

intensity and finality which led Shaw to remark that Little Dorrit "lays dynamite at the foot of Victorian society" - a comment to which Amy Dorrit would surely meekly object.

The predominant metaphor describing this process is the prison. The world of Little Dorrit is a world of prisons, literally under lock and keyⁱⁱ: "The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets..." (636). The metaphor is all-encompassing: Victorian society is itself a series of self-enclosed prisons, a labyrinth of lost and wandering souls. The novel moves deftly between literal prisons and the metaphorical prisons of belief: Mrs. Clennam's religion, William Dorrit's delusions of grandeur, Henry Gowan's false gentility. In Little Dorrit, the fictions so prolifically generated by David Copperfield become prisons for the mind and the soul; the potential of bad art to become bad faith is brought to the fore; and the act of salvation becomes an act of transcendence, an abolition of the network of prisons which constitute Victorian society.

The choice to open the novel with the figure of Rigaud, locked in his cell in Marseilles, is more than just a clever bit of theatricality. Placed in the prominent position of prologue, Rigaud's prison is the key to all other prisons in the novel. The terrifying fact of Rigaud, hiding in this deepest, most fundamental of prisons, is an indication that the highly wrought comedy of manners of the later chapters is not a Dickensian attempt to imitate Jane Austen or George Eliot. To the contrary: the presence of Rigaud represents an awareness of evil which is never farther than just beneath the surface of the novel. His eventual disclosure and fate are at the heart of this, Dickens' magnum opus and most comprehensive exposition of the nature of evil.

The presence of Rigaud returns Dickens to the absolute world of OCS, the problem of evil phrased in its most basic terms. His hook nose, shock of red hair, grimy hands, and snaky mustache all evoke the classic villain tradition from which both Quilp and Fagin emerge. Like Quilp, he is a stage villain: "His theatrical air, as he stood with

one arm on his hip, within the folds of his cloak...seemed to intimate that he was rehearsing for the President" (26). While Quilp's theatricality depends on an assortment of sight-gags and physical humor, however, Rigaud is a gentleman whose mock-gentility more clearly recalls Fagin: "Call me five-and-thirty years of age. I have seen the world. I have lived here and there, and lived like a gentleman everywhere" (26). He is a dandy, a "citizen of the world" (26), and as the running heading indicates, "a cosmopolitan gentleman" (25). In this speech, and in his insistence on his gentility throughout the novel, Rigaud conclusively unmasks Steerforth. Both are faux gentlemen, consummate artists whose pretensions hide their false natures.

In this way, Rigaud initiates the transition from David Copperfield: whereas the earlier novel describes the process in which the artistic vision gradually merges with social identity, the radical skepticism of Little Dorrit - developing out of David's questioning of the nature and the adequacy of his artistic vision at the end of the novel - finds its natural outlet in the character of Rigaud, the artist who is the father of all lies. His nature is insincerity: "It's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game. Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!" (25). Rigaud has taken the logical conclusion of David Copperfield - that society can only exist in the minds of those who create it - and formed that theory into a tremendous satire on the ironic nature of both art and society as fictional enterprises. This becomes the principle theme around which the characters in the novel are varied: Henry Gowan, Sparkler, Mr. Merdle, Mr. Meagles, Mr. Casby, and William Dorrit are all variations of the false gentleman. The world that David creates in the name of meaning - Victorian society itself - is exposed as a fiction, a failed artistic experiment which imprisons its creators within its wallsⁱⁱⁱ.

Thus, as the critical link in the novel's structure, Rigaud connects the mythic energy of Quilp with the false pretensions of the bourgeois, revealing the truth behind the affirmative facade of David Copperfield. In effect, the world of the novel has a monster hiding in its basement. This motivates the second dimension of the novel's first chapter,

which is devoted to the promise of revelation. The awesome scope and narrative significance invoked by the sight of the flaming Marseilles in the first chapter demonstrate the cosmic significance of Rigaud and his prison^{iv}. Dickens is setting the reader up for a remarkable tour de force; the all-seeing eye of the narrator penetrates with the clarity of a divine judge, and at every level, the narrative promises to deliver nothing less than the eschaton itself: "Everything in Marseilles, and about Marseilles, had stared at the fervid sky, and been stared at in return, until a staring habit had become universal there" (1). Nothing is hidden in this blinding, staring light: "Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings, were all closed and drawn to keep out the stare. Grant it but a chink or keyhole, and it shot in like a white-hot arrow" (16). With the chapter's concluding paragraph, an allusion to the book of Revelation, the novel demonstrates its intention to expose the hidden relationship between the visible and invisible worlds: "the long dusty roads and the interminable plains were in repose - and so deep a hush was on the sea, that it scarcely whispered of the time when it shall give up its dead" (31). Dickens is finally taking Betsey Trotwood at her word, and focusing the entire range of his artistic powers not on the creation of a self, or a self in society, but upon a probing inquest into the assumptions of such a project. The terms in which this is described derive from Revelation, promising to effect an eschatological act of deliverance in which the prisons will be broken open and all things brought into judgment^v.

Thus, the opening chapter promises to expose the hidden source of evil and connect it to its visible effects. Ordinary, bourgeois indifference is linked at its root to the cosmic malevolence of Rigaud: both arise from the imprisoning condition of falsehood. This interrelationship is emphasized by the introduction of the novel's second prison, the quarantine^{vi}. The irony of the quarantine environment lies in a discrepancy between the knowledge possessed by the characters and that of the reader. The reader is aware that the quarantine is simply an extension of Rigaud's prison, and exists in a satiric relationship to it. The characters, however, only disclose this knowledge through

accidental statements which anticipate both the dark world beneath them and the events which stretch ahead. Thus, when Mr. Meagles admits, "to suspect me of the plague is to give me the plague. And I have had it - and I have got it" (32), he is unwittingly describing the purpose of the quarantine and his own place in it as a member of the bourgeoisie. Just as Rigaud is released into the world and spreads a kind of plague, the prisoners in the quarantine are also freed to spread their own brand of virus, which eventually brings about the first apocalypse of the novel.

Mr. Meagles, of course, fails to understand the powers at work here; his understanding is flatly one-dimensional. After obtaining his freedom, he speculates, "But I bear those monotonous walls no ill-will now...One always begins to forgive a place as soon as it's left behind; I dare say a prisoner begins to relent towards his prison, after he is left out" (39). Mr. Meagles' total lack of vision, his inability to understand the satire, is flatly contradicted by Miss Wade, the only character in the quarantine who comprehends its full symbolic significance: "If I had been shut up in any place to pine and suffer, I should always hate that place and wish to burn it down or raze it to the ground" (40). Miss Wade, a kind of evil Jane Eyre, represents the intrusion of the Rigaud plot into the placid society of the Meagles. Like Rigaud, she is a stage villain, a character of myth imposed on the flat background of the middle class. She is an evil step-sister, an enchantress, and the consort of the devil. The paradox she represents is a recurrence of the dialectic between innocence and experience. Mr. Meagles' innocence leads to his failure to comprehend the transcendent nature of evil. His existence is squarely limited to the finite dimensions of his prison. In contrast, Miss Wade's proximity to the world of the infinite gives her the ability to see through to the essential nature of their condition - a visionary power alien to the bourgeois. Her personality therefore serves as a counterpoint to the flabby banality of the Meagles, and like other villains in the novel, the power of her stinging commentary lies in the possibility that she speaks the truth. For instance, she comments prophetically, "You may be sure that there are men and women already on

their road, who have their business to do with *you*, and who will do it...they may be coming, for anything you know, or anything you can do to prevent it, from the vilest sweepings of this very town" (43). Miss Wade penetrates through the Meagle's ignorance, seeing to the heart of the novelⁱⁱⁱ.

This is demonstrated through her relationship to Tattycoram. In their blandly well-meaning religiosity, the Meagles cannot recognize the destructive fallacy of their treatment of Tattycoram. So similar a project as that of the Maylies in Oliver Twist, and Betsey Trotwood in David Copperfield, runs into serious difficulty in this novel because the institution of the bourgeois is characterized by inauthenticity; its lack of a true center renders the middle class a prison which leads to relationships of domination and inequality. This is more striking considering the generally benign depiction of the Meagles both here and throughout the novel. Indifference, even well-meaning indifference, has cataclysmic consequences. Thus, while Tattycoram is largely an anecdote to the Meagles, the hidden truth can only be provoked by Miss Wade: "I am younger than she...and yet it's me that always looks after her, as if I was old, and it's she that's always petted and called Baby! I hate her! They make a fool of her, they spoil her. She thinks of nothing but herself, she thinks no more of me than a stock and a stone!" (44). Tattycoram's outburst reveals the subtext behind the Meagles' generosity and Minnie's carelessly applied affections, demonstrating the possibility for evil even in the novel's most generally well-meaning characters. Ultimately, it serves as a reminder of the true significance of the quarantine, connecting the mythic phenomenon of evil with its result in the imprisonment and incapacitation of the middle class.

