Grammar of Choice: Charles Dickens's Authentic Religion

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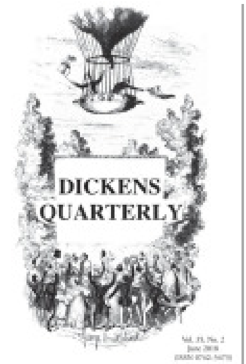

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Grammar of Choice: Charles Dickens's Authentic Religion

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When Robert Butterworth claims in *Dickens, Religion, and Society* (2016) that "Dickens's religion is absolutely central to his work" and further identifies five aspects in which "Dickens's religion goes to the very core" of his novels, he rests his argument on half a century of recent studies of Dickens's religion.[1] While Butterworth's premise (that religion is all-important) grasps the essence, his conclusion that Christianity is the solution to all the social problems depicted in Dickens's fiction remains unsettling. Butterworth's careful examination of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, for example, gives the impression that religion is a remedy against a particular evil, as if religion is something ready-made for us to understand and to utilize, something outside of human existence itself. I contend, on the contrary, that religion for Dickens is, to use George Eliot's idea of the role of art in "The Natural History of German Life," something that "surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment" (110). I would suggest, therefore, that religion is something Dickens wishes his characters and his readers to be informed by, to participate in, something I would call

1 I am indebted to those studies which challenged the view that Dickens was hostile to religion or that his religion was nothing more than sentimental clichés. Humphry House's *The World of Dickens* (1960) puts Dickens in the camp of religious liberalism against the more austere Evangelical atmosphere of the Victorians. Dennis Walder's *Dickens and Religion* (1981) examines Dickens's responses to and interactions with Anglicanism, Unitarianism and the Broad Church. Janet Larson offers a reading of specific Biblical allusions in *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (1985). Of particular value is an essay by Valentine Cunningham, "Dickens and Christianity," which deals with Dickens's unique sense of Christianity, as expressed through the images, characters, and selections of Biblical texts in his novels, a topic explored by Gary Colledge's detailed study of Dickens's *The Life of Our Lord* in *Dickens, Christianity and The Life of Our Lord* (2009). Andrew Sanders studies the trope of death in Dickens's novels in his study *Dickens the Resurrectionist* (1992).

authentic. I would further argue that the authentic religion hinges on the central idea of choice-making.

The "Inauthentic" in Religion

In most of Dickens's fiction, genuine religious experience is seldom found in churches, nor do clergymen usually exemplify religious principles. Religious institutions are often a target for criticism. Examples abound in his works. Sometimes Dickens simply cannot help making throwaway remarks – in *Little Dorrit*, for instance – when Mr. Meagles explains the name of the child he and his wife adopted "'to be a little maid'" to their daughter, Pet. Accepting the arbitrary name of Harriet Beadle, given to her by the Institution from which she was adopted,[2] Mr. and Mrs. Meagles changed "'Harriet into Hattey, and then into Tatty,'" while as for "Beadle," they altered that to "Coram," adding, "'If there is anything that is not be tolerated on any terms, anything that is a type of Jack-in-office insolence and absurdity, anything that represents in coats, waistcoats, and big sticks, our English holding-on by nonsense, after every one has found it out, it is a beadle (33; bk. 1, ch. 2). Another example occurs in "Sunday under Three Heads" (1836), where Dickens attacks the bill against recreation on Sundays. He describes two kinds of church services and shows both of them inadequate. There is a "fashionable church," – presumably an orthodox Anglican church, where only members of the privileged class worship and whose clergyman attends to the "style" of his preaching without regard for the content: "Mark the soft voice in which he reads, and the impressive manner in which he applies his white hand, studded with brilliants, to his perfumed hair" (7). In contrast to the "lax" atmosphere found in "a less orthodox place of religious worship," the clergyman torments his audience with a "drawling tone," and "frantic gesture" (8), invoking eternal punishment upon the congregation, as if to echo the preacher in Jonathan Edwards's "Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God." According to Michael Slater, strict observance of the Sabbath is for Dickens a "perversion of Christian teaching" (71). Reactions to Sabbatarianism can be found elsewhere. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, for example, Kit Nubbles counters his mother's hesitation about taking his brother to a play on Sunday with the objection: "'Can you suppose there's any harm in looking as cheerful and being as cheerful as our poor circumstances will permit?" (231; ch. 22).

