

Identity, Self and Shadow in *Little Dorrit*

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Harvey Sucksmith says in his introduction to the World's Classics edition of *Little Dorrit* that Dickens like no other writer 'devastatingly exposed the "persona-culture" of Victorian England and its shortcomings'.¹ Sucksmith defines persona as a 'conformist' identity (conforming, that is, to mid-Victorian notions of the self) that 'constrains genuine responses' (p.xii); a social mask that deceives its wearer as well as the others who behold it. In this essay I want to examine Dickens's formal and thematic approach to the notion of identity, to look at the way he sets it up, and then to suggest that in those terms Dickens's exposition of what Sucksmith calls 'persona' may be seen not so much as devastating as contradictory. I want to explore this contradiction through the ambiguous relationship between the key images of darkness and light in the novel, as well as through the difficulty of naming in the text. At the centre of this difficulty I shall, finally, place the figure of Little Dorrit.

The issue of 'persona culture' is concentrated in one almost surreally eccentric character who is 'always staring', although she 'never acknowledged that she saw any individual'. The other 'major characteristics discoverable by the stranger' in this 'amazing little old woman' are 'extreme severity', 'grim taciturnity', and 'a propensity to offer remarks, in a deep warning voice, which, being totally uncalled for by anything said by anybody, and traceable to no association of ideas, confounded and terrified the mind'. The last 'remarkable thing' about this character is that 'she had no name but Mr. F's Aunt' (p.131).

Society within *Little Dorrit* often comes across as an enlarged version of Mr. F's Aunt, whose blank gaze both accentuates the self-awareness of an individual and dismisses him or her at the same time. Mr. F's Aunt's verbal attacks on Clennam, in which

1 Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, ed. Harvey Peter Sucksmith (Oxford, The World's Classics, 1989), p.xii. All subsequent references are to this edition.

she invariably refers to him in the third person ("Throw 'im out the winder"), as well as Clennam's discomfiture in being the object of Mr. F's Aunt's stare, become an indication of the way he, like other characters, finds himself placed in his society as a whole. William Dorrit, for example, lives in fear of what he calls the 'Eye of the Great World' as personified in the 'basilisk' eye of Merdle's butler. This kind of factitious and socially imposed identity, whether willingly or unwillingly sustained by the individual, proves a life-defeating burden. Clennam, in doing the right thing, remained untrue to himself and to his needs for twenty years. For William Dorrit the results of his attempts to do the right thing are even more serious: his pretence to a socially acceptable identity weakens him fatally in body and mind; and, in an irony that touches tragedy, his death is preceded by bewilderment and a disastrous inability to maintain his image at a dinner party.

In the society that *Little Dorrit* presents, the individual can only survive within a system of pretence, which at best and in part sustains life, as when Clennam finds relief from existence in day-dreaming, or when William Dorrit takes comfort in his office as 'Father of the Marshalsea'. At worst, and at all times to different degrees, however, such pretence is enervating and in itself imprisoning. Similarly, society is not only a place of an unremitting glare, of a heightened if uncomfortable self-awareness; it is also a circumstance of blindness, ambiguity, and a playing with shadows – as Mrs General says, "Nothing disagreeable should be looked at" (p.398). With this in mind, I want to consider the opening chapter of the novel, where the interplay of dark and light is involved in constantly defining and redefining the perception of identity.

This idea of society holding the individual in its glare, almost committing a visual assault, is apparent in the opening paragraph of the first chapter. Here 'strangers were stared out of countenance by staring white houses, staring white walls, staring white streets, staring tracts of arid road, staring hills from which verdure was burnt away' (p.1), much in the same way as Mr Merdle is stared 'out of countenance' by his butler (p.209). The unrelenting intensity as well as the impersonal blankness

seclusion'² into which such a gaze forces the individual is intimated in the description – 'Blinds, shutters, curtains, awnings, were all closed and drawn to keep out the stare' (p.2). The description goes on to specify that the 'churches were the freest from [the glare]' (p.2). But even the church becomes not a haven but a limbo, a no-man's-land of 'ugly shadows'; while along with the 'barking of dogs', the 'rattling of vicious drums', we are given the 'jangling of discordant church bells'. The Tower of Babel associations are supported by a hectic list of differing nationalities; loss of meaning is very much connected to absence or negation of self and accords with the other metaphors in the description, which is in many ways an image of hell, a place of lost souls. The church, therefore, becomes equated with the prison that the passage moves on to describe.

