

*Little Dorrit*: Some Visions of Pastoral

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The major concern of *Little Dorrit* is brought into sharp focus by Mrs Merdle when she informs Amy and Fanny Dorrit: "we are not in a natural state. Much to be lamented, no doubt—particularly by myself, who am a child of nature if I could but show it—but so it is. Society suppresses and dominates us."<sup>1</sup> The natural is indeed suppressed and dominated by Society in much of the novel, and the opposition of nature and society is fundamental. Mrs Merdle speaks authoritatively for many of the characters, yet as Dickens' ironic humour here actually suggests, nature is by no means wholly suppressed in *Little Dorrit*.

The darkness of *Little Dorrit* is a cliché of Dickens criticism, and of course there are good reasons why this should be so. Most of the novel is set in London, and the oppressive sense of London is one of the book's major devices; even the continental cities of Venice and Rome are largely significant as metaphorical extensions of the English capital. Dickens places much of his action not only in London but in self-contained communities within London such as the prison, the melancholy house of Clennam, and the self-referential bureaucracy of the Circumlocution Office. And Dickens is never so perceptive of psychological darkness and oppression as when he takes us beyond specific locations within the city to the enclosed confines of the individual consciousness, the prison of the isolated ego: we think of Mrs Clennam stifled by her self-protective Calvinism, of Arthur's obsessive belief that life has ended at forty, and of Miss Wade's paranoia. Certainly, much is being suppressed.

Society, as Mrs Merdle conceives it, is the main instrument of darkness in *Little Dorrit*. Society is the oppressor. Some of the structures it erects are visible facts, like the Circumlocution Office or the Marshalsea prison, but its most pernicious effects are realized less as concrete objects than as manifestations of human behaviour, or as modes of thought. The perverse illusion of Merdle's millions hovers over Bleeding Heart Yard and even the schoolroom as well as over Harley Street, and the graven image of gentility has its devotees everywhere. The most deadening

1 Book the First, ch. xx. References to *Little Dorrit* will be to Book and chapter, and will be placed in the text.

effects of Society are thus on the mind, and the most nullifying influence on the human imagination is the obsession with what Society will endorse or condone. Our sense of Society's oppressive power, however, should not be allowed to suppress such positives as Dickens wishes to affirm. For against the grime of the city and the pollution of the Thames, against the mind-forged manacles crippling the consciousness of so many of the novel's characters, is set a richly contrasting sense of naturalness and vitality that is crucially important to the novel's sense of possibility. At first glance there may not seem to be a great deal of nature in *Little Dorrit* and we certainly do not think of the book as one of the great Romantic novels in English. For the most part, however, nature in *Little Dorrit* is imagined rather than actually seen—it is Nature mythologized (and capitalized). Like Society, to which it is consistently opposed, Nature operates most powerfully in terms of the human consciousness. Nature both embodies and engenders valuable and positive human attitudes just as it is the motivating force behind many of the novel's meaningfully creative actions, which are themselves exercises of imaginative power before they are physically demonstrable. Against Mrs Merdle's conception of Society Dickens sets an organic vision of Nature which is everywhere shaped and informed by his reading of Romantic poetry. His vision of Nature is closely akin to Wordsworth's "sovereign Nature", and "Nature as a spirit and pulse of good"; and as Wordsworth had explored his own vision of pastoral nature in the eighth book of *The Prelude*, "Love of Nature Leading to Love of Man", so Dickens uses some visions of pastoral in *Little Dorrit* as a focus for positive human values.

The simple but significant opposition of country and city in the third chapter of the novel suggests the manner as well as the purpose of Dickens' use of Nature. On his way home, Arthur Clennam leaves the coffee house on Ludgate Hill and walks out into the rain. "In the country", Dickens tells us, "the rain would have developed a thousand fresh scents, and every drop would have had its bright association with some beautiful form of growth or life. In the city, it developed only foul stale smells, and was a sickly, lukewarm, dirt-stained, wretched addition to the gutters." Setting the abundant beauty of the countryside against the squalid filth of the city, Dickens gives us not so much a literal description of the countryside as an idea about the countryside as a place of growth and creativity. And this image is all the

more forceful precisely because it is not literal or real. Unhampered by the need to describe in detail, Dickens can concentrate a great deal of suggestiveness on the phrases "a thousand fresh scents", "every drop", "some beautiful form", where the unspecific quality of the language contributes directly to the sense of amplitude and profusion.