Dickens is not against the material church per se as a place for worship or edification. Whether or not a church can be the "right place" for "amen," argues Natalie Bell Cole, depends if "human good will and general practices of faith" make up in strong feeling "what they lack in shallow form."

2 The Foundling Hospital, London, whose founder was Thomas Coram.

Otherwise "religious forms risk losing their spiritual significance to become merely staged events" (212). Mere adherence to formality is both the root and the symptom of an "inauthentic religion," she concludes. In "Gone Astray," Dickens envisions the "authenticity" of a church. It should be a place, says the narrator, where "all the beggars who pretended through the week to be blind, lame, one-armed, deaf and dumb, and otherwise physically afflicted, laid aside their pretence every Sunday, dressed themselves in holiday clothes, and attended divine service in the temple of their patron saint" (35). Religious practices have to be invested with meaning. The marriage ceremony for Lizzie Hexam and Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend* is held at Eugene's bedside as he is recuperating from Bradley Headstone's savage assault. It is performed, "with suitable simplicity," under the direction of Mr. Milvey, one of the rare cases of good-hearted and responsible clergymen in Dickens's novels. The service is said to be "so rarely associated with the shadow of death: so inseparable in the mind from a flush of life and gaiety and hope and health and joy" (732; bk.4, ch. 11). Even though it is removed from a church, this ceremony unites the two in a sacred union, unlike the wedding of Edith and Paul Dombey. Their nuptials stand in sharp contrast, a herald to the disastrous events that follow. Although conducted in a church, the service is permeated with intimations of death. The atmosphere is "cold and dark;" and dawn "moans and weeps," lingering "in the vaults below," amidst coffins" (476; ch. 31).

A related concern is the skepticism with which Dickens treats language and reason as a basis for belief. A revealing instance occurs in *Bleak House* when Jo and Mr. Chadband meet at the Snagsbys'. Jo presents a paradox: he cannot read what is intelligible to most other people, yet he possesses a quality which connects him to others that cannot be adequately rendered in words. The Reverend Chadband, by contrast, whose verbal expressions are supposed to offer spiritual hope and comfort, fails completely to connect, as any promise of assistance is lost in a web of opaque and ambiguous language, so distorted and misused as to become a barrier, instead of a bridge. Chadband's verbosity and circular arguments bring to mind Mrs. Gamp and Wilkins Micawber, characters who reveal Dickens's propensity for the comical and the grotesque. But in Chadband's case it is more than that. As a preacher, he abuses language to the extent that, as Trevor Blount observes, he "degrades the missionary impulse to a verbal narcissism" (Blount 333).

I would argue, however, that Dickens's criticism goes even further. In chapter 25, when Jo is snatched from the street as a means of "affording a subject which Mr. Chadband desires to improve for the spiritual delight of a select congregation," he selects the crossing-sweeper in order to talk about "Terewth." The reason Jo is a lost sheep, "'devoid of flocks and herds,'" says Chadband, is that he is deprived of such "'Terewth'"(411; ch. 25). It is no

mere accident that his prattle should be on this topic, for, as preacher, his duty is indeed to elucidate "truth," which, if imparted to people like Jo, would benefit society. A comparison of Chadband with Mr. Taylor, a preacher Dickens met in Boston and mentioned in *American Notes*, helps elucidate the point. Even though it suffered "the fault of frequent repetition, incidental to all such prayers," Mr. Taylor's prayer "was plain and comprehensive in its doctrines, and breathed a tone of general sympathy and charity, which is not so commonly a characteristic of this form of address to the Deity as it might be" (107; ch. 3). In this respect, Dickens speaks in concert with John Bunyan, who, in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, attacks the abuse of language in the allegorical figure Talkative, a man who can elaborate on any given religious topic but who rarely practices any of them. The protagonist Christian, seeing the danger of this man, cautions Faithful about Talkative who "'will beguile with this tongue of his,'" adding that "'Religion hath no place in his heart, or house, or conversation; all he hath lieth in his tongue, and his Religion is to make a noise therewith.'"Christian rightly sees the incompatibility of true religious spirit and the mere play of words, two things "'as diverse as are the Soul and the Body'" (63–65; part 1).Emma Mason, in a study of Bunyan and Dickens, points out that Dickens gives vent to his mistrust of evangelicalism by creating "numerous incorrigible clergymen," whose archetypes, she argues, can be found in Bunyan's writing. About Chadband she writes,