This connection is developed in a different way through the introduction of the Circumlocution Office. The Office continues the themes of Marseilles. Both environments, for instance, are multi-lingual centers of commerce: "Mechanicians, natural philosophers, soldiers, sailors, petitioners, memorialists...were all indiscriminately turned up under the foolscap paper of the Circumlocution Office" (135). This

Babylonian atmosphere develops into an extended metaphor which satirizes the activity of the Circumlocution Office as pagan idolatry, even giving the Office its own hierarchy of "minor priests and acolytes" (137). In both environments, Dickens uses the Judeo-Christian language of true versus false religion to demonstrate the pervasive conditions of falseness and hypocrisy which underlie the activity of commerce.

This can be seen in the effects of the Circumlocution Office, which becomes a kind of factory for the processing and distribution of the false gentleman symbolized by Rigaud - as, for instance, in the tendency of the Office towards evasion: "If you get it...that memorial must be entered in that Department, sent to be registered in this Department, sent back to be signed by that Department, sent back to be countersigned by this Department, and then it will begin to be regularly before that Department" (146). In this way, the Office avoids the metaphysical question of its essential self and its relationship to society. A second strategy is replication: "nobody would have been justified in saving the Parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence" (134), an artistic strategy which diverts attention from the value or relative truth of the fictions being produced and instead focuses attention on quantity. Thus it is that the Circumlocution Office perpetuates its existence, drowning the bourgeois in a sea of irrelevant information.

These two strategies of evasion and replication combine to produce the defining principle of the Circumlocution Office, absurdity. The inarguably evil nature of absurdity in Little Dorrit demonstrates the degree to which Dickens is committed to the revision of the imaginative project engaged in by David Copperfield. Absurdity in Little Dorrit prefigures its use in 20th century works by Kafka, Joyce, and Beckett. It is a condition of amorality and anarchy which represents a false return to the pre-rational condition of innocence. The imagination itself is realized as a force of chaos insofar as it is manifested in bourgeois existence. Its effect is not freedom but its opposite,

stultification. Thus, literature - and by implication, religion - cease to become creative forces and instead serve only as endlessly self-generating forms of concealment for the essentially false and imprisoning nature of the bourgeois.

Arthur Clennam demonstrates this through his mock-heroic assault on the Office. His hopelessly repeated mantra, "I want to know", and his absurdist confrontations with the residents of the Circumlocution Office symbolize the ineffectiveness of his existence. Arthur is a new Don Quixote, as the Barnacle reveals to the finally defeated soul: "our place is not a wicked Giant to be charged at full tilt; but only a windmill showing you, as it grinds immense quantities of chaff, which way the country wind blows" (867). He is the chief victim of the stultification produced by the Office, utterly incapacitated by its effects. As the consummate bourgeois hero, Arthur's encounter with the Office provides the link between melodrama and satire, the underlying energy of myth and the emergent crisis of modernism. The Office itself becomes an extension of the bourgeois^{viii}, connecting the hollow, false nature of the middle class with the pagan idolatry portrayed at Marseilles, and the mythic figure of Rigaud lurking in his cell.

If the Circumlocution Office, then, is a center for the spread of the contagion of the bourgeois, its most effective agent of transmission is Mr. Merdle. Merdle is the priest-king of the bourgeois, "a Midas without the ears, who turned all he touched to gold" (299). The extended metaphor satirizing the Circumlocution Office as a pagan temple encompasses Merdle as well: he is the false prophet, the "man of the age", and the anti-Christ^{ix}. The worship of money is once again satirized as blasphemy: "All people knew...that he had made himself immensely rich; and for that reason alone, prostrated themselves before him, more degradedly and less excusably than the darkest savage creeps out of his hole in the ground to propitiate, in some log or reptile, the Deity of his benighted soul" (652). Merdle's feast becomes a parody of the Messianic banquet: the "high priests" and "officiators at the altar" create a mock Kingdom of God. Indeed, the heights to which Dickens takes his ironic worship of Merdle are potentially

astounding: Merdle is described as “a sacred flame” fanned by the mighty Barnacles, and is located by Bar “in the innermost sanctuary of the temple”, statements which, if taken literally, suggest possible divine origins. Inversions of the same imagery, however, also disclose Merdle's true satanic nature: his association with his hearth-fire seems to imply hell-fire, enforced by the suspicions on the Barnacle-Merdle merger, “because it was indisputable that if the adherence of the immortal Enemy of Mankind could have been secured by a job, the Barnacles would have jobbed him” (654), a statement which is closer to the truth than the masses realize. In his last appearance before his death, Merdle walks from Fanny's sight, appearing to leap, “and waltz, and gyrate, as if he were possessed by several Devils” (825).

Thus, Merdle is the Satan of the middle class, the lord of evasion, absurdity, and lies. Signifying the bourgeois ailment, Merdle's name (from the French *merde*) indicates the lack of substance which underlies the final, processed condition of evil in the novel. The scene of his death describes this condition: “Lying in it, as in a grave or sarcophagus, with a hurried drapery of sheet and blanket thrown across it, was the body of a heavily made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, common features” (830). As befitting a lord of the Circumlocution Office, Merdle has perfected the art of “How Not to Do It”; clarification on what exactly Dickens means by “it” might result in an answer such as “anything at all.” Merdle represents the most scathing evolution of the self as artistic creation; in his total insubstantiality, he personifies the moments of intense self-doubt - the threat of the *tabula rasa* - in Oliver Twist and David Copperfield which question whether such a self actually exists at all.

In this way, Merdle represents a state of evil which is far removed from the Quilpian condition of dynamic tangibility and presence. Modulated by the Circumlocution Office into a condition of obfuscation and evasion, evil is finally realized in Merdle as a force of absence; it is a great vacuum, characterized by absolute nothingness. Merdle has committed fraud: the crime of falsely claiming to exist. It is in

the Merdle crisis that the novel ranges closest to the 20th century genre of nihilism. As the heading to chapter twenty-six, "Reaping the Whirlwind", indicates, the Merdle episode summons the question of ultimate foundations. If Little Dorrit is devoted to deconstructing the structures of meaning created in Dickens' earlier fiction, and thus regards Victorian society as a prison to be abolished, then Merdle's fall raises the natural question of what, if anything, is intended to replace it.

In various ways, the other middle class characters in the novel pose similar questions. This is most apparent in the Fanny-Sparkler courtship and marriage. Sparkler is the novel's most pathetic character: step-son or no, he is Merdle's true progeny, utterly lacking a soul. In the shallowness of his emotions and his total vacuity, he is evil reduced to a paste. Fanny more closely resembles the line of characters from Miss Wade to Mrs. Clennam. There is no question that Fanny possesses an inner self entirely lacked by Sparkler. Yet, Fanny becomes entangled in the mottoes of those such as Mrs. Merdle, who argue that "seeming would be quite enough" (471). Fanny's career as an actress become an extended metaphor for her particular form of imprisonment; like Rigaud, she is a character on a stage, acting out a scripted part as dictated by society. Amy's visit "behind the scenes" of the theatre reveals the stage-metaphor as a variation on the curiosity shop, a bizarre collection of the props required for the drama of Victorian society: "At last they came into a maze of dust, where a quantity of people were tumbling over one another, and 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" (283). This, for Fanny, is her means of accommodating the "prison taint", yet in doing so, she joins Mrs. Merdle, Mrs. Gowan, and Mrs. Clennam in imprisoning her will within the debilitating pride which runs so darkly through the novel's female characters. Ultimately, her inability to escape from the "shadow of the Marshalsea" condemns her to her own personal hell with Sparkler.