Amy Dorrit's capacity for imaginative vision, which is so important to her significance in the novel, is suggested in very similar terms at the climax of the claustrophobically oppressive chapter, "The Father of the Marshalsea in Two or Three Relations" (Book the First, ch. xix). During the course of this chapter we have seen William Dorrit tell Amy that she should, in consideration of her father's position, lead John Chivery on; we have seen him break down in maudlin self-pity; and we have even seen him boasting of all that he has done for his children. Amy has said hardly anything. Dickens has suggested her feelings by the occasional description of a gesture, such as her looking away or bending her head. But as this chapter closes Dickens takes us right into Amy's mind:

When she had stolen downstairs, and along the empty yard, and had crept up to her own high garret, the smokeless house-tops and the distant country hills were discernible over the wall in the clear morning. As she gently opened the window, and looked eastward down the prison-yard, the spikes upon the wall were tipped with red, then made a sullen purple pattern on the sun as it came flaming up into the heavens. The spikes had never looked so sharp and cruel, nor the bars so heavy, nor the prison space so gloomy and contracted. She thought of the sunrise on rolling rivers, of the sunrise on wide seas, of the sunrise on rich landscapes, of the sunrise on great forests where the birds were waking and the trees were rustling; and she looked down into the living grave on which the sun had risen, with her father in it, three-and-twenty years, and said, in a burst of sorrow and compassion, "No, no, I have never seen him in my life!"

(Book the First, ch. xix)

The world of the prison and the values of gentility are thrown into relief by a transcendent act of the imagination. Somewhere, great creating nature is awakening. Although Dickens points the brutal contrast between what Amy sees and what she thinks about, this vision contrasts vitally with what has gone before in the chapter, which thus ends by invoking a suggestion of potential or possibility. And without being in any way escapist, the vision beautifully expresses Amy's wishful sense of release from intolerable pressure. Once again the imaginative quality of the

vision enables Dickens to present nature dramatically heightened and carefully orchestrated. The repeated "of the sunrise" lends an incantatory force to the final sentence, and the participles "rolling", "waking", and "rustling" evoke the vibrant movements of nature, the rhythms from which so many people in the novel are alienated. Similarly the adjectives "wide", "rich", and "great", with all their generality of absolute statement, are placed in telling opposition to the contraction of the prison. Vague and general though the vision may be, it is nevertheless gloriously expansive, full of movement and richness, and its effect here is felt as real enough.

Nature is not always as Amy Dorrit sees it here. At the beginning of the second part of the novel Dickens takes his travellers, and his readers, straight from the prison to the darkness and ghostly mists of the Alps. The journey up the mountain is for the travellers a journey into unreality:

As the heat of the glowing day, when they had stopped to drink at the streams of melted ice and snow, was changed to the searching cold of the frosty rarefied night air at a great height, so the fresh beauty of the lower journey had yielded to barrenness and desolation. A craggy track, up which the mules, in single file, scrambled and turned from block to block, as though they were ascending the broken staircase of a gigantic ruin, was their way now. No trees were to be seen, nor any vegetable growth, save a poor brown scrubby moss, freezing in the chinks of rock. Blackened skeleton arms of wood by the wayside pointed upward to the convent, as if the ghosts of former travellers overwhelmed by the snow haunted the scene of their distress. Icicle-hung caves and cellars, built for refuges from sudden storms, were like so many whispers of the perils of the place; never-resting wreaths and mazes of mist wandered about, hunted by a moaning wind; and snow, the besetting danger of the mountain, against which all its defences were taken, drifted sharply down.