> Lacking any kind of sustained conviction or integrity, Chadband symbolizes that 'indolent temporizing' that formed the rotten core of the established church for Dickens, a manipulative and bankrupt institution whose 'dark and dingy' buildings blackened the sky-scape of Britain, suffocating its inhabitants with 'an air of mourning' and 'death'. (Mason 157)

The portrait of Mr. Chadband, however, goes further than revealing him, like Talkative, as a derelict or incompetent preacher. The very choice of the epistemological word "terewth" forces the reader to ponder whether truth of this particular nature – the religious truth – can ever be delivered simply by "preaching" and by being preached to. As the narrator notes, Jo feels himself to be "an unimprovable reprobate […] for HE won't never know nothink." Here, Dickens probes the gulf between the privileged group and the social outcast. Perhaps Dickens is suggesting that what prevents people from understanding each other is not any individual's stupidity or hypocrisy, but rather oblivion to the fact that religious truth can only be embodied, illustrated, and acted upon, which no formality or dogma can achieve. The narrator proceeds to tell Jo that:

> Though it may be, Jo, that there is a history so interesting and affecting even to minds as near the brutes as thine, recording deeds done on this earth for common men, that if the Chadbands, removing their own persons from the light, would but show it thee in simple reverence, would but leave it unimproved, would but regard it as being eloquent enough without their modest aid – it might hold thee awake, and thou might learn from it yet! (415; ch. 25)

Valentine Cunningham takes this passage as "Dickens's common charge against his evangelical and, especially, Dissenting preachers and would-be Bible expounders" (270). The emphasis, however, is equally on the distinction Dickens makes between empty rhetoric and the "unimproved" history of Jesus, told in language without any pretentiousness. Of course, in the fictional world that Dickens portrays, "Jo never heard of any such book" (415). Dickens himself, however, attempted to write one, *The Life of Our Lord*, an account of the deeds of Jesus "done on this earth for common men."

We are therefore faced with the question: where to locate the genuine, authentic religious experience in Dickens's works? To answer, I would like to single out a passage from *Our Mutual Friend*. In book three, chapter nine, after the burial service of Betty Higden, Mrs. Milvey, the wife of Mr. Milvey, the clergyman, asks Lizzie Hexam if Riah ever intended to convert her to Judaism. Lizzie replies as follows:

> 'They have never asked me what my religion is. They asked me what my story was, and I told them. They asked me to be industrious and faithful, and I promised to be so. They most willingly and cheerfully do their duty to all of us who are employed here, and we try to do ours to them. Indeed they do much more than their duty to us, for they are wonderfully mindful of us in many ways.' (508–9; bk.3, ch. 9)

Lizzie stays with her father when the latter's reputation is falsely blemished, who sacrifices her own education to support her brother Charley, who withstands the threats of Bradley Headstone, and who bravely intervenes to save Eugene Wrayburn from drowning. Riah is generous, kind-hearted and equally brave when he offers shelter to Lizzie when she is in danger. In a sense, both are religious figures though in the passage I have quoted, neither cares about doctrine let alone the need to convert the other to a particular set of beliefs. Riah takes Lizzie as a concrete human being, not a Christian in abstraction. He wants to know her life experience and once he knows it, he supports Lizzie in her decisions, a theme to which I will return. It is Mrs. Milvey, by contrast, the wife of a kind-hearted clergyman, who raises

the issue about "conversion" only to be relieved to learn that "there was no fear for the village children, there being a Christian school in the village, and no worse Judaical interference with it than to plant its garden" (514; bk. 3, ch. 9). While Dickens himself was a devout Christian, he portrays here a deeply compassionate, devoted Jewish man misunderstood by a good Christian. The scene conveys, I suggest, how Dickens's concern transcends the boundaries of sects: he is in a quest for the core and common bond of all true religions. As William Howitt commented early in 1846, "No man has dreamed of Mr. Dickens's politics, or cared to inquire after his religion; he has stood amongst us belonging to us all; of our creed, of our party, of our way of thinking […] simply because he had no party or prejudices, but treated human interests as they belonged to man and not to classes" (Howitt 205).