One of the chambers of this prison is focused on as being 'so repulsive a place that even the obtrusive stare blinked at it, and left it to such refuse of reflected light as it could find for itself' (p.2). At this point the symbol of light contains its own inversion. In the previous passage, light is the 'obtrusive stare' of society that 'blinks' at low life; but light can also be read more traditionally as the element of the divine: 'Like a well, like a vault, like a tomb, the prison had no knowledge of the brightness outside; and would have kept its polluted atmosphere intact, on one of the spice islands of the Indian Ocean' (p.23).

The image of light in this passage, then, is constantly modulating in its implications. This also happens with the image of its source, the sun. It is first presented in its life-denying aspect (as metaphor for society), as a 'blazing sun upon a fierce August day' (p.1); nevertheless, by the end of the third paragraph, it has become the image of divine light, too bright to look at, 'one great flaming jewel of fire' in a 'sky of purple' (p.1). The idea of vision as assault, therefore, also modulates here: in protecting his or her sense of self, the individual cannot bear to be seen, but also cannot bear to see. This link between light and revelation, between shadow and the play of identity, is carried on in the scene between Rigaud and Cavalletto.

2 Miss Wade is to be described by the phrase 'self-secluded' (p.209).

Rigaud is first presented to the reader as an anonymous male figure in a significantly indeterminable position ('half sitting and half lying' – p.2). Appropriate to the idea of vision as assault, which the novel sets up from the start, Rigaud's eyes are 'sharp rather than bright – pointed weapons with little surface to betray them' (p.3). The darkness of his character is given in a number of ways. The warden's child, a representation of light in its enlightening aspect ('the fair little face, touched with divine compassion, as it peeped shrinkingly through the grate, was like an angel's in the prison' – p.4), recoils from him. But the darkness of Rigaud's character is given more fully in the way he uses words as a sleight-of-hand, in which the novel picks up once more the Tower of Babel associations. He also speaks of himself as if his character were a valuable object in which he takes the exquisite interest of an antiquarian. He presents himself as though he were an actor or his own lawyer:

His theatrical air, as he stood with one arm on his hip, within the folds of his cloak, together with his manner of disregarding his companion and addressing the opposite wall instead, seemed to intimate that he was rehearsing for the President, whose examination he was shortly to undergo, rather than troubling himself merely to enlighten so small a person as John Baptist Cavalletto. (p.8)

Cavalletto recognizes the way in which the identity of Rigaud, like his way of talking, slides in different ways at the same time. For when Rigaud demands of him whether Cavalletto knew him to be a gentleman, Cavalletto replies 'ALTRO' (p.7), which is a Babel in one word, being assent, denial, and equivocation.

Rigaud's real self is revealed by the sun, as he exits from the prison at an hour past midday to be greeted by an 'uproar' of 'yells, shrieks, oaths, threats, execrations', which is the light of judgement (p.11). Even so, there is the interesting complication that the evil in Rigaud, which we are meant to see as his undeniable, his essential quality, is also, as it is difficult not to notice, histrionically devised. Rigaud's sinisterness becomes all the more emphatic for being assumed, and it is this that Cavalletto mimics, typifying both the distinctness and the fleetingness of Rigaud:

With his rapid native action, his hands made the outline of a high hook nose, pushed his eyes near together, dishevelled his hair, puffed out his upper lip to represent a thick moustache, and threw the heavy end of an ideal cloak over his shoulder. While doing this, with a swiftness incredible to one who has not watched an Italian peasant, he indicated a very remarkable and sinister smile. The whole change passed over him like a flash of light, and he stood in the same instant, pale and astonished, before his patron. (p.565)

Rigaud can be seen as an incorporation of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) where the familiar is unfamiliar and the self is divided. As such, he is the dramatically appropriate centre for the first chapter, whose images shift around to form a complicated structure of significance. His character, histrionically exact, provides a vivid definition of identity that Dickens explores and repeats with infinitely subtle variations throughout *Little Dorrit* as a whole. As such, too, he is a point of departure for a discussion of other characters in the novel.