(Book the Second, ch. i)

A corresponding unreality is created for the reader by Dickens' refusal to reveal the identities of the travellers until the very end of the chapter. Furthermore the sophistication of the continental tour is turned into a primitive struggle for survival—the convent could have been "another Ark", William Dorrit becomes "the Chief of the important tribe", and the living and the dead are in ominous proximity. To set the social antics of the travellers against the backdrop of ice and snow is to stress their moral negation, for nature here is as imprisoning as it is in "The Ancient Mariner".

We think inevitably of Coleridge's poem, but it is impossible not to read the opening pages of the second part of the novel without thinking also of the entire complex of Romantic responses to the Alps, the vale of Chamounix, and the monastery of the Grande Chartreuse. Matthew Arnold's poem "Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse" was published in April 1855, the month before Dickens began writing *Little Dorrit*, and it is reasonable to assume that he may have seen it in *Fraser's Magazine*. In any case both poet and novelist are using one of the great Romantic scenarios, the Alps, the starting-point of both is a journey up an Alpine mountain on an autumn evening, and their purposes are similar. Arnold's point is that the great Romantic positives no longer apply. The location he has chosen for his poem recalls Wordsworth's very different feelings on his visit to the same monastery as described in Book VI of *The Prelude* (which had only been published a few years earlier), and he also refers to the inefficacy of the poetry of Byron and Shelley to palliate the spiritual sickness of the mid-century. Dickens makes no such direct allusion, but his purpose in using the Alpine setting is surely to challenge the Romantic stereotype of Sublime Nature that was so often associated with the Alps. The most marked and terrifying aspect of Dickens' description is the unreality of the Alpine setting (anticipating the whole continental tour), as he stresses mist, desolation and death. Wordsworth had written that the naturalistic details in the Simplon pass

Were all like workings of one mind, the features  
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;  
Characters of the great Apocalypse,  
The types and symbols of Eternity  
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.  
(*The Prelude*, VI, ll. 636-40)

In contrast to the underlying unity and design perceived by Wordsworth, Dickens' figurative language suggests unreality, instability, and impermanence. The track up the mountain is like the broken staircase of a gigantic ruin, the mountain peaks are "like spectres who were going to vanish", and everything seems about to melt or dissolve in cloud.

Everything is hazy and precariously unreal. At a highly conspicuous point in the novel Dickens is questioning the meanings with which nature can be invested, and in a way that is extremely important to his own strategic use of it in *Little Dorrit*. Nature as Dickens presents it in the novel is never the Apocalyptic, Sublime Nature that had been associated with the Alps in the

English mind from about the middle of the eighteenth century. It is rather a concentrating focus for human concerns; and the pastoral, as a magnifying device for those aspects of nature associated with community and plenitude, removes us as far as possible from the lonely, desolate summits of Alpine mountains to a nature whose human significance is never in doubt. For Dickens uses nature most imaginatively in the novel when he extends it into the quasi-mythical world of pastoral. Still within the broad framework of opposition to Society Nature and all its associations are pushed to the extreme as Dickens, with bold and uncompromising directness, underscores the most positive values in his novel, yet simultaneously stresses certain necessary qualifications.

The clumsily sarcastic reference to the "Arcadian objects" of a stultifying London Sunday in the third chapter of the novel is no indication of the central use to which the pastoral is put later on. But old Mr Nandy does give us something of a clue. His habit, when he visits his daughter and her family, is to "come the warbles" about Chloe, and Phyllis, and sometimes even about Strephon being wounded by the son of Venus. In his own way the old man is one of the many artists in the novel; for his pastoral songs, vapid and out of date though they may be, are still a form of creative expression that is starkly opposed to his existence in the Workhouse, where Nandy is even denied the dignity of "Mr" before his name. These songs are the highlight of his visits home, and they are highly meaningful within the Plornish household. Through the discrepancy between their apparent vapidness and the very real value that they carry for Mrs Plornish, Dickens suggests the central purpose of his use of the pastoral in *Little Dorrit*. Indeed, the major significance of the Plornish household is underlined by its pastoral associations (and it is important to stress that in this novel of class conflict and twisted family relationships, the Plornish marriage carries great value). These are encapsulated and magnified in the extraordinary mural on the wall of their cottage:

