

Recovering Meaning: *Little Dorrit* as Novel and Film

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Nearly every discussion of film adaptations of novels warns about the risks of comparing two such different art forms. In his foundational work, *Novels into Film*, George Bluestone declares:

it is insufficiently recognised that the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera, as different from each other as ballet is from architecture.

The film becomes a different *thing* in the same sense that a historical painting becomes a different thing from the historical event which it illustrates. It is as fruitless to say that film A is better or worse than novel B as it is to pronounce [Frank Lloyd] Wright's Johnson's Wax Building better or worse than Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.¹

And now thirty-five years after Bluestone's work, we have Brian McFarlane in *Novel into Film* warning against the 'fidelity' syndrome in such comparisons:

'Is it really 'Jamesian'? Is it 'true to Lawrence'? Does it 'capture the spirit of Dickens'? At every level from newspaper reviews to longer essays in critical anthologies and journals, the adducing of fidelity to the original novel as a major criterion for judging the film adaptation is pervasive. No critical line is in greater need of re-examination — and devaluation.²

¹ George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 5-6.

² Brian McFarlane, *Novel into Film* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), p. 8. For valuable theoretical approaches, see also Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 96-106; and Seymour Chatman, 'What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa)' in G. Mast, M. Cohen and Leo Braudy, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 403-19.

Caveats about incomparability abound. Here are only a few. A novel is silent graphemes on a page which must be mediated into thoughts and feelings; film has words and sounds and images and motion that are non-mediated, received through 'raw' perception, as 'virtual presence'. A novel has, however, freedom from the 'mere' image and can easily be deeply psychological and even conceptual; a film favours action. A film may avail itself of the close-up, the detail shot, the flashback, flashforward and dream. But then so can a novel. Indeed there are no technical bars for the novelist in recreating inner consciousness nor providing conceptuality. A novel has a huge range of markers — of time, of causality, mood or tense, for instance. A novel can say before, after, when, since, because, as if, would have, could have, should have, might have and so on. A film may have to rely on plot sequence or on conventions like the fade, dissolve or wipe to suggest only a few of these functions; or it may even resort to adding two rather lame duck strategies — expository dialogue or voice-over, this latter a technique that could render a film a mere 'uncinematic' illustration of its voice-over. An easy technique of recuperating complex narratorial functions, voice-over has, nevertheless, to be used sparingly — while the novel *is* a voice-over. The narrator 'speaks' the whole novel.

A novel can have a third person narration, a first person narration, a 'point of view' narration, a ventriloquist (Joycean) narration; and these narrations may be omniscient, reliable or unreliable. The camera's eye generally has an automatic affinity with the third person reliable omniscient narration. Most often the novel's narrator is not just a reporter, but a personality with an attitude — intimate, comic, ironic, morally intrusive or whatever. Film has no equivalent of the narrator's personality

See also Joy Gould Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction into Film* (New York: University Books, 1985); R. Giddings, K. Selby and C. Wensley, *Screening the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1990); M. Klein and G. Parker, *The English Novel and the Movies* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981); Fred. H. Marcus, ed., *Film and Literature: Contrasts in Media* (Scranton: Chandler, 1971); Stuart Y. McDougal, *Made into Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985).

and attitude or ‘tone’ and must either exclude these features or find compensation in its strategies of, say, length of shot, soft or hard focus, camera angle and so on.

A novel may have a unique style and one aspect of this style may be elaborate and ingenious tropes — simile, metaphor, synecdoche, metonym, symbol. Film is predominantly synecdochic and metonymical, although these attributes combined with fades, dissolves or imagery modulation and repetition — plus the apt use of sound — can make a huge repertoire of tropes. But these are mere ‘analogues’ of the verbal, not the verbal.³ The source of delight in film troping and novel troping is ever different.

A novel can be expansive with a complex plot, subsidiary plots and myriad characters. Film requires compression and selection, usually resulting in focusing on six or seven main characters at the most and dropping or rearranging incidents or whole subplots. For the film requires instantaneous intelligibility. The viewer is rather like a driver speeding down a main street — not able to take in everything but needing to comprehend the situation. A novel reader can select the speed required for intelligibility and can re-read, if need be.

A novel may take a long reading time in exposition of its world, in description of a character’s appearance and in the enunciation of its theme. A film has seconds.

A novel may risk digressions. A film dare not.

³ In an essay of 1926, Virginia Woolf makes a now famous but too pessimistic lament that a film’s troping is far below the level of that of the written word: ‘Even the simplest image: “my love’s like a red, red rose, that’s newly sprung in June” presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the flora of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and the hesitation of love. All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid’ (*Collected Essays*, ed. L. Woolf (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), II, p. 271). Certainly words are not images. But film does have a huge repertoire of tropes, even if it cannot make a direct translation from the linguistic.

A novel has relatively few production difficulties. A film has extraordinary difficulties — from assembling a working team to getting millions of dollars perhaps just to start.