Miss Wade, for one, is presented in such a way as to link her closely to Rigaud in terms of 'persona'. She is 'proud' (p.18), a word that Rigaud also uses to describe himself (p.9); and like our introduction to him, the first image of her is of a detached and distant figure, whose motives and actions are indeterminable. (The reader is told at one point that she 'had either withdrawn herself from the rest or been avoided by the rest – nobody, herself excepted perhaps, could have quite decided which' – p.18). Shadow, as with Rigaud, also has an important part to play in sustaining Miss Wade's identity:

The shadow in which she sat, falling like a gloomy veil across her forehead, accorded very well with the character of her beauty. One could hardly see the face, so still and scornful, set off by the arched dark eyebrows, and the folds of dark hair, without wondering what its expression would be if a change came over it. (p.19)

Miss Wade prefers the shadows, being more herself when she is within them, just as shadows give Rigaud the appropriate circumstance in which to play out his 'character'. Also, the idea of vision as assault is connected to Miss Wade as it was to

Rigaud. Miss Wade has an 'observant' face (p.18), and it appears 'next to impossible' that her expression 'could soften or relent' (p.19). Here is the impersonal intimidating gaze of society.

Such intimidation is the product of Miss Wade's self-obsession. This becomes apparent in the scene in which Miss Wade discovers Tattycoram weeping in a room of the quarantine.

The visitor stood looking at her with a strange attentive smile. It was wonderful to see the fury of the contest in the girl, and the bodily struggle she made as if she were rent by the Demons of old. (p.21)

Miss Wade's definition of her identity, which requires detachment from her emotions, is implied in her response to Tattycoram's passion. Nevertheless, the tension between Tattycoram and Miss Wade must be stated in a more complicated way than in the simple psychological opposition between self-repression and that which is repressed. In this sense, Tattycoram's outburst of passion is to be seen not so much as a spontaneous overflow of emotion as a theatrical performance of feeling, which needs an admiring audience (as does Rigaud's performance), of the disconnected and observing self. Miss Wade takes that part for Tattycoram, as well as yet another; at which point we turn full circle. For, when Tattycoram says to her, 'you seem to come like my own anger, my own malice' (p.21), we find that here, too, Miss Wade's observation of Tattycoram is vision as assault.

Similar circumstances of shadow surround Mrs Clennam. Within the four walls of her dark and airless room, Mrs Clennam is a presence to be reckoned with ('the old influence of her presence and her stern strong voice, so gathered about her son, that he felt conscious of a renewal of the timid chill and reserve of his childhood' - p.27). Yet her unequivocal identity is and can only be played out within the room's 'doubtful light' (p.28). For characters like Mrs Clennam, Miss Wade, and Rigaud, identity is defined by and the self hidden in the shadow. Within the darkness of Mrs Clennam's room people become like ghosts:

'Is that Affery?' said Arthur...

The cracked voice replied that it was Affery: and an old woman

came forward into what doubtful light there was, and kissed her hand once; then subsided again into the dimness. (p.28)

Mrs Clennam herself has 'the appearance of a phantom of fierce aspect' (p.39), and her insubstantiality of self is emphasized when she leaves her room for the first and the last time within the novel, only to find that she is 'surrounded by an eager glare of faces' (p.657). Although Mrs Clennam is given in one respect, as were Miss Wade and Rigaud, absolute self-definition, it is a self-definition of self-negation: with her 'immoveable face', Mrs Clennam is 'beyond the reach of seasons' and 'of changing emotions' (p.28).

This spectre-like state of self, which dissolves into and is yet sustained by shadows, also receives subtle emphasis and insistence in the character of Affery and the circumstances in which she finds (or loses) herself. Affery believes that almost everything she sees is a dream, and ends up becoming as elusive as her visions. Her perception of Flintwinch and his brother, who form a parallel to the twining of Miss Wade and Tattycoram, disorients her and serves in this way as another image of false self-detachment.