Mrs. Plornish's shop-parlour had been decorated under her own eye, and presented, on the side towards the shop, a little fiction in which Mrs. Plornish unspeakably rejoiced. This poetical heightening of the parlour consisted in the wall being painted to represent the exterior of a thatched cottage; the artist having introduced (in as effective a manner as he found compatible with their highly disproportioned dimensions) the real door and window. The modest sunflower and hollyhock were depicted as flourishing with great luxuriance on this rustic dwelling; while a quantity of dense smoke

## SYDNEY STUDIES

issuing from the chimney indicated good cheer within, and also, perhaps, that it had not been lately swept. A faithful dog was represented as flying at the legs of the friendly visitor, from the threshold; and a circular pigeon-house, enveloped in a cloud of pigeons, arose from behind the garden-paling. On the door (when it was shut) appeared the semblance of a brass plate, presenting the inscription, Happy Cottage, T. and M. Plornish—the partnership expressing man and wife. No Poetry and no Art ever charmed the imagination more than the union of the two in this counterfeit cottage charmed Mrs. Plornish. It was nothing to her that Plornish had a habit of leaning against it as he smoked his pipe after work, when his hat blotted out the pigeon-house and all the pigeons, when his back swallowed up the dwelling, when his hands in his pockets uprooted the blooming garden and laid waste the adjacent country. To Mrs. Plornish it was still a most beautiful cottage, a most wonderful deception; and it made no difference that Mr. Plornish's eye was some inches above the level of the gable bedroom in the thatch. To come out into the shop after it was shut, and hear her father sing a song inside this cottage, was a perfect Pastoral to Mrs. Plornish, the Golden Age revived.

(Book the Second, ch. xiii)

In all the outrageousness of its extravagant humour this passage goes to the heart of the novel, and the reader's smile is a tribute to its profoundly human seriousness. Wordsworth's attempt to update the pastoral in the eighth book of *The Prelude* is here itself updated as Dickens eloquently endorses the transforming capacities of the human imagination. In the middle of a London slum, nature is mythologized into Poetry and Art.

When Wordsworth sent a complimentary copy of *Lyrical Ballads* to Charles James Fox in 1801, his covering letter spoke of "the bonds of domestic feeling among the poor". Lamenting the growing effects of industrialism upon "small independent proprietors of land", he said: "Their little tract of land serves as a kind of permanent rallying point for their domestic feelings, as a tablet upon which they are written which makes them objects of memory in a thousand instances when they would otherwise be forgotten. It is a fountain fitted to the nature of social man from which supplies of affection, as pure as his heart was intended for, are daily drawn."<sup>2</sup> Wordsworth had a different class of people from the Plornishes in mind, and is speaking of the hereditary estates of men like Michael. Yet his remarks are directly applicable to the Plornish mural which is also "a rallying point for their domestic feelings", and from which "supplies of

2 *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. de Selincourt (rev. Shaver), 2nd edn, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1967), I, pp. 314-5.

affection are daily drawn". Nature and Art (the relationship of which is the major concern of all pastoral) are here united in a vital partnership of man and wife. As Polixenes says in *The Winter's Tale*:

This is an art  
Which does mend nature—change it rather—but  
The art itself is nature.

Art both expresses and fosters the human impulse to love. We are presented with a fiction in which to rejoice, an updated Golden Age, the pastoral brought to perfection in a wonderfully sustaining deception. Moreover, this mural itself recalls striking visual images from earlier in the novel—our first sight of Mrs Plornish, hastily rearranging her clothes after nourishing her child (Book the First, ch. xii), and, in shocking contrast, the mother with her baby at her breast in the memorial effigy to the dead travellers found upon the mountain (Book the Second, ch. i).