I take this passage from *Our Mutual Friend* as a clue to Dickens's views about religion. It tells us what Dickens deems irrelevant, namely institutions and dogmas; it emphasizes the importance of human beings who do not preach, but illustrate live religious truths. Carolyn Oulton also cites this passage as a cue to understanding Dickens's religion. She argues that "*Our Mutual Friend* denies the importance of abstract religious understanding to eternal life," a conclusion based on this significant detail: "Attempting to reassure his horrified wife that Lizzie's association with Jews will not lead to a fatal apostasy, the Reverend Milvey shows no desire to convert them" (Oulton 153). This episode suggests that Dickens holds individuals accountable for their choices, and it points to a unique vision of religion, one that started with the Romantics, especially August Wilhelm Schlegel and Friederich Schleiermacher, further developed by Søren Kierkegaard, and was introduced into English religious thought by Thomas Carlyle, before it was absorbed by Dickens. For Dickens religion does not mean the study of theology or adherence to forms; religion for him is embedded in the characters' choices at every moment of every day.[3] Simple as this may seem in one sense, these moments of "choice-making" are both complex and revealing, and it is here that Dickens embeds the religious, philosophical and psychological dimensions of our relationship to ourselves, to those around us, and to the universe. This idea is pivotal in our understanding of Dickens, because if we continue to think of religion solely in terms of doctrine or institutional affiliation, we would come to the same conclusion as the received idea that Dickens is perhaps indifferent to religion. Alternatively, if we think of religion simply as good deeds and charity, we would reduce his religious imagination to "sentimental platitude," as some of his contemporaries did.

3 "Choice" is precisely what constitutes character ("*ethos*" in Greek), according to Aristotle: "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids" (Poetics VI).

Religious Authenticity

Felicia Bonaparte argues in *The Poetics of Poesis: The Making of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (2015), that the nineteenth-century experienced an epistemological crisis and for that reason, there was a quest for "a new and modern religion, for some transcendent reality tenable in the modern world" (127). Bonaparte credits the Schlegel brothers with pioneering this modern quest. Besides the Schlegels, however, the German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher is particularly germane, because he attempted to strip religion of all unnecessary parts in order to reveal what is "authentic." He argues that religion is ultimately a matter of feeling (*Gefühl*), a consciousness of the infinite embodied in the finite world. For this reason he distinguishes religion from both ethics and science. In an early work entitled *On Religion* (1820–21), he famously announces that "quantity of knowledge is not quantity of piety:"

> The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things, in and through the Infinite, and of all temporal things in and through the Eternal. Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal. Where this is found religion is satisfied, where it hides itself there is for her unrest and anguish, extremity and death." (43–44)

Bernard Reardon thus summarizes his view: "Dogmas, formularies of faith and worship, ecclesiastical institutions, these things are the outcome and manifestation of religion and as such have their due uses; but they are not its ground or its substance" (40).

The substance of religion, then, needs to be experienced subjectively. The authentic religion is not something people can contemplate, but a human experience necessitated by the condition of human existence. This position is most eloquently argued by Søren Kierkegaard who, in various works but especially in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), tackles the issue of authentic religious faith. Kierkegaard calls into question the efforts of Hegelian philosophy to put human knowledge into a logical system. A system of knowledge can only be achieved where every single component of the system is objective. In Kierkegaard's view, this kind of system can be constructed, but only applied to such abstract knowledge as mathematics or logic, i. e., knowledge that is independent of human beings. Most other kinds of knowledge, on the other hand, belong to the human sphere and

indeed start with the human mind, and since human beings are subjective, the "system" of such knowledge, if possible, would have to involve the idea of "human existence."The starting point of such a system, therefore, is not absolute, but mediated through human reflection. In conclusion, an absolute, objective system of any knowledge that pertains to human existence is not possible. It is only possible, Kierkegaard adds, for God, for whom "existence" is a system by itself. This is the challenge Kierkegaard poses to the modern philosophical mind, which tends to systematize human knowledge, be it history, philosophy or religion. But we must remember this system is built on subjectivity, because "becoming subjective is the *only* way in which human beings can truthfully relate to themselves as existing beings; the only way in which their existence can become an issue for them" (Pattison 38). To know what it means to "exist" seems, for Kierkegaard, the paramount duty of modern man, who must