So spare a sensitive thought for the film adaptation of a novel in any comparison of novel and adaptation.

No one compares novel and adaptation better than Joss Lutz March in his distinguished essay, 'Inimitable Double Vision: Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, Photography, Film.'⁴ March has avoided the pitfalls of a simple 'fidelity' comparison;⁵ he has respected the integrity of Christine Edzard's *Little Dorrit*⁶ as a work in its own right (as was the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Nicholas Nickleby* or Verdi's *Otello*, he argues - p. 244); and he has avoided making patronising exceptions for writer/director/co-producer Edzard, who worked against severe odds.⁷ He explores the film as an adaptation partly to show how triumphant Edzard's six-hour version is; and most critics would agree.

Space permits only a summary of March's views. Essentially he praises the film. He sees it as coming 'close to perfection' (p. 277). He praises the casting of actors like Alec Guinness, Derek Jacobi, Joan Greenwood and Miriam Margolyes as yielding

⁴ Joss Lutz March, 'Inimitable Double Vision: Dickens, *Little Dorrit*, Photography, Film,' *Dickens Studies Annual* XXII (1993), 239-82. Hereafter cited in the text by page number. This essay deals not just with the novel/film comparison but with the relation of Dickens's work to the photograph and film.

⁵ March, p. 242: 'Doting fidelity to a novel or a play is an overvalued virtue: at worst it produces unfilmic and frigidly respectful films. Besides: what does "faithfulness" mean?'

⁶ Sands Films (London, 1987). See Filmography at the end of the essay.

⁷ March (pp. 234-40) outlines the production difficulties faced by Christine Edzard and co-producer Richard Goodwin. See also Guy Phelps, 'Victorian Values', *Sight and Sound* 57 (1988), 108-10 for discussion of production difficulties.

definitive characterizations (p. 245). He praises Edzard's preference for 'under-acting' (p. 245); her subdued palette of browns (p. 262); low-key lighting (pp. 258, 262); and her painstakingly authentic hand-stitched costumes (pp. 269-70). Edzard's expressive use of sound from dogs barking to bird song to Verdi's music (pp. 256-7); her untricky camera work (p. 258); and her psychologically revealing montage work, especially in Part One (p. 260), all receive March's praise. He has great admiration for her *mise en scene* which uses spaces — tight or open — as metaphors of mental states, much as the novel does (pp. 258-9). Edzard avoids the picturesque or merely nostalgic in her *mise en scene*: her street scenes are full of objects and people almost obstructing the cameras to recreate the authenticity of Dickens's 'roaring streets' (pp. 241, 263-6).

On the large issue of the two-part structure, altered in aim from Dickens's two-part structure of 'Poverty' and 'Riches', March considers that Edzard's focusing on Arthur Clennam in Part One and Little Dorrit in Part Two allows a suitable leisurely pace, an almost novelistic unfolding of character (p. 243). Although some critics have bemoaned the slowness, March is right that Edzard gets more deeply into Arthur's and Little Dorrit's thoughts and feeling than without the overlaying. He praises the double focus as avoiding some of the soliloquizing of the novel (p. 253).

March emphasises the success of the freedom Edzard takes by adding the Slapbang Restaurant scene. He sees it as essentially Dickensian (pp. 249-51) and as solving some adaptation problems: it delivers lots of information via Pancks and lets us know what Clennam is feeling and thinking. Says March:

to appreciate fully the artistry of the Slapbang restaurant scene, and the problematics of film adaptation, we should consider this question: How can you say in film — 'he is thinking of Little Dorrit'? It is difficult. Film imagery works differently to the metaphor and simile of the novel because film itself is not a figurative but an actual language ... So it has been said that if novelists sometimes face the problem of making the significant

somehow visible, filmmakers often find themselves trying to make the visible significant (p. 251).

Edzard solves her problems by having Pancks ask Clennam what he's thinking as Clennam's eye dwells on a child who comes into the restaurant for her father's dinner. Clennam's look at the child triggers feeling, and he can tell Pancks he's thinking of Little Dorrit. March concludes that 'what matters most in adaptation is the tone of the work: if that is lost, if the novelist's viewpoint has not been absorbed into the emotional blood of the film, the work is lost' (p. 251).

March makes an overwhelming case for Edzard's interpretation as a distinguished achievement as a film and as an adaptation. He does this in spite of the fact that Edzard omits what he calls the 'melodramatic superstructure' (pp. 241, 243). He quotes Edzard: 'I wanted to avoid the exaggerative, the melodramatic, and the sentimental' (p. 241).⁸ In so doing she makes all sorts of omissions that are for the most part not serious; and some are judicious indeed.