This mural would win no prizes at the Royal Academy but its creative significance to Mrs Plornish should not be derided or underestimated any more than the obvious humour of the passage should be allowed to blur its focus. Most of the moral positives of *Little Dorrit* are located in Bleeding Heart Yard. On introducing us to the place in the twelfth chapter of the novel, Dickens tells us that "there was a family sentimental feeling prevalent in the yard that it had character." It does indeed. Its importance is indicated by Dickens' location within it of, first, the factory of Doyce, and later the partnership of Doyce and Clennam; and it seems, to Clennam, both fanciful and practical (Book the First, ch. xxiii). The association of wonder, or creative deception, with Bleeding Heart Yard is also insisted upon when we visit it for the very first time, in the conflicting opinions prevalent about the derivation of the name:

The opinion of the Yard was divided respecting the derivation of its name. The more practical of its inmates abided by the tradition of a murder; the gentler and more imaginative inhabitants, including the whole of the tender sex, were loyal to the legend of a young lady of former times closely imprisoned in her chamber by a cruel father for remaining true to her own true love, and refusing to marry the suitor he chose for her. The legend related how that the young lady used to be seen up at her window behind the bars, murmuring a lovelorn song of which the burden was, "Bleeding Heart, Bleeding Heart, bleeding away," until she died.

(Book the First, ch. xii)

To the Gradgrind, as to "the antiquaries who delivered learned lectures in the neighbourhood", this would simply be flying in the face of fact. But literal truth, or factual demonstrability, is not

the point; as Dickens says, this legend is "the one little golden grain of poetry" that sparkles in the coarse sand of life in the yard, and we may confidently assume it is to be valued for that. Like the mural the legend is a sustaining illusion, and the need to believe in it expresses a simple truth about humanity—"that many more people fall in love than commit murder." And of course it is thematically woven into the central *motifs* of the novel by the idea of imprisonment, just as it anticipates William Dorrit's attempted manipulation of Amy's affections.

Central and important as all this is, none of it is sentimentalized and much of it is qualified. After all, the line between sustaining illusion and deadening deception is perilously hard to draw. In Bleeding Heart Yard itself romantic legend and pastoral myth are offset and counterbalanced by the rampant fictions of gentility and Society, as we can see from Plornish's ludicrously misplaced admiration of William Dorrit, from the general belief in British superiority, and from the magic response commanded here (as everywhere else) by the name of Merdle. Art can sustain and nourish. But it can also mislead, as witnessed by the apparent similarity of the Last of the Patriarchs to the portrait of ten-year-old Master Christopher Casby (Book the First, ch. xiii), and by the portrait of Mr F.: "The artist had given it a head that would have been, in an intellectual point of view, top-heavy for Shakespeare" (Book the First, ch. xxiv). No matter what philosophical philanthropy teaches we should neither sentimentalize nor idealize people, with or without the medium of art.

The pastoral in *Little Dorrit* is carefully qualified, most obviously by the very presence of Mrs Merdle, the spokeswoman of Society, who is, she tells Mrs Gowan, "pastoral to a degree, by nature" (Book the First, ch. xxxiii). John Chivery also is important to Dickens' undercutting of the pastoral. His pastoral vision of union with Amy is desperately pathetic in its sentimentality because it involves shutting the world *out*, and the potential implications of pastoral as escapist fantasy are suggested through John's being able to see life only in terms of death and tombstones (Book the First, ch. xviii). Of course this qualification in no way undercuts the significance of the Plornish mural, of Amy Dorrit's vision, or (as we shall see) of Amy herself. Larger than life though the pastoral may be, it magnifies the possibilities for life which it incorporates, and it serves to focus felt needs that are only valid as far as they can be tested against vital human impulses. There is no correlation whatever between the pretensions and pretences engendered by Society, and Amy Dorrit's

seminal statement to Arthur Clennam: "I could never have been of any use, if I had not pretended a little" (Book the First, ch. xiv). The criterion of "use" is important and the Plornish mural, which is also a form of pretending, is likewise "useful" because it organizes human and social possibilities rather than pretensions; the ideal it imaginatively expresses has been fostered by a carefully evaluated response to experience.