> direct all his attention to his existing. It is from this side that objection must first be made to modern speculative thought; not that it has not a false presupposition but a *comical* presupposition, occasioned by a kind of world-historical absent-mindedness what it means to be a human being. (*Postscript* 120)

The issue of religious faith is Kierkegaard's persistent focus and the core of *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. Of all kinds of knowledge in the human sphere, religion, "a personal, infinite interestedness in one's own eternal happiness," is the least amenable to abstract analysis, particularly because the subject of such religious faith is an existing individual. Kierkegaard here is forcing his readers to face the modern, human condition, with the faculty of reason having been dissected first by David Hume and subsequently by Kant; but religious faith is exalted precisely because humans are not God.

It is from this epistemological angle that Kierkegaard criticizes the propensity of "inauthentic religion" to rely heavily both on historical investigations of Christianity, which he thinks achieve at best "approximation," and on the "speculative" work of philosophy. "Christianity, " he says, "cannot be observed objectively, precisely because it wants to lead the subject to the ultimate point of his subjectivity, and when the subject is thus properly positioned, he cannot tie his eternal happiness to speculative thought" (*Postscript* 57). He does not deny the contributions made by biblical scholars and theologians to illuminate certain aspects of Christianity, but what they deal with is still in the realm of the "objective," and, therefore, beside the point for an existing individual. Detached, indifferent, aloof, the "observer" of religion – Kierkegaard's metaphor for the historical scholars of Christianity – can never fully invest himself in religious faith, which is by nature

subjective. The word "pagan" for Kierkegaard represents everything that is not genuine religion: "In relation to Christianity, however, objectivity is an extremely unfortunate category, and the one who has objective Christianity and nothing else is *eo ipso* a pagan, because Christianity is precisely a matter of spirit and of subjectivity and of inwardness" (*Postscript* 43).

It is misleading to understand Kierkegaard's critique of doctrinal or institutional religion as a shortcut to faith, a route that circumvents "intimate knowledge of antiquity, obtained by indefatigable diligence" (*Postscript* 26). In fact, by distinguishing religious faith from almost all other kinds of human faculties, Kierkegaard points to the unique yet insurmountable difficulty of attaining religious faith. He confesses that, "moved by a genuine interest in those who make everything easy," he "conceived it as [his] task to create difficulties everywhere" (Kaufmann 87). Loneliness is the first difficulty. The individual who can attain true faith must be alone, since he has no outside authority to rely on, be it the Bible, the church, priests or doctrines. Picking up the theme of the "crowd" and the "individual" which he started in an essay *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard declares the "crowd" irrelevant in the realm of faith, for, "it cannot comfort him to know what the human crowd knows. […] From God he must derive his consolation, lest his entire religiosity be reduced to a rumor" (*Postscript* 245).

It is true that religion as subjectivity operates in the most ineffable, impenetrable part of human psyche, and in terms of authenticity, such a religion resists definition. However, being subjective is not a fuzzy category for Kierkegaard. His philosophical instinct impels him to enunciate: being subjective for him involves a paradox of experience: on the one hand, the individual realizes the impossibility of breaking from the immediate (finite) experience; on the other hand, he needs to define himself in a God-relationship, thus transcending his finiteness, by making choices within experience at every moment of every day: "to bring the God-idea together with such an accidental finitude" (Kaufmann 243). Faith defined as such is a venture, which would involve risks, the primary of which, in the case of Christianity, is to encounter the "objective uncertainty" (religious truth inexplicable in empirical or philosophical terms), "with the passion of the infinite" (Kaufmann 214).