The failure of her marriage recalls Merdle's fall from grace. Whereas the Merdle episode, however, represents the progression of evil on a political and financial level - the spread of ineffectuality and absence in terms of bureaucratic institutions - Fanny's marriage to Sparkler reduces this phenomenon to painfully personal dimensions. The stultification produced by the Circumlocution Office is now realized in terms of impotence: Fanny and Sparkler cannot *accomplish* anything; their union is barren, devoid of purpose and meaning. This is seen, for instance, in the setting of their house, which exists in the condition of the living death, beyond time: "a little mansion, rather of the Tite Barnacle class, quite a triumph of inconvenience, with a perpetual smell in it of the day before yesterday's soup and coach-horses" (814). No hope can be found in religion; the churches themselves are crumbling: "The bells of the churches had done their worst in the way of clanging among the unmelodious echoes of the streets, and the lighted windows of the churches had ceased to be yellow in the grey dusk, and had died out opaque black" (814). Their use of language, a marker of fertility in the novel, is notably impaired. Sparkler's comments are only awkward non-entities which achieve nothing, a fact acidly observed by Fanny. For her own part, she instructs, "For goodness' sake don't talk...I want to talk, myself" (816). Sparkler's attempts at conversation are either ridiculed or ignored by Fanny. His attempt to relate her brother's illness to the state of soldiers in the West Indies is completely glossed over by Fanny, who resumes her own subject without acknowledgment. Thus, language produces nothing in the marriage. Both Fanny and Sparkler's words die the moment they leave their lips.

Movement is also an impotent force. Fanny seems to exist in a state of perpetual slow motion, the minutiae of her movements noted in such excruciating details as the languid turning of her eyelids (819), whereas Sparkler's movements, like his words, are simply nonsensical. He pushes a sprig of mignonette up his wife's nose, then pushes a chair about the room "like a dull man with a pair of skates on for the first time, who could not make up his mind to start." He is a sickly, ghoulish parody of a gentleman whose

catatonic motions are the personification of the Circumlocution Office's state of absurdity. Finally, the Fanny and Sparkler marriage can be read in terms of its sexual implications. Their marriage, fertile in nothing else, is evidently barren in sexuality as well. Fanny twice suggests "going to bed" as an effective way of ending the prolonged interaction; the first time, she threatens to do it herself, the second, she orders Sparkler to perform the same action. Though just three months into the marriage, the couple conceives of going to bed as an act of separation rather than union. Thus, the marriage has failed in all regards. The disease of the middle class has not only corrupted the nation's financial and government institutions, but has blighted the marriage hearse as well. Fanny herself, amidst the overwhelming sense of exhaustion, emphasized by the repetition of the word "tired", discloses the morbid truth: her marriage to Sparkler "is like lying in a well" (814). This comment recalls both the description of Rigaud's prison: "Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb" (17), and the well at the end of the world in Old Curiosity Shop. It is the grave, and Fanny's marriage has failed precisely because she and her lifeless husband reside at the bottom of it together in a gruesome parody of married life. Prophetically, Fanny's continually repeated longings for death have been fulfilled.

The Fanny-Sparkler marriage assumes as its basis the failed marriages of David Copperfield, which focus the dialectic between absurdity and reason into a domestic format. David Copperfield consistently fails to create marriages which successfully incorporate the imagination into their structure - the two most obvious examples, Murdstone-Clara and David-Dora, fail for the same reasons. In the end, the novel simply abandons the question in David's marriage to Agnes. Fanny and Sparkler portray the version of the David-Dora marriage prophesied by Dora on her death-bed, in which both characters live, but die to each other. In their courtship, Fanny and Sparkler also enact a black satire of David's romance with Dora. Like David, Sparkler is rendered insane by his obsession with Fanny; his random pursuit of her through the waters of Venice renders him completely absurd. The failure of romantic love in David Copperfield is still with

Dickens, and remains in its characteristic state of absurdity. Its morbid consequences in this novel indicate the extent to which such love fails when imprisoned by characters such as Fanny and Sparkler. It is the task of Little Dorrit to redeem it or disown it forever.

Fanny's tragic fate is the result of a progression of thought which begins in the Marshalsea. If Rigaud's prison hides beneath the surface of the novel like a dark spring, then the Marshalsea looms over it, lurking in the corners of the novel, hiding in the memories and apprehensions of its residents. Whereas Rigaud's prison, however, contains within it the fundamental energy of the novel, manufactured by the Circumlocution Office into manacles for the middle class, the Marshalsea represents the final condition of evil. The Marshalsea is the novel's waste dump; it is where the imprisoned go to die. Like the quarantine, the Marshalsea functions as a satiric commentary on the middle class. Whereas the quarantine, however, is juxtaposed against the background of latent energy implicit in Marseilles, linking the middle class with the promise of apocalypse, the Marshalsea lacks all such tension. Instead, the parallel results in the ironic deflation of the bourgeois pretensions. Recalling Littimer from David Copperfield, the debtors also have their own hierarchies, waiters of "shabbiness upon shabbiness", and facilitate the "insolved upon insolvency." Both class systems inherently depend upon others for their self-existence: "All of them wore the cast-off clothes of other men and women; were made up of patches and pieces of other people's individuality, and had no sartorial existence of their own proper" (118). This leads to the depiction of borrowing as a form of depraved recycling in which each individual is a parasite of another: "As they eyed the stranger in passing, they eyed him with borrowing eyes - hungry, sharp, speculative as to his softness if they were accredited to him, and the likelihood of his standing something handsome. Mendicity on commission stooped in their high shoulders...(119). The hierarchies and sycophantic relationships mirror those of bourgeois society, demonstrating its desperate, fraudulent character.

The primary means by which this analogy is effected is, of course, William Dorrit himself. Mr. Dorrit enters the prison already affected by a weakness of mind and character, "very amiable and very helpless" (83). His natural passivity renders him a prime candidate for the disease of the Marshalsea, as passed on by the doctor: "It's freedom, sir, it's freedom! ...Elsewhere, people are restless, worried, hurried about, anxious respecting one thing, anxious respecting another... We have done all that - we know the worst of it; we have got to the bottom, we can't fall, and what have we found? Peace" (88). Mr. Dorrit soon sees the wisdom in this logic, realizing that "the lock and key that kept him in, kept numbers of his troubles out" (88). Thus, he begins the "smooth descent" into the Marshalsea, from which he never escapes.

This is the delusion by which those inside and outside of the Marshalsea sustain themselves. Both the debtors and the middle class cope with their imprisonment - the inability to move, think, or feel - by arguing that prison is man's natural and right condition; like the bourgeois themselves, Mr. Dorrit builds this lie into an elaborate pretense of gentility^x. Mr. Dorrit's pathetic sham kingdom develops from other imaginary kingdoms, such as Mrs. Jarley's and Mr. Micawber's, and is a parody of that built by Mr. Merdle. Like Merdle, Mr. Dorrit presides over a body of willingly deluded worshipers, mere variations on the court of Bar, Bishop, and Treasury. He inflates his knowledge and his seniority, relies on the exaggeration of popular opinion, and develops the pretense into a racket in which he can extort the other debtors and his own family. As it does with Fanny, his self-styled royalty develops as a means of accommodating the "shadow of the wall"; thus, Mr. Dorrit's process of development is a process of assimilating the Marshalsea into himself. Clearly, Mr. Dorrit represents Dickens' conjoining of Micawber and David. The imaginary kingdoms of both are revealed in Mr. Dorrit as delusional, false foundations for the establishment of the self. In this act, the skepticism directed towards the union of society and the imagination reaches its most desperate note.

The Dorrit's ascension to wealth, therefore, and Fanny's eventual banishment to Sparkler Hell, performs the function of lifting the Marshalsea satire out of the literal condition of financial poverty and into its proper place, the spiritual poverty of the bourgeois. In doing so, the mock-kingdom generated by the Dorrit's delusion assumes its true significance, as a parallel to the equally mendacious pretensions of such figures as Mrs. Merdle, Mrs. Gowan, and Mrs. General. The satire constitutes Dickens' conscious rejection of the changeling myth. William Dorrit, *Oliver Twist*, and *David Copperfield* are all the beneficiaries of miraculous patronage, but in Little Dorrit, the mystical correlation between virtue and class evaporates completely. Thus, William Dorrit is found to be the heir of a great fortune which not only does not affirm an inner gentility or predilection to social status, but is used as a satirical means of demonstrating the absolute fallacy of wealth and status as an indicator of morality^{xi}.