Dickens' own use of the pastoral in *Little Dorrit* is thus exploratory, and he is continually testing the various pastoral visions presented in the novel for validity and authenticity. Pastoral is scrutinized most rigorously at Twickenham where, in the Meagles' cottage and the surrounding beauty of the garden and countryside, Dickens exposes both the life-denying tendencies of idealization and the related, seductive power of idyllic nature on the human imagination. Carefully removed as it is from the city, Twickenham does seem in many respects the Paradise that Gowan calls it (Book the First, ch. xvii). However, this paradise is threatened from the outset, for the apparent domestic happiness of the Meagles household is about to be disrupted by the novel's supreme egotists, Miss Wade and Henry Gowan himself. There is a direct link between Meagles' total incapacity to discriminate among the *bric à brac* with which his house is stuffed, and which passes in his mind for art, and the fact that Pet is, as Doyce puts it, "too young and petted, too confiding and inexperienced, to discriminate well" (Book the First, ch. xxvi). Dickens thus uses the Meagles story to establish an organic connection between the pastoral aspects of the novel and its darker concerns. He places the Meagles' cottage at the opposite end of the novel's spectrum of pastoral vision from the Plornishes' cottage, and the contrasts between the households are organized primarily in terms of their wholly different versions of pastoral.

Pet Meagles functions most crucially in the novel as a foil to Amy Dorrit, and the bond of sympathy between them in the second part of the novel draws attention to the penetrating discriminations by which Dickens earlier distinguishes between them. Both Pet and Amy are associated with the pastoral of childhood, itself a major legacy of the Romantic movement, but there the resemblance ends. Pet's childishness, however sweet and good-natured, is not to be confused with Amy's innocence; and Pet, for all her frankness, her dimples and her freshness, is spoilt, weak, and dependent—qualities which are too easily exploited. In contrast, Amy is a figure of love and creative self-sacrifice whose innocence (Dickens emphasizes) is not explained by simple

association with childhood: "Worldly wise in hard and poor necessities, she was innocent in all things else. Innocent, in the mist through which she saw her father, and the prison, and the turbid living river that flowed through it and flowed on" (Book the First, ch. vii). And that the reality of her innocence is enhanced rather than diminished precisely by its *not* being childish is suggested by the prostitute on the night Amy and Maggy are shut out of the prison. "You are kind and innocent," she tells Amy, "but you can't look at me out of a child's eyes" (Book the First, ch. xiv). Needless to say, Clennam's incapacity to see her as anything but a child (like his failure to perceive either the reality of Amy's love for him or the unreality of his own love for Pet) tells us far more about him than it does about her.

The contrast between Pet and Amy as pastoral figures is established most clearly in relation to Arthur Clennam, for, at different times, they each give him flowers. Pet gives him roses as she tells him of her impending marriage, and he is forced to take leave of his fanciful dream of loving her (Book the First, ch. xxviii). It is an important stage in the dream-life Clennam has been leading for so long, and at an equally important stage in his later emotional development Amy Dorrit brings him flowers in the prison (Book the Second, ch. xxix). This episode confirms Amy's position at the moral centre of the book, not just because of her association with pastoral nature as a figure of innocence and love, but rather because her positive qualities are expressed in terms of her knowledge of a world elsewhere, a world of freshness and renewal untainted by the ubiquitous prison. Her childhood Sunday visits to the country with Bob the turnkey (Book the First, ch. vii) initially introduce the Child of the Marshalsea to a world of nature and freedom from which she brings back flowers to the prison, just as at the end of the novel it seems to Clennam as if a garden has come into the Marshalsea. Thereafter she seems always to carry something of this world with her, and her early excursions into "the fields" with Bob lift her range of imaginative understanding far beyond the prison wall. As Flora inimitably puts it, too, her very name is "like a place down in the country with a turnpike, or a favourite 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" (Book the First, ch. xxiii).

The pastoral associations refreshingly encroach on the city, on the Iron Bridge where Amy so often goes to be alone. On her first visit there, at the suggestion of Arthur Clennam, we are told

that the bridge "was as quiet, after the roaring streets, as though it had been open country" (Book the First, ch. ix). Henceforth the bridge becomes for her a kind of oasis within the urban desert, and the revitalizing associations with which Dickens' simile endows it are later compounded for Amy by its association with her growing love for Arthur Clennam. Conversely it is in her effect on Clennam at the end of the novel that we see that real force and power of Amy as a pastoral figure, from the moment she brings the sensations of a garden into the prison with her cooling, life-giving bouquet until, in the final chapter of the novel, Amy Dorrit and Mother Nature become one and the same.