Edzard makes a serious omission in omitting melodrama: Rigaud. In Dickens's *Little Dorrit*,⁹ there are so many dreams, visions, memories, omens, almost hallucinatory personifications of weather, cities, streets, buildings, even belongings, and so many uncanny coincidences, that Dickens has no trouble putting the melodramatic Rigaud into his tale. As in the work of Hawthorne or Dostoevsky, the real, the actual and factual, is only half the story. Dickens uses both the real and the surreal,

⁸ Edzard inadvertently revives an old complaint against Dickens by contemporary conservative reviewers, notably James Fitzjames Stephen: to try to quell Dickens's social criticism, Stephen accused him of melodrama and sensationalism. See Edwin M. Eigner, 'Dogmatism and Puppyism: The Novelist, the Reviewer, and the Serious Subject: the case of *Little Dorrit*,' *Dickens Studies Annual*, 22 (1993), 217-37.

⁹ Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit* (1857; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), ed. John Holloway. Hereinafter cited by page number in the text. This is the 1868 edition that Dickens corrected.

the uncanny, to tell a huge moral fable, an allegory¹⁰ of a whole society, an era, moving along in the ‘pilgrimage of life’ (p. 67). *Little Dorrit* is an allegory of a world wherein are absolute good and absolute evil and all the degrees in between.

Just sampling Dickens’s introduction of Rigaud is enough to convince that Rigaud is no melodramatic trapping but a cynosure of the novel’s profoundest concerns. The notion generally accepted by critics that Dickens uses the prison as a master metaphor of society and even of the mind is justified. But what causes the prison?¹¹ Rigaud. Or to name his other manifestations, Rigaud/Lagnier/Blandois. What causes society (or Society)? Rigaud.

Dickens introduces Rigaud in a scene Edzard omits — the Marseilles scene, opening the novel, drawing several of the major characters together on their affluent, civilised travels and mingling criminality in their midst. Dickens first presents Rigaud in a foul prison, facing the charge of murdering his wealthy wife. He is unforgettable: his eyes have no depth; he has a thick dark moustache under a hook nose and over thin lips; his ‘dry hair’ is ‘shot with red’ (p. 41). He is tall. His hands are abnormally white, small and plump. ‘When Monsieur Rigaud laughed, a change took place in his face, that was more remarkable than pre-possessing. His moustache went up under his nose, and his nose came down over his moustache, in a very

¹⁰ Cf. Jane Vogel, *Allegory in Dickens* (Studies in the Humanities 17, University of Alabama Press, 1977), and Denis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981). Vogel’s work often over-interprets, but is very useful nonetheless.

¹¹ Cf. Hillis Miller’s view in *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968) pp. 228-9: ‘Dickens ... has found for this novel a profound symbol for the universal condition of life in the world of his imagination: imprisonment. ... As Edmund Wilson has observed, *Little Dorrit* advances beyond Dickens’ earlier novels in the way it shows so persuasively that imprisonment is a state of mind.’ Miller’s idea that ‘Blandois’ wicked imprisonment is his idea of himself as a gentleman’ (p. 231) is, however, overdetermined. Rigaud/Blandois is set free by Dickens (and the French legal system). He has no conflict.

sinister and cruel manner,' says the narrator, morally intruding (p. 44). Rigaud is Dickens's devil figure.¹² He is uncanny — 'melodramatic' — from his first entrance into the tale. Even facing execution, he feels — and this is shocking to the reader — no remorse for his crime. He abuses and manipulates his fellow inmate, the Italian petty smuggler. He is totally self-centred and arrogant. Significantly he brags that he has never done any work in prison (smuggler Cavalletto does it for him) and he claims he is a gentleman: 'A gentleman I am! ... it's my intent to be a gentleman. It's my game. Death of my soul, I play it out wherever I go!' (p. 47).

The idea of the gentleman and of a gentleman as doing no work yet having entitlements enters Dickens's tale here and remains throughout — a moral leitmotif in varying degrees in the lives of compromised characters like William Dorrit or Tip or Henry Gowan. Rigaud is deep in the heart of society or rather Society; and suitably Dickens chooses his name from that of an actual seventeenth-century dancing master of Marseilles.¹³ Behind Rigaud's so-called gentility are

¹² Cf. Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, pp. 181-2: 'Rigaud represents the utterly depraved, he is a murderer beyond redemption. Dickens gives him the familiar, traditional diabolic attributes from morality play and melodrama: hook nose, hair shot with red ..., gentlemanly pretensions and a self-dramatising air. He also exhibits a sinister tendency to deny Providence by always claiming to be where he is by the mere shake of "destiny's dice-box" ... although, as one would expect of the devil, he also always appears just when the evil desires of others seem to require it ... Rigaud is important in that he reminds us of Dickens's continuing belief in the possibility of absolute evil.'

¹³ John Lucas, *The Melancholy Man. A Study of Charles Dickens's Novels* (London: Methuen, 1970), p. 247. Cf. A. E. Dyson, *The Inimitable Dickens* (London: Macmillan, 1970), pp. 209-10: 'Rigaud creates himself a "gentleman" to extract homage, knowing that confidence is nine-tenths of the game. The tawdry sham gets him through life more or less as intended: so we are prepared not only for Rigaud himself in the rest of the book, and for poor William Dorrit, but also for all those other more-or-less successful imposters in polite society ...' See also Roger D. Lund, 'Genteel Fictions: Caricature and Satirical Design in *Little*

entitlement, greed, corruption, narcissism, violence and even murder.