Society suffers its individuals, then, to be deluded and self-absorbed. In that sense, the inversions of society, those who avoid society and/or who are avoided by it – the butler, Rigaud the criminal, Mrs Clennam the eccentric, and Miss Wade the governess – are society's image. Moreover, in themselves they contain the psychological split that exists within society as a whole; the split of emotional disconnection, the split of which Clennam is aware when he is in prison and becomes 'afraid of himself' (p.614). These individuals are victims, and they in turn make others the victim of their own detached observation. In the process, they become locked in narcissistic relationships, like Miss Wade and Tattycoram; or they become third persons, like Rigaud and his 'character' or Mrs Clennam and her persona as the scourge of God. The way they perceive and reject others is the way they have fashioned themselves. Their perception is basilisk, but like the self-referential Mr. F.'s Aunt, it is themselves they have turned to stone.

So far it would seem that Dickens's approach to identity may well be summed up by Sucksmith's definition of persona. But difficulties start to emerge when we look at the way that Dickens allows a character's 'persona' to slip.

It is not only the apparently self-sufficient characters of the novel who find their appropriate context in shadow; so, also, do those who are emotionally vulnerable and too easily stripped of identity. Shadow offers protection from social inquisition, allowing both self-effacement and self-expression. William Dorrit's 'public character' is a fiction that he needs to maintain in order to survive, but it is also a life-depriving defence against emotion, which the shadow of the prison serves at once to deny and to foster. We are told how 'the time had been when the Father himself had wept in the shades of that yard', but that he had grown 'inclined to remonstrate and to express his opinion that people who couldn't get on without crying had no business there' (p.187). And when he is shaken out the ceremony of official identity and into tears by the generosity of Plornish, the collegians 'marvelled what had happened to their Father; he walked so late in the shadows of the yard, and seemed so downcast' (p.56). Moreover, near the end of the novel the notion of shadow harbouring rather than belying the self becomes clear in the way Mrs Clennam reveals her emotion to Little Dorrit in chapter 31:

'GOD bless you!'

She stood in the shadow so that she was only a veiled form to Little Dorrit in the light; but, the sound of her voice, in saying those three grateful words, was at once fervent and broken. Broken by emotion as unfamiliar to her frozen eyes as action to her frozen limbs. (p.659)

Like the curious figure of Rigaud, whose meaning slides in two directions at once, Dickens uses the image of shadow to allow himself and his characters to treat the notion of persona in different ways – to exploit and adopt identities, as well as to escape and avoid the same. The implications, however, of the way Dickens uses the image of shadow to indicate both emotional depth as well as an immoral ambiguity, raises a couple of points. The first is that Dickens intrigues the reader in his

manner of suggesting that identity is no more than a clear-cut shadow thrown upon the wall by a trick and a wavering candle. Rigaud, in his similarity to the villain in Victorian melodrama, that figure both scrupulously defined and hidden by his black cloak, is the exemplar not only of what Dickens does with the notion of 'persona', but how he does it. The second point is that a character, such as Daniel Doyce, whom Dickens presents in a calm and approving light, dispensing with the subtlety of shading, tends to take on a virtuous blandness. These are the sort of issues that Sucksmith overrides. So much is clear, if not to Sucksmith himself, when he talks of Casby and his deceptive 'patriarchal pose', calling the character 'rather wooden', and adding that 'this is apt; for a mask is rigid and false' (p.xii). Here the line between moral judgement and assessment of style has become inappropriately blurred. To call Casby 'wooden' is a choice of adjective that furthers Sucksmith's morally tendentious argument, but which belies the vitality that Dickens puts into the drawing of Casby as a character he wishes to show up.

Far more intriguing, then, in many ways, are the characters in whom are combined these two aspects of shadow, as protecting the possibility of self-realization on the one hand, and as giving room for duplicity on the other. These aspects meet in the presentation of Arthur Clennam. His relationship, too, with the Meagleses throws a revealing light on those figures – or perhaps considering their kinship in terms of plain goodness to Doyce – an interesting shadow.

Clennam is introduced in chapter two, itself in many ways an inversion of chapter one. In chapter one, the external scene is beautifully detailed by the narrator, the situation and physical characteristics of Rigaud and Cavelletto established just before or just as they begin to speak. In chapter two there is none of this; the situation and surroundings are to be inferred from the seemingly disembodied voices of two speakers whose identities emerge not until almost a page in from the beginning. Mr Meagles, not unlike Rigaud, theatrically demands attention as a presence, while Clennam is introduced (almost as if he were Meagles's shadow), as 'Mr Meagles's companion, a grave dark man of forty' (p.14), and is constantly referred to as 'the other'.