This is symbolized by the corroding piles of wealth encountered by the Dorrits in Italy, physical indicators of the spiritual corrosion found both in the Marshalsea and in the fashionable circles of which they are now a part. Like the London from which the Dorrits' travel, Italy is a world crumbling in on itself; it is Nell's church at the end of the world, and Fanny and Sparkler's true home. Like their marriage, it is utterly barren: "There seemed to be nothing to support life, nothing to eat, nothing to make, nothing to grow, nothing to hope, nothing to do but die" (548). The passage prefigures the final description of the Marshalsea in the novel: "Changeless and barren, looking ignorantly at all the seasons with its fixed, pinched face of poverty and care, the prison had not a touch of any of these beauties in it. Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly the same dead crop" (954). The environment of Italy is fundamentally linked to the lifelessness of the Marshalsea and to the entire corpus of the failed project of modernism.

William Dorrits' fall from grace encapsulates the apocalyptic structure of the novel: as his riches are gradually built into an elaborate method of concealment for his moral poverty, the underlying currents of apocalyptic energy swirl around him into a

force which ultimately destroys both his material and his moral facades, laying bare his essential self. The connection with the storm in David Copperfield is clear: Dickens expands David's "airy castle of my life" into William Dorrit's "castle in the air", the great imaginative enterprise which is his created self. As it does for David, the castle in the air proves as impermanent as a dream, and as authentic. At the dinner in which William Dorrit is exposed, the worlds of the Marshalsea and of the bourgeois are finally united: "Ladies and gentlemen, the duty - ha - devolves upon me of - hum - welcoming you to the Marshalsea. Welcome to the Marshalsea!" (759). In his madness, William Dorrit has finally come to recognize the thematic unity of the two worlds.

Thus, the story of the Dorrits is its own apocalypse, fulfilling in its fashion the promise of the novel's first chapter to explode the fallacies and pretensions of the bourgeois. The stories of other characters enact this same pattern of secrecy and disclosure. Mr. Casby, for instance, is another variation on the false gentleman. As his title, "The Patriarch", indicates, his false nature is an exploration of the potential for bad faith inherent in the concept of fatherhood, a question which derives from the father quest of David Copperfield. Like Mrs. Clennam, Casby inhabits the Dickensian environment familiar from OCS, beyond the effects of time: "This was old Christopher Casby - recognisable at a glance - as unchanged in twenty years and upward, as his own solid furniture - as little touched by the influence of the varying seasons, as the old rose-leaves and old lavender in his porcelain jars" (179). The implication here, as it is throughout the novel, is imprisonment. Casby is as paralyzed within the confines of his delusions as are Mrs. Clennam, Fanny, and others. Like Fanny, his movements are painfully limited: his smooth grey eyebrows move to the ticking of the watch, and later turn to respond to Arthur; his thumbs slowly revolve around each other; he is described as "So grey, so slow, so quiet, so impassionate" (180). This condition represents an inquest into the Platonic ideal, as it is presented in both OCS and David Copperfield. Casby has attained Nell's goal of perfect placidity; his demeanor is continually described in terms of

calmness, smoothness, and gentility. Yet, the condition is only another deception, a means of displacing the question of self. In his stoicism, Casby has arrived at a point of total dissociation from his environment: "The Patriarchal state, always a state of calmness and composure, was so particularly serene that evening as to be provoking. Everybody else within the bills of mortality was hot; but the Patriarch was perfectly cool. Everybody was thirsty, and the Patriarch was drinking" (936). Casby is as much a relic as Nell's grandfather, and like Nell, he is slowly being transformed into art: "He had been accosted in the streets, and respectfully solicited to become a Patriarch for painters and for sculptors; with so much importunity, in sooth, that it would appear to be beyond the Fine Arts to remember the points of a Patriarch, or to invent one" (180). In this way, Casby has achieved the goal of both David and Nell, having become an archetype. The Last of the Patriarchs has virtually merged with the painting on his wall; he has become little more than a pair of benevolent eyebrows.

The paradox of benignancy as malevolence develops out of the quarantine environment. Casby and Mr. Meagles are variations of each other; Mr. Meagle's well-intentioned blindness finds its full destructive potential in Casby's feigned bourgeois benevolence. The comparison between Meagles and Rigaud seems harsh, yet a similar comparison between Rigaud and Casby demonstrates the potential for evil inherent in the Meagles fallacy. It is Meagles' uncomprehending banality which Casby assumes. Casby's smooth platitudes mask the predatory meaninglessness of his words: "When he had made one of these little repetitions, sitting with his hands crossed before him, he did it with his head on one side, and a gentle smile, as if he had something in his thoughts to sweetly profound to be put into words." As it is for Fanny and Sparkler, language is a meaningless signifier for Casby. The emptiness indicated by his words is contained in a wonderful metaphor: "Christopher Casby was a mere Inn signpost without an Inn - an invitation to rest and be thankful, when there was no place to put up at, and nothing whatever to be thankful for" (183). This, in essence, describes the metaphysical

skepticism of the novel: the created self, and the self in society, is a signifier without a signified, a mass of contradictory and empty notions pointing nowhere. The signifier, the external self, is merely taken for granted by the readers of the text of Casby's character: "in the great social Exhibition, accessories are often accepted in lieu of internal character" (184).

Even Casby's suppression of speech is subject to the same skepticism: "As if he denied himself the pleasure of uttering it, lest he should soar too high; and his meekness therefore preferred to be unmeaning" (181-2). In this last quality, Mr. Casby becomes a new version of Uriah Heep, the expert in false humility; both characters demonstrate the deceptive potential of meekness as an innocence falsely claimed. In this, Casby and Uriah claim membership in a Dickens character type which might be called a fraudulent version of the adult as child. These characters recognize the dialectic between innocence and experience and exploit it. This false meekness contrasts Casby against the archetype of meekness in the novel, Amy herself. Such an abuse indicates the rigorous nature of the novel's skepticism: even meekness is not beyond the possibility of hypocrisy. In the end, the task of redeeming humility is left to Amy.

Perhaps Casby's closest analog is Mrs. General. Like Casby, Mrs. General is a human shell: "If her eyes had no expression, it was probably because they had nothing to express" (530). Her mind is utterly vacuous: "Mrs. General had no opinions. Her way of forming a mind was to prevent it from forming opinions" (530). Just as Casby's emptiness passes for benevolence, Mrs. General's lack of a self is her version of propriety. For Mrs. General, to exist at all is to risk indecency. By way of this, she tells Mr. Dorrit, "Fanny...at present forms too many opinions. Perfect breeding forms none, and is never demonstrative" (557). Casby exonerates himself from the suffering of his tenants through feigned innocence; Mrs. General performs a similar act of absolution by feigning delicacy: "Nothing disagreeable should ever be looked at...A truly refined mind will seem to be ignorant of the existence of anything that is not perfectly proper, placid,

and pleasant" (561). Mrs. General's pretense of ignorance makes her a mock-Heep, although unlike Heep, her ambition lacks all imagination. What passes for imagination in Mrs. General is a curiously inverted faculty which, rather than constructing meaning and investing objects with significance, actually empties the world of meaning^{xiii}. Such acts of destruction are not without their consequences in this novel. As noted, Rigaud is just beneath the surface of this novel; the world of myth is only waiting for an opportunity to make itself known. Thus, Mrs. General's ultimately bourgeois expression of snobbery is allied at a deep level with the current which runs beneath the novel. She has forfeited her humanity, and belongs to the under-world: "Up, then, would come Mrs. General; taking all the colour out of everything, as Nature and Art had taken it out of herself...scratching up the driest little bones of antiquity, and bolting them whole without any human visitings - like a Ghoul in gloves" (716).

The novel disposes of Mr. Casby in the same way. The mode of apocalypse demands a full disclosure of the nature of Casby's crimes, and for that purpose, Pancks is momentarily transformed into Mr. Micawber: "What do you pretend to be? What's your moral game? ...You're a driver in disguise, a screw by deputy, a wringer, and squeezer, and a shaver by substitute. You're a philanthropic sneak. You're a shabby deceiver!" Pancks recognizes the nature of the deception: "This mound of meekness, this lump of love, this bottle-green smiler, this is your driver!" (940). To cap this denunciation, Pancks divests Casby of his signs of benevolence, his grey locks and his broad hat. Thus emasculated, Casby achieves his own apocalypse, his true self revealed: "A bare-polled, goggle-eyed, big-headed lumbering personage stood staring at him, not in the least impressive, not in the least venerable, who seemed to have started out of the earth to ask what was become of Casby" (942). Both Casby and Mrs. General have failed to be human, and both ultimately are revealed as sub-human creations whose pretensions are conclusively demystified.