Significantly and eerily, Rigaud can pass easily in society. As he brags to Cavalletto: 'I have seen the world. I have lived here, and lived there, and lived like a gentleman everywhere. I have been treated and respected as a gentleman universally' (p. 48). Rigaud in other words, goes freely to and fro upon the earth. Dickens creates in Rigaud with his metonymical 'small smooth hand' (p. 48) of gentility, not just an extreme character but a principle at work in society. In his fake gentility Rigaud succeeds for a long time: 'He had a certain air of being a handsome man — which he was not; and a certain air of being a well-bred man — which he was not. It was mere swagger and challenge; but in this particular, as in many others, blustering assertion goes for proof, half the world over' (p. 49). Dickens's introduction of so many details about Rigaud is tantamount to an analysis of his characteristics that are then set to work in the tale in diverse characters and diverse incidents.

A masterstroke of this novel about the 'whole science of government' (p.145) is the implicit equating of the Circumlocution Office with Rigaud's characteristics: Rigaud declares to Cavalletto that he 'must govern' (p. 49). This completes Rigaud's characteristics: the subjugating and suborning of others, precisely what the Circumlocution Office does. He is more than a sham gentleman, this murderer who enters the society of *Little Dorrit*. Gentlemanliness is only one manifestation of Rigaud's evil; he is a complex character, however bizarre and extreme, however melodramatic.

What Dickens does in his introduction of Rigaud is to establish him as just enough real to negotiate the realism of the novel and just enough uncanny — or surreal — to function allegorically. Every detail about Rigaud in these introductory scenes shows this double use of Rigaud and why Dickens took such a risk with so extreme a character. In this allegory of good

Dorrit, *Dickens Studies Annual* 10 (1982), 45-66. Rigaud, however, stands for far more than sham gentility.

and evil in society, Rigaud is the necessary evil. In Part I, chapter XI, titled 'Let Loose', there is no ambiguity as to Rigaud's role as devil, total evil, that passes in society, and, in various forms binds it together. Trudging towards a town, Rigaud, now Lagnier, feels hatred, resentment, scorn for the 'imbeciles' (p. 168), dining comfortably. When he finds a lowly inn, there is talk of a prisoner who has escaped the gallows — legally. In a scene of intense irony, Rigaud/Lagnier listens to the speculation in the inn 'that the devil was let loose' (p.168), acquitted in Marseilles. Significantly, rather than have Rigaud escape, Dickens has him legally acquitted, impelling his deep theme that society, even in the form of the law, does not recognise the evil within and is complicit with it.

The rather decided innkeeper's wife declares: 'That there are people whom it is necessary to detest without compromise. That there are people who must be dealt with as enemies of the human race' (p. 169). Rigaud's reaction in listening to this is less than conscience-stricken: he continues eating, then becomes overbearing and patronising. But his manner and appearance are such that the landlady starts to lose her decisiveness; she does not know whether he is 'handsome' or 'ill-looking' (p. 170). When she notices his 'fine hand' which he turned 'with great show' (p. 170), his hint of the genteel, she starts to think him handsome. (Later Dickens is to describe Rigaud's hands as 'turning one over another like serpents' (p. 818).) This little episode of the landlady's judgement starting to fail in the face of gentility is paradigmatic; for it is the simulation of gentility, of gentlemanliness, that disarms Rigaud's or society's victims repeatedly; and gentlemanliness as an appearance and an entitlement rather than as an earned and moral state, Dickens criticises not just throughout *Little Dorrit* but in his other major work. It is Rigaud/Blandois' swagger and 'air of authorised condescension' that is to make even tough-minded Flintwinch start to think of him as 'a highly gentlemanly personage' (p. 400) and yield to his requests. Rigaud/Blandois is to expound on his own 'gentlemanliness' wherever he crops up, suborning those tempted by

gentlemanliness. Dickens is consistent in depicting the power of gentlemanliness, so valued by society, to suborn.

So no less than a psychologically analysed devil is let loose in this tale of 'wayfarers on the road of life' (p. 179), of a 'vast multitude of travellers' (p. 221). And the extraordinary panorama of characters can be sorted out on a moral scale — those who have affinity with Rigaud's qualities and those who have affinity with or move towards Little Dorrit's Blakean radical innocence. Like Rigaud, Little Dorrit is not only a 'real' character, but also a principle at work in the novel, 'a human incarnation of divine goodness'¹⁴ as Hillis Miller puts it. She is the cynosure of New Testament virtues, the virtues of the Beatitudes, the imitation of Christ. She and Rigaud form the moral axis of the allegory's moral world.