Individuality of feature in Clennam's case is reduced to 'the gravity of his dark face' (p.14). Clennam within the shade remains of obscure identity – a self not described or delineated, but a self effaced. The linking element between the two chapters is, of course, the image of the prison in its differing guises; and the common element between Rigaud and Clennam is their ambiguity of presentation. Moreover, like Rigaud, Clennam becomes a third person, although in Clennam's case the process is carried a step further. For in becoming the detached observer of his negative, suffering, hopeless love for Minnie Gowan, he transforms himself into a 'Nobody', a third person who does not exist.

Clennam, we find, falls in love twice with a shadow created by his own daydreams. But if Flora stands as a comic lesson concerning the solipsistic tendency of (Clennam's) desire, Minnie stands as its undeniable, if deceptive lure. At one point in the novel Tattycoram indicates, albeit unwittingly, to Clennam that he is deceiving himself in his conception of Minnie:

The picture [of Minnie and her sister] happened to be near a looking-glass. As Arthur looked at it again, he saw, by the reflection of the mirror, Tattycoram stop in passing outside the door, listen to what was going on, and pass away with an angry and contemptuous frown upon her face that changed its beauty into ugliness. (p.169)

In the moment when Clennam sees Tattycoram's beauty transformed into ugliness by a mirror, a reflected image, he is finding it impossible to decide which image of the little girl in the picture represents Minnie. The event serves as an indication of something to which as yet he remains blind; that Minnie is not simply what she seems to Clennam – beautiful, good, and affectionate; she is also spoilt, frivolous, and vain. Minnie Gowan contains her own inversion, and the relationship between them is only the ghost and a shadow, not as Mr Meagles fondly believes of what might have been, but considering the love Little Dorrit bears for Clennam, of what cannot and should not be.

This fleetingness of identity is what we find in the heart of the Meagles house, when Clennam glimpses the shadow and image of Tattycoram's face in the mirror. Shadow, therefore, also finds

its way into the happy light-filled Meagles household, not simply in obvious terms of the shadow of care over Pet's parents at the idea of her marriage to the worthless Gowan, but the same shadow of sinisterness that surrounds Rigaud. That Tattycoram cannot make up her mind whether the Meagles home is a sanctuary or a prison points out not only Tattycoram's moral vacillation, but on another level the dubious nature of the persona of the middle-class Victorian family, whose piety, with ever so slight a twist, becomes priggishness and whose love becomes a set of repressive strictures. In the sense that Dickens holds up both an image and an inverted mirror image of the Meagleses, Tattycoram is equally cause and victim of the skewed and fractured harmony of the Meagles household.

Tattycoram is one of the few figures in the novel to be presented in images of light.

[The cottage] was made out of an old brick house, of which a part had been altogether pulled down, and another part had been changed into the present cottage; so there was a hale elderly portion, to represent Mr. and Mrs. Meagles, and a young picturesque, very pretty portion, to represent Pet. There was even the later addition of a conservatory sheltering itself against it, uncertain of hue in its deep stained glass, and in its more transparent portions flashing to the sun's rays, now like fire and now like harmless water drops; which might have stood for Tattycoram. (p.162)

There is a beautiful depth of implication in this metaphor. Again implicit here is the notion of vision as assault, the blinding brilliance of light hitting glass, which links the metaphor to the 'staring white walls' of Marseilles, and therefore Tattycoram to society, hostile in her observation of others and evading (self) perception. At the same time, however, Tattycoram also happens to be the only immediately telling sexual presence in the novel (as well particularly in a household where admission of sexuality is not permitted). This quality of her vitality is as obvious as the monitoring of the reader's response to it. Both aspects are caught in that image of the conservatory filled with brilliant flashes of light.

Like the reader, Tattycoram must come to realize the

implications of her rebellious energy. By the end of the novel, she has had instilled within her the love of a faithful servant ('a very pretty tenderness indeed' – p.339), which makes her a potential Mrs Tickit. Tattycoram is to become, like Little Dorrit, a 'little Mother' and a 'dear child', as Little Dorrit nominates herself, despite her initial dislike of Clennam's calling her so (p.142). Appropriately, the formal conversion of a quashed and penitent Tattycoram takes place as she listens to Mr Meagles's aggravatingly unctuous summing up of Little Dorrit's virtues (p.677).