In this denunciation, Pancks redeems himself in the manner of Micawber. Both demonstrate the maturation of their artistic vision by assuming the role of the artist as defined by Betsey Trotwood - the one who sees. Other characters perform this same task of deconstructing the fictions so prolifically created by the novel. For instance, the character of Physician is unique among the allegorical figures: "Where he was, something real was" (826). More than this, however, he is given the privilege of witnessing the true soul of Society: "Here is a man who really has an acquaintance with us as we are, who is admitted to some of us every day with our wigs and paint off, who hears the wanderings of our minds, and sees the undisguised expression of our faces, when both are past our control; we may as well make an approach to reality with him" (827). Thus, it is Physician's job, as the guardian of life and death, to mediate a degree of necessity to the participants in the drama of Victorian society. Death eradicates the difference between interior and exterior, the public persona and the essential self^{xiii}.

The character of Flora stands in the middle of these two modes. Flora is certainly one of the novel's great artists, yet, she expresses neither the flippant skepticism of Henry Gowan nor the painstaking earnestness of Amy Dorrit. In her sheer voluminity of language, much of it misdirected, Flora can be seen as a child of the Circumlocution Office. She produces absurdity at nearly the same rate: like Julia Mills from David Copperfield, she is a walking satire on Dickens' themes of romance, memory, and sentimentality, recalling the past with as much gusto as both Julia and David and investing it with her own artistic commentary: "Meanwhile Flora was murmuring in vapid snatches for his ear, that there *was* a time and that the past was a yawning gulf however and that a golden chain no longer bound him and that she revered the memory of the late Mr. F...and that the decrees of Fate were beyond recall..." (194). The fiction of youth maintained by Flora's art is a product of Casby's influence. Her father's mock-Platonic stasis has infected her in much the same way that Arthur has come to resemble his mother. It was Casby, Flora indicates, who prevented her from marrying Arthur and

instead compelled her to marry Mr. Finching: "Romance was fled with the early days of Arthur Clennam, our parents tore us asunder we became marble and stern reality usurped the throne" (339). Flora's marriage to Mr. Finching left her a "statue bride", imprisoned by her father's tyranny of banality.

Thus, Flora accommodates the stultifying effects of her father's influence through an art which becomes a form of self-delusion. Flora belongs in the "adult as child" tradition, and in this way, her artistry is a function of innocence, an unrestrained form of production which is all-encompassing and has no qualities of morality or judgment. Therefore, Flora satirizes the state of innocence from which David and Arthur have emerged, demonstrating, as do the other characters in this tradition, the impossibility of clinging to youth. Arthur, as well, has maintained a form of this Romantic idea, inherited from his ancestor David Copperfield: "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...he had kept the old fancy of the Past unchanged, in its old sacred place" (184). Although Arthur is only living up to David's manifesto of recollection in maintaining this devotion to the past, the appearance of Flora shatters the illusion forever: "Clennam's eyes no sooner fell upon the subject of his old passion, than it shivered and broke to pieces" (184). In this method of growth, the Flora episode is a variation on the failure of the David-Dora marriage. (Flora's name recalls Dora, "the little flower"; Arthur observes that he had left her a lily and she had become a peony.) Both episodes are indicative of the failure of romantic love to provide a stable text on which to base a sense of self, a theme which continues the satire begun by the Sparkler-Fanny courtship. In Little Dorrit, as in the end of David Copperfield, the state of innocence is a mode of self-denial.

Indeed, for all her comedy, Flora's condition is similar to that which will give rise to Miss Havisham. Unlike David, she is simply incapable of separating past from

present: "[She] was wholly destitute of the power of separating herself and him from their bygone characters" (194). Thus, the performance she enacts is an anachronism, a meaningless rehearsal of a forgotten role: "Now, when the stage was dusty, when the scenery was faded, when the youthful actors were dead, when the orchestra was empty, when the lights were out" (190). Rigaud, Fanny, and Flora are all self-conscious performers, but Flora's theatricality has no quality of immanence; it is mired in the past. This perversion of the Platonic ideal develops all the way from the morbid fixation on the past demonstrated by OCS; Flora's delusion is an insistence on taking David Copperfield literally, transforming the act of recollection into a grotesque caricature of authentic existence.

Thus, Flora belongs with the characters such as Mrs. Clennam and Casby whose conscious creation of self removes them from the flow of time and becomes a means of imprisonment. In this way, Flora is indeed another incarnation of bourgeois self-deception. Yet, Flora also belongs to the other tradition; her art also has the qualities of transcendence and perception. For instance, she recognizes Arthur's disappointment: "I know I am not what you expected, I know that very well" (188), an observation which is typical of "the quick perception of a cleverer woman." In the classic tradition of Betsey Trotwood and Micawber, she reduces Mrs. Clennam's terrifying pretensions to comic dimensions: "so it was at his mother's was it really that you knew him first, highly sensible and firm but dreadfully severe - ought to be the mother of the man in the iron mask" (340). Following Flora's artistic analysis, Mrs. Clennam is nothing more than "Fate in a go-cart" (340), and Mr. Casby has been dismissed as "smoothly blundering" (342). Her innocence, like that of Mr. Dick, gives her an ability to cut away the encumbering logic of experience and penetrate to the essential nature of things. Thus, Flora modulates between the novel's two modes of concealment and disclosure. She is as prolifically creative as any member of the Circumlocution Office, yet her creations just as often have the effect of deconstructing the pretensions and facades of others. In this way,

Flora demonstrates both the novel's highest qualifications of art, and their most dangerous possibilities.

Thus far, it has been seen that Little Dorrit effectively deconstructs Dickens' entire quest for meaning, in particular as it reaches its most characteristically bourgeois expression in David Copperfield. Indeed, in the novel's obsession with imprisonment, it resembles nothing so much as OCS. Having exploded the union between immanence and transcendence achieved by David Copperfield, Dickens has come full circle, left once again with the crisis of the pure soul eternally separated from the will. The similarities between the two novels are striking. Arthur's London, for instance, is only another incarnation of the London experienced by Nell, a corroded, lifeless wasteland, incapable of supporting creativity, benevolence, or reason. It prefigures the absurdist and existentialist settings in all of 20th century literature, literally a hell on earth: "Miles of close wells and pits of houses, where the inhabitants gasped for air, stretched far away towards every point of the compass. Through the heart of the town a deadly sewer ebbed and flowed, in the place of a fine fresh river" (49).

This London recaptures the nightmare stasis which Nell attempts to escape: "'Nothing changed', said the traveller,' stopping to look round. 'Dark and miserable as ever. A light in my mother's window, which seems never to have been extinguished since I came home twice a year from school..." (51). The tautological reply to Arthur's routine inquiry regarding his mother's health is telling: "She is as she always is now" (52). This could stand as a motto for Arthur's London, where everything is as it always is now. Mrs. Clennam herself claims to be beyond time: "All seasons are alike to me...I know nothing of summer and winter, shut up here. The Lord has been pleased to put me beyond all that" (54).

Arthur recognizes the truth behind his family situation: "The track we have left kept is not the track of the time; and we have been left far behind" (67). This could stand for his mother's entire out-dated credo; however, he fails to understand that it implicates

himself as well, imprisoned as ever in her murky theology. Even the house has frozen in a nightmare moment: "the room was so unaltered that [his father] might have been imagined still to keep it invisibly...Down in the cellars, as up in the bed-chambers, old objects that he well remembered were changed by age and decay, but were still in their old places; even to empty beer-casks hoary with cobwebs..." (78). This last image prefigures the horrifying sight of Mrs. Havisham's wedding cake, frozen in its own eternal moment. Both Arthur and Mrs. Havisham have achieved the stasis which is the hallmark of the living death.

Having subjected David's faith in imagination and transcendence to a punishing skepticism, Dickens leaves Arthur bereft of any structure of meaning whatsoever. He is the David of the Murdstones, bereft of the saving power of his father's library. Thus, he has inherited the gloominess of the Murdstone creed, with none of its energy: "The sound had revived a long train of miserable Sundays, and the procession would not stop with the bell, but continued to march on. 'Heaven forgive me...How I have hated this day!'" (49). The ironic satire on Sabbatarianism forms the connection between Arthur's and his mother's decaying psychological states. He has imbibed her cynicism, her violent self-castigation, her sexual repression. Arthur's reaction to the Minnie crisis, his perception of himself as much older than his actual age, and one for whom "those things are past" is an indication of this. Like his mother, Arthur has assimilated himself to the essentially barren condition of society; in fact, he has absorbed the entire negative, defeatist flow of his mother's personality without her sense of energy and vitality. Arthur is a lifeless version of his mother, a wasted spirit who flits about the globe in a vain quest to redeem a sin he does not understand.