Among those characters who have an affinity with Rigaud is pre-eminently the orphaned Miss Wade, another character Edzard necessarily omits. Miss Wade has an instant affinity with Rigaud when he hears she is unforgiving (p. 61). She suffers from pride, entitlement, resentment, vengefulness; and like Rigaud, she is uncanny. She 'appears' to Tattycoram, another orphan (and also an omitted character), in her fits of rage (p. 65). Tatty is, however, to move to atonement, rewarded by Dickens's granting her the forgiving substitute parents, the Meagles. Mrs Clennam has an affinity with Rigaud — later known to her as Blandois. In spite of her scorn of hollow 'vanities' (p. 73) and her obsessive self righteousness, Mrs Clennam is proud (p. 860), cruel and vengeful, propping up her vengefulness in Old Testament mode (p. 86). And, as Rigaud/Blandois sneers, she could have committed her crime against Arthur's mother for money. After her own version of herself in a 'confession' to Blandois, he says: 'Lies, lies, lies. You know you suppressed the deed and kept the money' (p. 847). Mrs Clennam is to beg mercy and forgiveness of Little

¹⁴ Hillis Miller, 'Dickens' Darkest Novel' in *Charles Dickens: Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit. A Casebook*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 165.

Dorrit (p. 858); she actually comes to the state of being able to bless Little Dorrit (p. 859).

Flintwinch has an affinity with Blandois. Although he calls Mrs Clennam a 'female Lucifer' (p. 851), he has some Lucifer/Blandois characteristics of his own. He too is vengeful and greedy and intriguing and he is cruel to his wife Affery. In fact Blandois makes fellowship with Mrs Clennam and Flintwich — he presents, always the gentleman, one to the other: 'Permit me, Madame Clennam who suppresses, to present Monsieur Flintwich who intrigues' (p. 850).

Serene 'Patriarch' Casby has Rigaud affinities. He masquerades as an entitled gentleman while suborning the Bleeding Heart Yarders, who hold him in awe as a kindly gentleman (p. 325). He really is greedy and heartless: he suborns rent-collector Pancks: 'I must insist on making this observation forcibly in justice to myself, that you ought to have got much more money, much more money' (p. 326). Pancks is, up to this stage of the novel, his go-between money-grubber.

Afraid of showing his (guilty) hands, Mr Merdle, *entrepreneur extraordinaire*, and whose name is a genteel version of merd/dung, is the 'most disinterested of men, — did everything for Society, and got as little for himself out of all his gain and care, as a man might' (p. 293). He is very close to Rigaud in greed, duplicity and entitlement. He is exposed as thief and forger and commits suicide rather than work for restitution.

His trophy wife, Mrs Merdle, the Bosom (p. 644), has Rigaud affinities. A devotee of Society, she feels entitlement, is duplicitous, manipulative and narcissistic (pp. 443-44). Ditto Mrs Gowan and Mrs General. Fanny is another devotee of Society with affinities to Rigaud. Like the Bosom she is vain, manipulative, duplicitous and feels entitlement; she is vengeful and willing to suborn Edmund Sparkler (pp. 550-1) to act out her revenge on Mrs Merdle and Society. Her brother Tip too feels entitlement, thinking Clennam should have lent him

money (p. 427). Tip is never to hold a job, to work in Dickens's sense, as, say, Daniel Doyce, Clennam and Little Dorrit do.

Henry Gowan has Rigaud affinities; he suffers from gentlemanly entitlement, envy, arrogance, greed (like his mother) and subjugates those around him, for instance, his bride, Minnie, for his vanity's sake. His vengeful attitude to others takes a form of perversity: he admits Blandois to his company, although others object and although he thinks Blandois is a fake gentleman (he is himself the real gentleman, of course). One of Dickens's running heads reads: 'Mr Blandois, Mr Gowan's Friend' (p. 541). In the scene where Gowan paints Blandois's portrait and satirically plays with the categories of good and evil (pp. 545-6), he shows himself to be uncontrollably cruel. He persists in violently kicking his dog for attacking Blandois until it bleeds and Little Dorrit intervenes.

Last but not least, is one of Dickens's masterly deep character depictions, William Dorrit, the long suffering but pretentious Father of the Marshalsea. He has several affinities with Rigaud. He is tainted by the notion of his being a gentleman, and with self-pitying and wily finesse he suborns those around him. He manipulates visitors and released debtors to give him money as a tribute, either without their recognising that he is begging or with their pretending that they do not recognise that he is begging. He avoids work. He accepts Little Dorrit's endless charity and protection. He is, says the morally intrusive narrator, 'lazily habituated to it' (p. 134). In fact lazy he is: 'Crushed at first by his imprisonment, he had soon found a dull relief in it being what he was, he languidly slipped into this smooth descent, and never more took one step upward' (p. 103). When he comes into a fortune, his vanity comes into its own. He is downright cruel to John Chivery who naively brings him a tribute of cigars (pp. 691-3); and he is willing to push Little Dorrit aside to marry Mrs General (pp. 704-6), a lady who earns her living creating pretensions in others, while pretending not to be earning her living, in other words, a character of Rigaud-like vanity, deceitfulness and manipulation. Dickens gives Dorrit his just deserts — a stroke at Mrs

Merdle's banquet at his moment of greatest social triumph (pp. 708-10). If the reader is taken in by Dorrit's pitiableness, the main thrust of the novel's meaning is skewed. Swinburne is right to call the Father of the Marshalsea 'pitiably worthy of pity as well of scorn'.¹⁵ We are, indeed, not meant to feel what Little Dorrit feels for him, but to see how much he uses her love and selflessness.