Nevertheless, if Tattycoram is cabined, cribbed and confined by her enlightenment, it is clear that Mr Meagles's pious speech cannot sum up Little Dorrit. This is because, unlike Daniel Doyce, she is not the creation of blatantly well-lit expression. She, like Clennam, is presented, but with perhaps more interesting complications, in the shade.

In chapter eight Frederick Dorrit says of himself, and could well, it would seem, say of all the characters in the novel, that he passes on 'like the shadow over the sun-dial' (p.66). The only person who is not the shadow of society, of their own or of another's imagination, is Little Dorrit herself:

As they sat side by side, in the shadow of the wall, the shadow fell like light upon him. She would not let him speak much, and he lay back in his chair, looking at her. Now and again, she would rise and give him the glass that he might drink, or would smooth the resting-place of his head; then she would gently resume her seat by him, and bend over her work again.

The shadow moved with the sun, but she never moved from his side, except to wait upon him. The sun went down, and she was still there. (p.633)

Whereas Miss Wade, demonstrating the lack of outward-going perception typical of many characters in the novel, speaks to Clennam 'as if she were speaking to her own looking-glass for the justification of her own stubbornness' (pp.551-2), Little Dorrit is a true mirror presenting not the image of herself but the substance of another who regards her:

He roused himself, and cried out. And then he saw, in the

loving, pitying, sorrowing, dear face, as in a mirror, how changed he was; and she came towards him; and with her hands laid on his breast to keep him in his chair, and with her knees upon the floor at his feet, and with her lips raised up to kiss him, and with her tears dropping on him as the rain from Heaven had dropped upon the flowers, Little Dorrit, a living presence, called him by his name. (p.631)

And at that point of being called by his name, Clennam is also at the point of finding his true self. Also, near the end of the novel the images of light and shadow that have been opposed with so many symbolic complications and ambiguities throughout become aligned in the following description:

It was one of those summer evenings when there is no greater darkness than a long twilight. The vista of street and bridge was plain to see, and the sky was serene and beautiful. People stood and sat at their doors, playing with children and enjoying the evening; numbers were walking for air; the worry of the day had almost worried itself out, and few but themselves were hurried. As they crossed the bridge, the clear steeples of the many churches looked as if they had advanced out of the murk that usually enshrouded them and come much nearer. The smoke that rose into the sky had lost its dingy hue and taken a brightness upon it. The beauties of the sunset had not faded from the long light films of cloud that lay at peace in the horizon. 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. (p.661)

Little Dorrit, like the scene in that previous section, represents the balance between light and dark rather than their oscillation. Explicit affirmation of Little Dorrit comes at the end of the novel in that well known chapter 34, where Autumn (a season of balance), is opposed to soporific, blinding summer, giving rise to true perception and a prospect that shines 'defined and clear' through 'unaccustomed openings among the boughs' (p.679). This peaceful and unified aspect of nature presents itself to Clennam on his walk to the Meagles cottage. The culmination of the beautifully lyrical description of the scene is the following sentence:

Between the real landscape and its shadow in the water, there was no division; both were so untroubled and clear, and, while so fraught with solemn mystery of life and death, so hopefully reassuring to the gazer's soothed heart, because so tenderly and mercifully beautiful. (pp.279-80)

Between what Little Dorrit appears to be and who Little Dorrit is there is likewise no division. Her designation, it seems, completely defines her. But what is interesting is how such an identification takes place.