Kierkegaard's felt need to purge away everything that is inauthentic in religion, the turn from the contemplation of "God" to the experience of "God-relationship," is set against the backdrop of a larger intellectual project in the nineteenth-century, namely the reconsideration of the power of "detachment" and a passionate call for a deeper "engagement." In Amanda Anderson's introduction to her study *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*, she traces the line of thought that critiqued the alienating effect of "detachment" on human life from Carlyle

and Mill, to William Morris and George Eliot (20). However, Anderson also rightly points out that "detachment" is not always a negative force: when critically deployed, it may in fact enhance the moral standard of society. Eliot's essay "The Natural History of German Life," according to Anderson, demonstrates the equal importance of both deeply engaged experience in and objective observation of a society. Although a cold, detached study of human life does not help generate sympathy, the kind of reflection and the objective viewpoint implied in this "detachment" is quite necessary for "a broader historical consciousness." Mill, Anderson argues, also allows ample space for the idea of distancing oneself from one's immediate standpoint in order to attain truth, a key idea in *On Liberty*. Detachment, to sum up, is an ambiguous preoccupation for the nineteenth-century thinkers. Far from being detrimental, "forms of detachment" were envisioned by the Victorians "as intimately connected to the moral project of self-cultivation" (Anderson 178). Anderson's trenchant argument holds true so far as it is kept outside the realm of religion, but "engagement" is precisely what the authentic religion requires.

I refer to the writers above in order to demonstrate an affinity between them and Dickens, rather than to argue for a direct influence on the novelist. Although Dickens was not noted for his erudition, he could not help imbibing the thoughts of his time, as his contemporary Edwin P. Whipple observed in 1849:

> he cannot breathe the atmosphere of his time without feeling occasionally a generous sentiment springing to his lips, without perceiving occasionally a liberal opinion stealing into his understanding. He cannot creep into any nook or corner of seclusion, but that some grand sentiment or noble thought will hunt him out. (239)

The figure Dickens did know and read, however, was Thomas Carlyle, whom Dickens considered his spiritual mentor. When he dedicated *Hard Times* to Carlyle he claims that "it contains nothing in which you do not think with me, for no man knows your books better than I." That Dickens read *The French Revolution*[4] is a fact; but one of the sources of Dickens's religious thinking can be found in an early essay "Characteristics," which Carlyle wrote in 1831. Starting the essay with a medical metaphor, Carlyle diagnosed English society as infected with excessive "self-consciousness," a condition which belongs to "a diseased mixture and conflict of life and death," while "unconsciousness belongs to pure unmixed life" (16). Carlyle

4 In the Preface to *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens expresses his admiration for Carlyle's *The French Revolution* by saying that "no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. CARLYLE's wonderful book."

traces this modern obsession with system and theory back to skeptical thinkers like David Hume, who dismissed "reason" but failed to propose a new foundation. We know from *Past and Present* that Carlyle's social vision points backward to the medieval world, but "Characteristics" gives us Carlyle the German Romantic who wants to return to ancient times, because the immediate and the transcendent were then at one with each other, achieving what Georg Lukács calls a kind of "totality." Modern Europe, by contrast, is marked by a division of body and soul, a loss of immediate access to the "infinite," and most specifically, a division of "doing" and "thinking."

Carlyle argues that this separation of doing and thinking has invaded the social, intellectual and spiritual aspects of English life. Society produces more treatises and systems of social reform than people put into practice; philosophical debates about human rights replace the actual concern for human welfare. Literature, says Carlyle (even more apropos 200 years later than in his own time), "has become one boundless self-devouring Review."Carlyle's criticism emphasizes not the rational work that society needs in order to progress, but Intellect itself: "of our Thinking, we might say, it is but the mere upper surface that we shape into articulate Thoughts; – underneath the region of argument and conscious discourse, lies the region of meditation; here, in its quiet mysterious depths, dwells what vital force is in us" (4–5).

It is in this spirit that Carlyle berates the current state of religion, which, as Ruth apRoberts rightly observes, is "persistently his chief topic" (apRoberts 110). Asking in a stentorian voice "whither has Religion now fled," Carlyle challenges his audience to re-think the nature of religion. The "healthy" religion, he argues, should be "vital, unconscious of itself," and it "shines forth spontaneously in doing of the Work." On the contrary, what we have is a self-destructive tendency in which religion was gradually turning into metaphysics. Instead of inspiring people to bring their best potential to bear upon actual life, religion has become a subject, an intellectual sphere, for people to make speculations about.