His condition is also characteristically modern: like a 19th century Woody Allen, he exists in a state of indecision, paralyzed by self-doubt and alienated from the necessity of work by financial independence. "How weak am I...that I could shed tears at this reception! I, who have never experienced anything else; who have never expected

anything else" (53). This self-pity constitutes Arthur's version of the Little Nell fallacy: he mistakes listless self-denial for meaningful sacrifice, and thus gradually incapacitates both himself and his community of friends. Ultimately, Arthur imitates his mother's act of imprisonment in a last hopeless sacrifice to his immeasurable self-hatred^{xiv}. Arthur has inherited Nell's world because he has refused the challenge of David's project: he has refused to create a self. He has no imagination, no faith, and no hope. Thus, his meandering, purposeless existence is a parody of the heroic quest for ultimate stasis, and like Nell, his direction is downwards.

Amy also is a clear variation on Nell. Like Arthur, Amy lacks the instrument of the novel's most powerful characters, a will. She is a passive, suffering servant who washes her father's feet in relative silence, carefully observing but rarely taking initiative. Indeed, it initially appears that even given the late date of this novel and Dickens' marvelous skill as an artist, he has still not learned to imagine a heroine as anything like an *adult*, that a Dickens heroine must always be an angel, and an angel, lacking in desire, must always be a child: "But she was so little and light, so noiseless and shy, and appeared so conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders that she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued child" (76). The ghost of Mary Hogarth still haunts Dickens. Indeed, at times, Dickens is simply repeating himself. Like Nell, Amy is trapped in bondage to an ungrateful and abusive parent, forcing her to put off all needs of her own. Amy's prison, created for her by her family, denies her a social position and the maturation of sexuality; content with this, she maintains a diminished, unspoken relationship with Arthur. Amy's sexual repression becomes apparent on several occasions. For instance, she rejects a potentially rewarding match in John Chivery out of her characteristic urge towards self-denial. Her uncertainty regarding sexuality is also linked to her relationship with her father. Her father's desire to find her an "eligible partner" is met with, "Oh no! Let me stay with you. I beg and pray that I may stay with you! I want nothing but to stay and take care of you!" (715). The bondage

in which Mr. Dorrit keeps Amy is the primary shackle which prevents her from maturation. Only when Mr. Dorrit dies, taking the world of the Marshalsea with him, can Amy be free to assume her rightful role^{xv}.

Clearly, Dickens' temptation in Little Dorrit is to simply write off the quest for meaning entirely and return to the formula of OCS, in which immanence and transcendence must remain fundamentally separate. This position would indeed render the novel an existentialist tragedy, as many critics have attempted to read it. However, this is a misreading. The 20th century, which might be described as a particularly egregious misreading of Dickens, focuses on the *crisis* of meaninglessness in Dickens while ignoring the solution. In fact, this reading threatens to reduce Dickens to the status of Henry Gowan, a morally vacant cynic who believes in nothing^{xvi}. In Henry Gowan, Dickens has created an archetype for the 20th century, distancing himself forever from the smug solipsism which is itself only another expression of the bourgeois condition. Dickens has performed the unlikely act of voicing skepticism about skepticism, or rather, a certain kind of skepticism which has no moral character, no quality of discernment, and only negates rather than constructs. To this end, the salvation posited by the novel does not simply consist in abolishing society, or meaning itself, in a moment of Blakean apocalyptic fervor, but in recreating it. For this purpose, Rigaud and his prison must return to the scene. Rigaud's escape from prison is certainly no divine act of grace, such as Arthur's release at the novel's conclusion. Instead, Rigaud is loosed onto the world, as the unwitting Swiss clergyman relates: "That's the true reason why they said the devil was let loose" (157). Given this, Rigaud's prison might be read as a necessary and beneficent institution, implying that the release of the will from its characteristic prison of restraint has, for Dickens, the potential for enormous and possibly destructive consequences^{xvii}. However, Rigaud also motivates the action of the novel; he impels it into being.

This is demonstrated by Rigaud's effect on Mrs. Clennam. She is at once fiercely enterprising, powerful, and compelling, traits which arise from her firm Evangelical conviction. However, her beliefs also have a restraining effect; she is quite literally paralyzed by her culture of prejudice. She is continuously described as a statue: "She sat looking towards the fire with the impenetrability of an old Egyptian sculpture" (68), which dovetails with Dickens ironic inversion of her Evangelical theology as a form of pagan idolatry: "Great need had the rigid woman of her mystical religion, veiled in gloom and darkness, with lightnings of cursing, vengeance, and destruction, flashing through the sable clouds" (68). Mrs. Clennam understands her condition in a way that Arthur does not: "Reparation...Yes, truly! It is easy for him to talk of reparation...But let him look at me, in prison and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins" (71). However, she cannot break free from its hold. When finally confronted with her misdeeds, she repeats her false logic: "If this house was blazing from the roof to the ground...I would stay in it to justify myself against my righteous motives being classed with those of stabbers and thieves" (915).

Thus, Mrs. Clennam remains imprisoned by an act of her own will. As he does with Arthur, however, Rigaud provides the energy necessary for Mrs. Clennam to break free of her self-imposed stasis. Confronted by his challenge, she performs the impossible: "It was, to all the three, almost as if a dead woman had risen." (921). Ironically, where the patience of others had failed to resurrect Mrs. Clennam, Rigaud succeeds. Frozen beyond time and beyond life, Mrs. Clennam can only be freed by an individual whose natural inclination is towards the present moment, the immanent reality of action and desire. However, her status remains ambiguous. Clearly, Rigaud does not have the power to offer Mrs. Clennam salvation; his only effect in the novel is disruption. Therefore, Mrs. Clennam journeys to Amy in the guise of a re-animated corpse: "Conspicuously dressed in its black garments and with its hurried head-covering, gaunt and of an unearthly paleness, it pressed forward, taking no more heed of the throng than a

sleep-walker" (925). Mrs. Clennam's disorientation is the result of her sudden fall into the dimensions of time and thought: "Made giddy...by the unexpected changes in half-remembered objects, and the want of likeness between the controllable pictures her imagination had often drawn of the life from which she was secluded..." (925). She is abruptly forced to contrast the fictional world she has vainly and idolatrously created against the reality; confronted by the gross nature of her transgressions, she has no choice but to appeal to ineffable grace.

This leads to the other half of the novel. Without Rigaud, the world of Little Dorrit remains in the decayed, entropic state portrayed by the end of Old Curiosity Shop; there can be no change, and therefore, no affirmative salvation, beyond life and time. However, Rigaud on his own is a nightmare. He is clearly no angel - he is nothing but a will - and this is exactly what Dickens requires for his network of redemption. Hence, Little Dorrit enters her own novel, prepared to demonstrate the truth of the proposition that the meek shall inherit the earth. In a significant sense, this biblical text can be seen as the novel's thematic statement. The saying is an eschatological prediction whose irony parallels that of Little Dorrit: as the book of Revelation indicates, the end of the world is an epic production, requiring a cast of millions and an elaborate cosmic drama before its spectacular denouement. It is God's final, greatest work. In the same way, Little Dorrit is Dickens' great imaginative project, a book which promises as it builds relentlessly towards its conclusion nothing less than the eschaton itself. The final lines, and the leading role belong, however, as Jesus indicates, to the meek. After the pyrotechnics and melodrama are concluded, it is the tiny figure of Amy who will deliver salvation to the novel's people.