Names are of great importance in the world of *Little Dorrit* and not simply in such instances as the talismanic name of 'Merdle' or in the fact that the Barnacles get where they are by names alone. There is a difficulty about naming that is linked to the difficulty of defining the self, as represented in the enigma of 'Mr. F's Aunt', both in name and character. For example, we might look at the way Clennam is depicted in chapter three (which is the first instance of the novel's insistent re-presentation of characters as if the narrowing of focus were hindered past a certain point and the presentation had to begin again):

At such a happy time, so propitious to the interests of religion and morality, Mr. Arthur Clennam, newly arrived from Marseilles by way of Dover, and by Dover coach the Blue-eyed Maid, sat in the window of a coffee-house on Ludgate Hill. (p.23)

In a sense the accumulation of names at this point is a witness of their insufficiency: the ambiguous nature of Clennam's identity has been so richly and successfully established in chapter two that this stiff, newspaper-like progression of proper nouns becomes highly ironic. Similarly, all the characters in *Little Dorrit* (mis)name or are (mis)named, in that the designation never seems fully to capture the person designated and therefore serves to decentre them from immediate focus. Miss Wade has no Christian name because she never gives it and keeps everyone, the reader included, at a formal distance. Rigaud adopts many names (Lagnier, Blandois), and the more designations he has the less nameable (the less definable), he becomes. Affery is forced into the name of Mrs Flintwinch and loses herself in a dream world. Clennam calls Mrs Clennam 'Mother' (a misnomer),

while Doyce is called a 'public offender' by Mr Meagles (an inversion of meaning – p.100), in the name of the Circumlocution Office, which misrepresents everything, if it doesn't mislay it first. Minnie Meagles is called 'Pet' while her real name remains unknown until book one, chapter sixteen (p.164), where it is given at the exact moment when Clennam is looking at a picture of her (Minnie) and her sister (Lillie), without being able to differentiate between them. 'The Dorrit Family' is a name that remains constant while its meaning changes from designating quality to referring to low life and back again in constant oscillation.

In order for the figure of Little Dorrit to resolve the difference between image and self, the name 'Little Dorrit' must be reserved from any touch of irony. Interestingly, however, the closest the name comes to being ironized is, precisely, the point where its significance is most fully indicated in Flora's lyrically comic definition:

'Why yes of course,' returned Flora; 'and of all the strangest names I ever heard the strangest, like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favorite pony or a puppy or a bird or something from a seed-shop to be put in a garden or a flower-pot and come up speckled.' (p.226)

The name 'Little Dorrit', therefore, is balanced between unusual significance and an equally unusual deflation of significance. In this way, the figure of Little Dorrit turns out to be not an opposing, but an extreme example of the problematic relationship of identity to self, already analysed in Miss Wade and Rigaud. The troubling implications inherent in the figure of Little Dorrit start to become apparent in the way the names 'Little Dorrit' and 'Amy' are opposed in the novel.

The only ones to call Little Dorrit 'Amy' are the members of her family, a misnaming that is on a par with their refusal to treat her as they ought. All the characters who come into more than passing association with the heroine of the novel must make the choice between the names of 'Amy' and 'Little Dorrit'. One exception to this is Frederick Dorrit, who never calls her by first name at all (other than a minor lapse of patronizing at the beginning of the novel – "She is a very good girl, Amy. She

does her duty” – p.77), and who ends up addressing her as ‘dear child’. The other exception is Maggy, who calls her ‘little Mother’. The use of the name ‘Little Dorrit’ signals direct perception of who Little Dorrit is, which is both mother and child. ‘Little Mother’, Maggy corrects her. “‘It’s all the same”, Little Dorrit replies, “all the same”” (p.142).

The name ‘Little Dorrit’ contains a multitude of ideas, associations, and stories, so that the figure nominated becomes enclosed within that name. The name of ‘Amy’, however, is not only opposed to that form of signification, but comments on it. This is markedly apparent in the rather one-sided conversations between Fanny and her sister, where ‘Amy’ is equated with ‘Twoshoes’, ‘Owl’, and ‘Tortoise’. Fanny’s performances, which capture with wonderful comic incisiveness all the more derisible aspects of Little Dorrit, become Dickens’s performances to forestall or provide an outlet for the reader’s exasperation with his heroine. ‘Amy’, then, like ‘Rigaud’ or ‘Miss Wade’, may name and misname, thus decentring the person named from immediate focus; but it indicates that ‘Little Dorrit’ is a designation equally ambiguous.