Not only individual characters, but whole categories of functionaries and of institutions share affinity with Rigaud. Treasury, Bar and Bishop — and even Merdle's Chief Butler — are to be included here (pp. 611-27). And, of course, as mentioned before, the Circumlocution Office. Comic as it is, it is also sinister. Its roots are in Rigaud characteristics. As Henry Gowan says: '... though I can't deny that the Circumlocution Office may ultimately shipwreck everybody and everything, still, that will probably not be in our time — and it's a school for gentlemen' (p. 358).

The opposite of Rigaud, but, like him, functioning both as a character and as a principle, Little Dorrit is good and goodness. She functions both as Amy and as the more symbolic Little Dorrit (or little door). She knows evil when she sees it. A little more than halfway through the novel, she and Blandois stare each other out in Gowan's studio (p. 546). She and Blandois have no affinity whatsoever. She is not at all tempted by his flattery of 'elegance and beauty' (p. 545) and does not flinch under his gaze. Having suffered as the Child of the Marshalsea, she takes it upon herself to learn and to work to better her family's situation. She does not fall into rage or resentment like Rigaud or Miss Wade: '... she was inspired to be something which was not what the rest [of her family] were, and to be that something, different and laborious, for the sake of the rest. Inspired? Yes. Shall we speak of the inspiration of a poet or a priest, and not of the heart, impelled by love and self-devotion

¹⁵ A. C. Swinburne, *Charles Dickens* (1913), pp. 44-7, quoted in *Charles Dickens. Dombey and Son and Little Dorrit. A Casebook*, ed. Alan Shelston (London: Macmillan, 1985), pp. 134-5.

to the lowliest work in the lowliest way of life!’ (p. 111).¹⁶ She does countless deeds that are not for herself alone, but for her family, for poor half-witted Maggy, for Clennam. She is never in conflict about doing selfless good as she goes to and fro upon her errands. When she comes into wealth, she is not affected or greedy or vengeful like Fanny. When she realises it is Minnie Gowan whom Arthur feels he loves, she is not jealous (pp. 495-6). She survives feeling cast aside by her father in his desire to marry Mrs General. She can forgive him (p. 670). She counsels Mrs Clennam, zealous Old Testament reader, to be

guided only by the healer of the sick, the raiser of the dead, the friend of all who were afflicted and forlorn, the patient Master who shed tears of compassion for our infirmities. We cannot but be right if we put all the rest away, and do everything in remembrance of Him. There is no vengeance and no infliction of suffering in His life, I am sure (p. 861).

Little Dorrit is a ‘real’ character but also the novel’s cynosure of New Testament virtue, both to the realistic tale and its allegorical hierarchy of virtue.

At the end when Arthur Clennam is the destitute Pupil of the Marshalsea prison, she still loves him and seeks him out to help him and remain ever after loyal (p. 896). Dickens rewards her with her marriage to Arthur Clennam, a radical innocent like herself.

Arthur has the closest affinity to Little Dorrit of all the characters. Like her, he is active virtue, out in his corner of society, doing good. Raised and rejected in an atmosphere of punitiveness (p. 68), he is unaware of the ‘real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament’ (p. 69); yet he has New Testament virtues akin to Little Dorrit’s. He is not vengeful. He seeks to make restitution of any wrongs his family might have done (p. 89). He does kind disinterested deeds on Little Dorrit’s behalf; he feels for her ‘ties of compassion,

¹⁶ There is only a passing moment of resentment when she grieves that her father had to pay debts both with money and time. Clennam understands and excuses her (pp. 472-3).

respect, unselfish interest, gratitude, and pity' (p. 231). When he loses Doyce's money, he thinks more of Doyce than himself (pp. 778-9). When he is bankrupt and in prison, he tries to renounce Little Dorrit's love so that he will not blight her life (pp. 884-5). Nearly helpless to act in prison, he nevertheless confronts Blandois; like Little Dorrit he recognises evil and literally turns his back on it (p. 818).

Arthur's fundamental goodness is to lead him to his awareness that it is love that he feels for little Dorrit, that she is both his beloved and his 'good angel' (p. 884). Of course his reward in both the romance and the allegory of the novel is to marry her and to pass out of the prison into a life of 'usefulness and happiness' amid the 'roaring streets' of London (p. 895).