Amy is the novel's great redeemer of artistic truth. In a novel which denounces society as a meaningless fiction, Amy is a bedrock of truth. Throughout, it is her "deep, timid earnestness" (890) which is emphasized. She is the antithesis of false gentility, entirely authentic in her emotions and intellect. Amy fulfills Betsey Trotwood's

requirement of the artist: she sees. Descriptions of Amy give prominence to her eyes: "It seemed to be a pale transparent face, quick in expression, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel eyes excepted" (76). These eyes serve Amy well, as she watches from her corner: she is capable of keen discernment in her perceptions of Mrs. Clennam's relationship to Arthur, Flora's inherent goodness, and Arthur's love for Pet. Though she begins the novel as a mere presence, her intelligence is deftly developed, particularly in the letters she writes to Arthur, which display the characteristic quickness of her mind and subtlety of her feelings. In her first letter, she demonstrates her apt understanding of the mismatched Pet and Henry Gowan marriage, describes in vivid detail her sense of loneliness and dislocation among the rich in Italy, and manages to convey an impression of her attachment to Arthur, which failure in communication is probably more attributable to his passive dullness than to hers. In all this, she conveys an active, enterprising mind which, much more so than Arthur's, makes connections and draws insightful conclusions. These qualities differentiate Amy from Nell, who has no mental capacity, and from Agnes, who has the depth of a stained glass window. Amy is only prevented from a full self-hood by her own imprisonment within the vindictive delusions created by her father, sister, and Mrs. General.

More so than any other character, Amy sees through these delusions, beginning from an early age: "She was a very, very little creature indeed, when she had somehow gained the knowledge...that while her own light steps were free to pass beyond it, his feet must never cross that line" (94). At this early stage, Amy's characteristic inability to maintain the family facade is already in place. With a "pitiful and plaintive look", she sees "her wayward sister; her idle brother", and surrounding them, "the high blank walls" and faded crowd (94). In her naïveté, she already comprehends the symbolic significance of the Marshalsea: she asks whether the fields are locked, whether they are desirable, and whether her father regrets his inability to visit them, denoting her understanding of the world as a kind of prison, and of her father as permanently separated from its beauty.

Clearly, it is her ability to think in these terms that separates Amy from her family both in their poverty and their wealth. Whereas the Dorrits attempt to maintain the fiction that their sudden, undeserved accession to wealth has created a radical break with their past, Amy continues to feel the presence of the Marshalsea throughout their travels: "It appeared on the whole, to Little Dorrit herself, that this same society...greatly resembled a superior sort of Marshalsea. Numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison..." (600). In her letters to Arthur, Amy describes her inability to separate her past and present lives: "I have dreamed of going down to Mrs. General, with the patches on my clothes in which I can first remember myself...I have not grown out of the little child in thinking of it" (650-651). Her recognition of the simultaneity between the Marshalsea and the ancient monuments of Italy results in a deep emotional experience: "'How many times when the shadow of the wall was falling on our room...this place was just as quiet and lovely as it is today!'" (650). In this association, she has arrived at a Dickensian correlation between the two settings which emphasizes both their similar and dissimilar natures. Throughout her letters, and her entire imaginative project, the result of her vision is unity through perception. Through her ability to perceive the truth behind the facade, she exercises an act of narrative cohesion which gives the world of the novel its unifying principle: "Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. 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 the interest of his life" (862). Yet, Amy is not simply a viewer whose observations provoke no emotional response. Instead, her powers as an artist lead her to empathy, for her family and for Arthur. In this, Amy far surpasses David as an artist. Her charity contrasts against David's juvenile, transparent ambition, his tendency to separate himself based on his perceived superiority. Thus, Amy is the novel's maker of meaning, creating

order from chaos. Her artistic vision becomes the text on which Arthur can build a sense of faith^{xviii}.

It is from this position that Dickens returns to the apocalyptic promise of full disclosure contained in the novel's first chapter: the imagination as faculty of perception will be deployed in an unrelenting demonstration of artistic power. As the novel's great perceiver, it is Amy who is given this task. This brings together Amy and Rigaud, uniting the imagination with the energy of the will. The Platonic universe will not suffice on its own for the kind of salvation Little Dorrit seeks, and therefore, Amy can and must grow up. To this end, Amy's intellect and good intentions are radically empowered, and she becomes the salvific, apocalyptic deliverer promised in the novel's first chapter. Upon her return from Italy, she is marked by a new confidence and power: "She looked something more womanly than when she had gone away, and the ripening touch of the Italian sun was visible upon her face" (889). Her interactions with Arthur in the Marshalsea contain a fuller, sexualized dimension, free from the timidity and apprehension of their earlier relationship, a development which culminates in her impassioned offer of love: "Pray, pray, pray, I beg you and implore you with all my grieving heart, my friend - my dear! - take all I have, and make it a blessing to me!" (892). Such a speech fulfills the potential demonstrated earlier by Amy's insightful, articulate letters; clearly, she has grown into the character Dickens intended her to become. Even Arthur is no longer capable of simply diminishing her into a girl: "If I had then known, and told you that I loved and honoured you, not as the poor child I used to call you, but as a woman..." (892). Amy has taken a decisive step away from the world of Little Nell: she has decided to grow up, and decided to live. Despite this, the novelist is careful to conserve her "deep, timid earnestness", maintaining the characteristic meekness which the apocalyptic irony of the novel requires.

Thus, Amy and Mrs. Clennam have been freed by the catalyst of Rigaud; the reintegration of both into a full, regenerative unity provides the dynamite necessary to

demolish Victorian society. Dickens' new vision is animated by Little Dorrit's living, breathing faith^{xix}: "We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure. There can be no confusion in following Him, and seeking for no other footsteps, I am certain!" (931). Like the Paraclete she represents^{xx}, Little Dorrit quickens even Mrs. Clennam, "Broken by emotion as unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs^{xxi}" (928).

The cosmic energy which has been funneled through the novel's structure bursts out in fulfillment of the apocalyptic promise of Chapter 1: "From a radiant centre over the whole length and breadth of the tranquil firmament, great shoots of light streamed among the early stars, like signs of the blessed later covenant of peace and hope that changed the crown of thorns into a glory" (932). This benevolent sign of forgiveness is coupled with the other great sign of divine fiat, the fall of the Clennam house. As Mrs. Clennam has nervously predicted, "Let me never feel, while I am still alive, that I die before his face, and utterly perish away from him, like one consumed by lightning and swallowed by an earthquake" (930), this is just the kind of wrath which God has in mind. Thus, down comes the house, and with it, the devil himself. Rigaud's role in the novel has been fulfilled, and he is no longer needed in the society Dickens is planning.

The motion of the novel's conclusion is, of course, not simply destructive, but regenerative. Dickens' mature faith, fully developed from the Platonic urges of Old Curiosity Shop, includes the promise of resurrection. Thus, the Christian church, symbol of death from Nell onwards, gets a facelift: "And they were married, with the sun shining on them through the painted figure of Our Saviour on the window" (967). The shift from the church as the abode of the dead to new life is neatly symbolized by the signing of the Registry: "This young lady...has come now to the third volume of our Registers. Her birth is in what I call the first volume; she lay asleep on this very floor, with her pretty head on what I call the second volume; and she's now a-writing her little name as a

bride..." (967). Just as the seal at its conclusion unifies the book of Revelation with the Book of Life, Little Dorrit's seal of approval at the end of her own text unifies the Book of Life with the novel as a metaphysical concept: in her persistent deconstruction of society as literature, Amy has redeemed fiction from the bourgeois limitations imposed on it by David Copperfield, and recreated the possibility of social affirmation within the literary realm.

The ending is one of the most hopeful and courageous in all of fiction. The novel's conclusion is the triumphant result of a tension in which the apocalyptic overtones of the novel's first chapter, with their tremendous latent power, are brought into play with the otherwise imprisoned pure soul. By accepting sexuality, desire, and time, Amy arrives at a faith which does not transcend the world, but transforms it; the apocalyptic, Evangelical energy promised in the novel's first chapter explodes into a radical, Blakean act, casting off the restraints and blasting the novel's prisons - the summation of Victorian society - into a new world capable of supporting fertility and life, symbolized by the married pair.

ⁱ Shaw, George Bernard, "Preface to Great Expectations," 1937

ⁱⁱ Lionel Trilling established the now-traditional interpretation that the novel must be understood in terms of prisons: "The story opens in a prison in Marseilles. It goes on to the Marshalsea, which in effect it never leaves...its connection with the will is real, it is the practical instrument for the negation of man's will which the will of society has contrived" ("Little Dorrit," printed in "The Opposing Self," pp. 45-46).

ⁱⁱⁱ Janet Larson analyzes the question of truth in Little Dorrit as a function of the prison metaphor: "Knowing that 'we are all partly creators of the objects we perceive,' Dickens explores more fully in *Little Dorrit* than he had yet the inescapable realm of "fiction," the influence of the imagined and the constructed in human life...Dickens sees the problem of the imagined as a fact of the human condition, as inescapable as the nature of the mind and the inherent abstraction of language" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 186).