This tension is most clearly marked when Dickens qualifies Little Dorrit’s persona as utterly ‘selfless’ (the adjective is Sucksmith’s, p.xiii), by indicating her sexuality. At one point a prostitute rejects Little Dorrit’s advances of friendship when she becomes aware that Little Dorrit is not, as she thought, a child, but a woman. This is the only time when Little Dorrit, albeit unwillingly, deceives anyone; and the only time, moreover, that she inspires a reaction of fear and repulsion. Little Dorrit becomes as ominous a figure as Miss Wade or Rigaud, an image of the prostitute’s own state of degradation. Little Dorrit and the prostitute are as identifiable as the beautiful face of Tattycoram is identifiable with her ugly reflection in the mirror. Extremes meet. Dickens is here neither accepting nor rejecting opposing Victorian concepts of the female; they offer him in their simultaneous contradiction and complicity wonderful dramatic scope. In this way, the scene that attempts to combine in Little Dorrit selflessness and purity with an indication of sexuality at the same time simply affirms that sexuality is a fall from purity and selflessness. In the dramatic opposing images of ‘Little Dorrit’

and 'the fallen woman', the sexuality of Amy Dorrit becomes decentred, because any idea of the person we may, without reservation, call 'Amy Dorrit' is also decentred.

The implications of this link between naming and sexuality may be inferred from looking a little more at Tattycoram, a character in many ways directly opposed to Little Dorrit. For one thing, right until the end of the novel she is tussling with her position within it, running away from her name and running back to it. The different ways in which each of these female characters approaches designation is detailed in their appearance: Little Dorrit is 'ethereal' with a 'pale transparent face' (p.45); but Tattycoram is sensual with her 'full red lips' (p.166), her black hair, and 'lustrous dark eyes'. In line with this, Little Dorrit's gaze as opposed to Tattycoram's wilful sullen one is never an assault, but always gentle, forbearing, and attentive. And if Little Dorrit's indistinctness of self is carried out in the quiet shade, the ambiguity of Tattycoram, as I have shown, is played out in the image of brilliant and fitful light.

Perhaps considering the way oppositions in the text tend to coalesce, it is both consistent and ironic that Tattycoram's repentance should take place while Little Dorrit is at the point of fulfilling her sexuality. But more importantly, Tattycoram's acceptance of her name, and the way such acceptance will dictate her life, is a troubling reminder that even in entering into full, adult existence, Little Dorrit is and never can be Amy Dorrit. This problem is summarized in Sucksmith's definition of Little Dorrit, which manages not only to affirm his statement, which I quoted at the beginning, about 'persona-culture', but to negate it as well: 'The Victorian idealization of woman as utterly pure and selfless helps the presentation of Amy as an *anima*-like redeemer of man through whom the healing voice of Nature speaks to Arthur' (p.xiii). In the light of this interpretation, it may be asked whether Little Dorrit does take the step from 'moral phenomenon', as she is described when first introduced (p.631). The question that leads on from this is whether Dickens is in any less of a predicament than Sucksmith when he tries to drain the discomfiting implications of the Victorian persona of the 'pure and helpless' female.

In a sense, then, *Little Dorrit* may be said to be 'about' Little Dorrit in the way that a conversation is 'about' a person who is never present; the novel's structure is an implicit extension and repetition of the initial exchange between Affery and Clennam. Who is Little Dorrit? She is nothing. But of course, here the novel also relies on the expectation it has set up in the reader to reply – No, she is not nothing. But what she actually is remains, at least on one level, indefinable. So, in preaching to a converted Tattycoram, Mr Meagles tells a story 'about' Little Dorrit ('I have heard tell' – p.627), that brings to mind Little Dorrit's own fairy-tale, which she told to Maggy. In both cases, or 'stories', the hidden shadow of Little Dorrit remains hidden.

The enclosed circuit of name and persona, which forms the figure of Little Dorrit brings us back to Mr. F's Aunt. Indeed, it is possible to think of the imagination enclosed within the novel as being much like the mind of Mr. F's Aunt with a higher level of creative voltage. Moreover, like the name 'Mr. F's Aunt', which names and does not name, 'Little Dorrit' captures and creates both the character and that character's ambiguity.

Therefore, Little Dorrit is both everything and nothing, one aspect allowing modulation into the other, as shadow does into light. And in that such modulation and inabsoluteness, as I have shown, is characteristic of *Little Dorrit* as a whole, the novel can only be said to be most appropriately defined.