There is a host of minor characters who have affinity or who move towards affinity with Little Dorrit's qualities. To mention here only a few: there are radical innocents like the Plornishes, John Chivery, Daniel Doyce, Maggy, even Flora. Perhaps pampered but good Minnie Gowan belongs here with her obtuse but kindly parents (Mr Meagles having only once succumbed to snobbery over the Barnacles's connections). There are those characters of potential goodness who rebel and realise their better self — like Frederick Dorrit, who, on Little Dorrit's behalf, finally rebels against his brother's vanity (p. 538); Cavalletto who chooses to flee from association with Rigaud (p. 175) and later becomes his captor and helps Clennam in his crisis; Pancks who rebels against Casby (p. 871) and becomes a helpful friend to Clennam; and Affery who finally 'awakes' from her dreaming, rebels against Flintwinch and Mrs Clennam and seeks to do active good by Arthur's wronged mother (p. 854).

Sarah Pickering as Little Dorrit in *Little Dorrit* (dir. Christine Edzard, 1987)

Most of these good characters will finally form a happy, typically Dickensian community of eccentric innocents around Arthur and Little Dorrit and outside Society, which will moil on with 'the noisy and the eager, and the arrogant and the froward and the vain, fretted and chafed' (p. 895), impelling it.

Without the evil of Rigaud instantiated in varying degrees in individuals and in institutions and uncannily manifesting itself from time to time in Rigaud's 'appearances', Dickens's great allegorical dialectic of (altruistic) good and (narcissistic) evil contesting in society, would become mere social satire with a love plot. Christine Edzard risked her film's coming close to this in cutting the 'melodrama' of Rigaud.

Yet this extraordinary young writer/director need not have omitted Rigaud. She shows mastery in creating a character that is both 'real' and a principle, an abstraction — for instance, with Little Dorrit. She first presents her in Part One as unacknowledged by Clennam, as she goes about her work at Mrs Clennam's house. Little Dorrit is from the beginning of her role enigmatic, fleeting and strangely separate from her surroundings. Her actions seem to come from some inner harmony that is a puzzlement. We are drawn to trying to understand her, to trying to catch another glimpse of her, even while we are moved by Clennam's past sufferings and present state. However in the novel neither Little Dorrit nor Clennam is enigmatic; and Clennam is not enigmatic in the film. Edzard is able to characterise his deep feeling; but he is not enigmatic. Little Dorrit is.

Edzard fits her character out with a bonnet that so often obstructs our view of her face; and she avoids the many revealing medium shots and close-ups that she uses for Clennam. We often see Little Dorrit only in profile and we long to see more of her face, to try to comprehend her inner harmony, her self-containment, as she moves about the disturbed and squalid worlds of the prison, the streets, Mrs Clennam's. Instead we must wait and often bear with only watching her busy hands doing useful, kind deeds. One of the main motifs of imagery in the film is Little Dorrit's busy hands.

Edzard frequently shows Little Dorrit in the background moving about quietly useful, while more dramatic events take place in the foreground.

The enclosing bonnet not only withholds her meaning; it allows her words and deeds and harmonious body movements to be observed as highly significant, suspenseful, pending fuller revelation. Edzard keeps Little Dorrit enigmatic until the end of Part One, when she ‘appears’ to Clennam. III and in the Marshalsea, now recognising his love and need for her, Clennam undergoes almost delirious reveries of the disturbing events of his life and of the quiet figure of Little Dorrit. Suddenly in this unsure state, he sees a posey of flowers on his table. Confused he looks beyond and Little Dorrit appears in the doorway of his prison room. Clennam doubts her reality — much as in the novel (pp. 824-5). But in the film she has been enigmatic; and only in this scene do we finally get to view her steadily, her full face, her little figure in its pauper’s blue dress, her separateness from the squalor of the prison, her self-possession. Now we get to witness her profound and purposeful love of Clennam in his hour of need. She steps into the prison room as both an unassailable power and an individual in love. End of Part One.

In the parallel scene in Part Two, when she comes to Clennam in prison, Edzard lets us see more of her personal feelings and her actions. Instantly she is busy on behalf of suffering Arthur. Unassailable in the face of crisis, her love prompts her busy hands. She is self-contained, thoughtful, competent, moving as always as if her bodily actions come from an inner harmony, as indeed they do. Dickens must explicate Little Dorrit’s source of inner harmony, its deep moral meaning, by various strategies as he develops her allegorical role more patently towards the end of the novel. To show her as loving, selfless, good and without conflict, Dickens uses Arthur’s realisation of his love for Little Dorrit as he thinks of her virtues (p. 787); then Little Dorrit’s longest speech in the novel, her counsel to Mrs Clennam to adhere to the virtues of Christ (p. 861); and then Mr Meagles’s counselling of

Tattycoran to model herself on Little Dorrit, who suffered, was unresentful and did her 'Duty' (pp. 881-2), in spite of this suffering. With the subtle, accomplished acting of Sarah Pickering, Edzard is able to render this moral harmony through Pickering's movements and slightest gesture. In Edzard's film, every gesture of Little Dorrit is a moral event.