On a healthy autumn day the Marshalsea prisoner, weak but otherwise restored, sat listening to a voice that read to him,—on a healthy autumn day, when the golden fields had been reaped and ploughed again, when the summer fruits had ripened and waned, when the green perspectives of hops had been laid low by the busy pickers, when the apples clustering in the orchards were russet, and the berries of the mountain ash were crimson among the yellowing foliage. Already in the woods glimpses of the hardy winter that was coming were to be caught through unaccustomed openings among the boughs where the prospect shone defined and clear, free from the bloom of the drowsy summer weather, which had rested on it as the bloom lies on the plum. So far from the sea-shore the ocean was no longer to be seen lying asleep in the heat, but its thousand sparkling eyes were open, and its whole breadth was in joyful animation, from the cool sand on the beach to the little sails on the horizon, drifting away like autumn-tinted leaves that had drifted from the trees.

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 on it. Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly the same dead crop. Yet Clennam, listening to the voice as it read to him, heard in it all that great Nature was doing, heard in it all the soothing songs she sings to man. At no Mother's knee but hers had he ever dwelt in his youth on hopeful promises, on playful fancies, on the harvests of tenderness and humility that lie hidden in the early-fostered seeds of the imagination—on the oaks of retreat from blighting winds, that have the germs of their strong roots in nursery acorns.

(Book the Second, ch. xxxiv)

Once again Dickens contrasts the sterile uniformity of the prison with the creative motion of nature, and once again the contrast is woven into the texture of the prose. The evocative rhythmic heightening of the first paragraph is set against the dull monotony of "Blossom what would, its bricks and bars bore uniformly the same dead crop." Not until the fourth paragraph does Dickens tell us that the voice reading is Amy Dorrit's; we hear only of

“the voice that read to him”. But Amy is reading to Clennam from the book of Nature as surely as she preached the gospel of the New Testament to Mrs Clennam. Her voice is the voice of “great Nature”, and great Nature is acting upon Clennam as surely as Mother Nature is acting upon the landscape. The counterpart to fruition and fulfilment in the landscape is the awakening to love and sexuality in the mind of Arthur Clennam. For him, Little Dorrit has finally come of age.

Once again the heightened colours—golden, russet, crimson—are emphasized. Once again the movement of nature is creative process; the fruits ripen and wane, the leaves drift away, and through the trees we catch glimpses of the approaching winter. The pressure of the future, very similar to that informing Keats’s “To Autumn”, is strongly felt in the passage, and Dickens’ recognition of the pressing demands of life and of the future ensures that nature, however heightened and charged, is kept free from sentimentality. But heightened and charged it certainly is, and as in the earlier episode when Dickens took us inside Amy’s mind to show us her vision of the abundant processes of nature, so the forcefulness of this passage is visionary rather than literal. We are given nature not as she is, but Nature dynamically charged with human significance. The essential truths afforded by Nature, like those embodied in Mrs Plornish’s mural, in the spirit of her father’s songs, or in Little Dorrit herself, point to human possibility and the plenitude of creative human resourcefulness.

F. R. Leavis has valuably stressed Dickens’ knowledge of the Romantic poets,<sup>3</sup> and we can see from *Little Dorrit* that the novelist put his knowledge to positive and artistic use. In the mid-1850s, in the face of nature red in tooth and claw, Dickens incorporated a positive Romantic vision of Nature into the meaning of his novel. But incorporation involved qualification and evaluation as well as endorsement, and the result is several visions of nature and the pastoral that relate directly to the novel’s concern with the powers of the human imagination. Notwithstanding the pressure exerted by the darker aspects of *Little Dorrit*, therefore, and counterbalancing Dickens’ fine analysis of Society’s workings, his lyrical impulse finds rich expression in his visions of pastoral nature, visions which assure us of the human capacity for endurance and triumph amid the uproar of the noisy, the eager, the arrogant, the froward, and the vain.

3 See F. R. Leavis’ essay on the novel in F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, *Dickens the Novelist* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 213–76.