^{iv} Gold focuses on the biblical and mythical aspects of this prologue, reading the chaos of languages in terms of the story of Babel: "As Marseilles lies 'burning in the sun,' we see in the opening chapter a Babel-like world. Men can no longer speak to each other, can no longer see each other, and are out of tune with their world...we have gone from flood to fire" ("Charles Dickens: Radical Moralism," pp. 213).

^v Larson argues that this apocalyptic promise is continually modified in the light of recurring skepticism: "In anticipating and then revising the End time, chapter 1 enacts a recurrent dialectical movement in the

novel: as expectations of endings or of new beginnings are repeatedly disappointed, we sense that Dickens' narrative is working not to confirm the mythic paradigms...but rather to modify them through an ironic rhythm of disconfirmation and revision" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 180).

^{vi} Thurley reads the two prisons as a thematic prelude to the rest of the novel: "We begin in an unimportant provincial gaol in the *midi*, and now move across the harbor to another sort of prison, the prison of quarantine. Dickens's novel has already started to take shape" ("The Dickens Myth," pp. 229).

^{vii} Trilling points out that part of the novel's ironic power is in the uncomfortable possibility that the villains are closer to the truth than anyone else: "The subversive pathos of self-pity is by no means wholly dismissed, the devil has not wholly lied. No reader of *Little Dorrit* can possibly conclude that the rage of envy which Tattycoram feels is not justified in some degree, or that Miss Wade is wholly wrong in pointing out to her the insupportable ambiguity of her position..." ("The Opposing Self," pp. 51-52).

^{viii} H.M. Daleski regards the Circumlocution Office as "the representative institution of the society depicted in *Little Dorrit*" ("Dickens and the Art of Analogy, pp. 198).

^{ix} Larson places the blasphemous worship of Merdle in its apocalyptic context: "Mammon-worshippers indulge many 'new polite readings of Scripture,' but most extensive is their appropriation of the Bible's most powerful dream in order to enhance capitalist ideology with the fiction that riches are the ultimate apocalypse, the transforming energy that ushers in heaven on earth. As its central symbol, the 'name of Merdle' is not simply 'the name of the age' but the name of the New Age...which arrives with the influx of money" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 188).

^x Thurley notes the significance of this mentality in the novel – the perversion of imprisonment into freedom: "At this point we can no longer say that Dorrit is deceiving himself, or even that he is choosing to deceive himself, although he is doing both things. In accepting the conditions of prison life and even making them desirable...he has become a completely inauthentic man" ("The Dickens Myth," pp. 247-48).

^{xi} As Thurley puts it, "along comes the golden fruit that was the birth-right of the early heroes and heroines, and, lo, instead of endless happiness and a vista of jolly Christmases stretching into the future, nothing but nervous anxiety, uncertainty, petty snobbishness, shame, and ultimate disgrace" (*ibid.*, pp. 246).

^{xii} Daleski observes that her method of varnishing becomes a general principle of dishonesty: "The varnishing of cracked objects becomes the sticking of a false front on to the whole universe" ("Dickens and the Art of Analogy," pp. 207).

^{xiii} It seems surprising that Dickens never explored the potential of this character more deeply. Physician is an anti-Casby, a figure of actual compassion and substance. Larson compares his role to that of the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount who listens and heals: "Physician, who in effect says, 'Come and see,' is the novel's model of how this narrative voice might 'do it'" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 251).

^{xiv} Thurley interprets Arthur's reaction to the Merdle crash as glorified self-abasement: "This is not just honesty, if it is honesty at all...it is simple self-destructiveness" (238).

^{xv} Larson notes the sheer ineffectiveness of the immature Amy: "Dickens' narrator often leads us to think of how Amy has worked; yet the cumulative effect of the novelistic presentation is to lead us to reflect on the futility of her work...In *Riches*, she comes to an excruciating awareness of the futility even of her love...In her relations with these people, there is... 'nothing to do but die,' what, literally, she would have to do to cease being the bane of the family" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 221).

^{xvi} Cockshut makes this case, arguing that "Dickens's criticism was entirely negative...He simply refused to recognize that government was necessary, and that no one has ever devised a way of excluding tedious routines from the business of government...The startling, yet inescapable conclusion is that in this he was very much like his own Henry Gowan. He is making fun of everything because he has contracted out of the normal routines of life" ("Imagination of Dickens," pp. 150).

^{xvii} Trilling states, "One of the effects of [Rigaud's] presence in *Little Dorrit* is to complicate our response to the theme of the prison, to deprive us of the comfortable, philanthropic thought that prisons

are nothing but instruments of injustice. Because Blandois exists, prisons are necessary" ("The Opposing Self," pp. 49).

^{xviii} Larson arbitrates between the idea of Amy as a metaphysical source of truth and as a source of narrative ambiguity as potentially complex as the novel's other competing voices, noting that Amy "involves herself in deception, assumes roles, and makes fictions" ("Dickens and the Broken Scripture," pp. 263). These categories, I would argue, are unnecessary, betraying a mistrust of metaphor itself. There is no contradiction in arguing that Amy is both an artist and a source of truth; it is the *nature* of Amy's art which sets her vision apart from the skeptical metaphysic of the rest of the novel.

^{xviii} Walder recognizes the "Old Testament-New Testament" dialectic as the thematic center of the novel's spiritual struggle: "[This] contrast runs throughout the narrative, and is brought to a climax...with the heroine's offer of mercy and forgiveness to the older woman when she finally confesses her guilt...In an important sense, religion is *itself* the central theme of *Little Dorrit*; it is the first, perhaps the only, novel of Dickens's in which plot, character and scene are all closely involved with religion" ("Dickens and Religion," pp. 171-72). Despite this, Walder still reads the novel as "fundamentally, but not exclusively humanist," though marked by "the deepest struggle to reach a more 'ideal' and transcendent form of belief" (172).

^{xix} Trilling calls Amy, "The Paraclete in female form," ("The Opposing Self," pp. 57).

^{xxi} Gold is less equivocal than Walder about the epiphanic nature of the conclusion: "By the time Dickens writes *Little Dorrit* he has pushed his search for the sources and nature of evil and suffering to the point where he is looking for the element common to all aberration and self-delusion and he is coming to a frankly religious answer" ("Charles Dickens: Radical Moralist," pp. 211). Trilling also interprets the conclusion as somehow mystical: "This confirms us in the sense that the whole energy of the imagination of *Little Dorrit* is directed to the transcending of the personal will, to the search for the Will in which shall be our peace" ("The Opposing Self," pp. 56-57).

Conclusion.

What then, is Dickens' final achievement? His novels dramatize a quest which, like the Christian tradition upon which it is based, seeks to redeem a fallen world. The early works, Oliver Twist and Old Curiosity Shop, explore the degree to which this desire can be taken literally. Is it possible to simply reject knowledge and maturity out of hand? The inevitable consequence of such a decision is either death or madness, as a range of Dickens' characters indicate - and madness, in its unpredictability, can lead to the false self-hood of exploitation. It may indeed be true that one must become as a little child in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, but the early novels demonstrate the impossibility of simply accepting this statement *ipso facto*. Dickens then shifts his focus to address the question of not whether to grow up, but how to do it right. Can maturation make sense out of the necessary loss which it implies? Can it preserve some essential quality of the pastoral world? To the extent that David Copperfield is an authentic work, the novel successfully demonstrates a pattern which takes into account the dualities of both loss and gain. The novel suppresses its darker implications, however, denying the possibility that the accession into society is in itself an act of violence, an impossible compromise which invalidates the very process of self-realization it is intended to achieve. Little Dorrit recognizes the limitations inherent in a socially defined sense of self. If society itself is a prison shackling the vital, authentic nature, then no amount of social compromise can free the essential self. Instead, society must be eradicated through the union between the pure soul and the will, resulting in an offer of grace which in turn recreates society and the place of the self within it.

This is the religious vision of Dickens, as it develops over the forty years of his career. It is, in every way, a *religious* narrative, perhaps destined to become the

defining prophetic statement of the Victorian era. In its construction, Dickens has not so much invented a new mythology as recreated an old one: the mythic pantheon of ogres, demons, angels, and heroes still stand as figureheads for the power of the imagination. In his great defense of the fundamentally human enterprises of art and religion, Dickens has refocused our attention on the furnace which burns at the center of The Old Curiosity Shop: the source of all stories, and of all life, and in doing so, has stated his case for its continuance.

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