Edzard also gives Little Dorrit a strong insightful line of dialogue that in the novel belongs to the narrator. The answer to the question 'Who's to blame?' is her answer 'everyone who was at Mr Merdle's feast was a sharer in the plunder.'¹⁷

The film's strategies with Little Dorrit — in movement, gesture, dialogue and withheld meaning — are of utmost economy. And through them Edzard presents us with both an Amy and a Little Dorrit as Dickens does. While remaining a 'real' character, Little Dorrit is also representative, a principle at work throughout the film, as she wends her way sorting through chaos and squalor, impelled by the mysterious harmony that we long to understand. Little Dorrit is both the beloved in the love story and the principle of selfless love in Edzard's hint of a moral parable.

And Edzard has attempted the melodramatic, the uncanny — in Pancks, Flintwich, Affery, Mrs Clennam and in the eerie metaphorical darkness and improbable incidents within the Clennam house. With Merdle, Edzard actually introduces Rigaud characteristics. In the scene before his suicide, she keeps his head and trunk in an unnerving, stealthy darkness, but lights his Rigaud-like white, guilty hands. With her metaphoric light and shadow and the startling focus on his hands (Dickens does not give Merdle white hands; he has Merdle obsessively 'handcuffing' himself instead), Edzard makes enigmatic Merdle more than a merely realistic character. Edzard's handling of these important characters suggests their existence on the brink of the surreal, the phantasmagoric. They could have functioned

¹⁷ See March, p. 272. He sees Edzard's interpretation of Little Dorrit as mildly feminist. Certainly Edzard allows her to be Clennam's intellectual equal.

as both real and allegorical, had Edzard chosen to develop the allegory more fully.

Edzard is even able to make the Circumlocution Office not just a particular target of comic satire, but a generic wrong. The *mise-en-scene* of the classically columned, deceptively airy Circumlocution Office, renders visible the demure ruthlessness of power structures. By the repeated vignettes of Arthur's increasingly pathetic frustration contrasted with the complacent suaveness of the Circumlocution officials and their obtuse underlings; by the disposition of metonymical detail shots (such as the blob of marmalade falling on a document or the red tape on piles of damp deteriorating documents); by the motif of paper rising and falling throughout the film, Edzard achieves the conceptual. No small feat.¹⁸

In her outstanding interpretation of *Little Dorrit*, Edzard has achieved the double existence of Little Dorrit as 'real' and as representational. She has risked the melodramatic, the near surreal with several important characters. And she has achieved the conceptual with the Circumlocution Office. If anyone could have rendered the dramatic and visual dialectic of good and evil in Dickens's great allegory of civilisation, she could have. She could have risked Rigaud, daring to mix the 'real' and the allegorical, as Dickens characteristically did; and this would have made this distinguished Dickensian adaptation — may I say it? — the more 'faithfully' Dickensian, the more deeply Dickensian.

I wish to express my indebtedness to Andrew Dowling and the Department of English for research assistance.

¹⁸ Fred H. Marcus's comments about translating a novel's ideas to film are typically cautious: 'The filmmaker *can* communicate narrative and descriptive elements simultaneously; he would, however, find it very difficult to communicate some abstract ideas, since film shots are concrete' (*Film and Literature: Contrasts in Media*, ed. Fred H. Marcus (Scranton: Chandler Publishing, 1971)), p. xvi.

Filmography

Little Dorrit. Sands Film (London, 1987)

Viewing time 344 minutes. Adapted for the screen and directed by Christine Edzard; photography by Brune de Keyzer; edited by Olivier Stockman; music by Giuseppe Verdi; arranged by Michael Sanvoisin; produced by John Braybourne and Richard Goodwin. Cast:

Arthur Clennam	Derek Jacobi
Mrs Clennam	Joan Greenwood
Flintwinch	Max Wall
Affery	Patricia Hayes
Young Arthur	Luke Duckett
Flora Finching	Miriam Margolyes
Mr. Casby	Bill Fraser
Mr. Pancks	Roshan Seth
Mr. F's Aunt	Mollie Maureen
Mr Meagles	Roger Hammond
Minnie	Sophie Ward
Tite Barnacle	John Savident
Clarence Barnacle	Brian Pettifer
Daniel Doyce	Edward Burnham
Mr. Plornish	Christopher Whittingham
Mrs. Plornish	Ruth Mitchell
Old Nandy	Eric Francis
William Dorrit	Alec Guinness
Frederick Dorrit	Cyril Cusack
Little Dorrit	Sarah Pickering
Fanny	Amelda Brown
Tip	Daniel Chatto
Bob	Howard Goorney
The Dancing Master	Murray Melvin
Captain Hopkins	John McEnery
Mrs. Merdle	Eleanor Bron
Mr. Merdle	Michael Elphick
Sparkler	Simon Dormandy
Lord Decimus Barnacle	Robert Morley
The Bishop	Alan Bennett