The Grammar of Choice

When Dickens's religion is judged by the idea of authenticity, his attacks on institutions and theology no longer appear as mere negation. The living power of religion precedes and extends far beyond the scope of parody or distortion. Rather he was religious precisely because of his critical exposure of doctrine and religiosity. All the Chadbands and Jellybys, all the ministers that pretend Jo never exists, are only nominally, not authentically, religious. If all the "official" clergymen in Dickens's works are found derelict (with the exceptions of the Milveys in *Our Mutual Friend* and perhaps Rev. Septimus

Crisparkle in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*), we should perhaps follow the spirit of *Vita Apostolica* in order to locate the genuine religious experience, to look for the reenactment of Christ in laymen. As a layman himself, as Toni Cerutti argues, Dickens "worried about the vanishing sense of a godly life already tangible in his days among all classes of people. The blatantly professed religiousness of Victorian society did not always correspond to a heartfelt creed" (Cerutti 51).

Perhaps the earliest example of this attitude we can find is Captain Cuttle, who, assuming Walter has died at sea, performs the duty of a clergyman, not by observing the rituals, but by releasing his heart-felt sorrow. Opening *The Book of Common Prayer* at the burial service and reading "softly to himself," the Captain, "in a true and simple spirit, committed Walter's body to the deep" (513; ch. 33). Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend* offers another example. She struggles to escape the clutches of the workhouse – a Christian institution, but at the same time, she exemplifies the Christian virtue of self-denial by sacrificing her own welfare for the future of Sloppy (bk. 2; ch. 14). Comparing these moments with Mrs. Jellyby's otherwise unidentified friend, a "contentious gentleman," who says "it was his mission to be everybody's brother, but who appeared to be on terms of coolness with the whole of his large family" (482; ch. 30), then, would give us a clue to Dickens's idea of religious authenticity.

The most archetypal example of Vita Apostolica is found in Mr. Peggotty, who embodies the principle of purpose and seriousness in life. If the sea represents the wild, uncontrollable force of nature in which our Byronic hero – Steerforth – is lost, the land, then, would suggest rootedness and peace. It is worth noting that Mr. Peggoty's house is an old boat on the land. David recalls, in his first visit to this "ship-looking thing," seeing some Biblical pictures hanging on Mr. Peggotty's walls, "some common coloured pictures, framed and glazed, of scripture subjects. […] Abraham in red going to sacrifice Isaac in blue, and Daniel in yellow cast into a den of green lions, were the most prominent of these" (41; ch. 3).

However, other than this inconspicuous detail, Mr. Peggotty is not in any theological way associated with "God." He simply acts like God in his providing a "haven" for those otherwise homeless – Emily, Ham, Mrs. Gummidge, and more importantly, in his unswerving determination to find, and to forgive his neice. When the dreadful news of Emily's elopement reaches him, he declares his first task is to seek her "'through the wureld […] and bring her back,'" explaining that doing so is his "'dooty evermore'" (460; ch. 31; 463; ch. 32), reenacting the good shepherd in Matthew 18. Dickens seems to imply that Mr. Peggotty is the antithesis of "despair," for he not only represents purpose and fortitude himself but also is ready to give hope to the hopeless, to shed "light" upon darkness. He insists that

when he is away seeking Emily, the candle in his house be lit every night, "'that if ever she should see it, it may seem to say 'come back, my child, come back!'" (463; ch. 32). Accordingly, when David comes to his lodging in London to inform him of Emily's latest tidings, he immediately makes arrangement for Emily's return, asking David to "'put a candle ready and the means of lighting it'" (683; ch. 46). The "light" to which he is associated in these two critical moments has a religious significance: the beginning of the Gospel of John says "In him was the life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1.4–5).

What also makes Mr. Peggotty an apostolic character is his choice to forgive Emily. The last word he utters before he embarks on his journey is that "'my unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her'" (480; ch. 32), a resolution not resulting from contemplation, but an instinct to love. The story of Emily and Mr. Peggotty invokes, simultaneously, two Biblical stories: Emily is the Prodigal daughter, who eventually comes back to the father. At the same time, in the dramatic scene preceding their reunion, we have the contrast between the implacable, vengeful Rosa Dartle and the all-forgiving Peggotty. Rosa Dartle calls the repentant Emily "earth-worm" and "carrion" and verbally sentences her to "die," to find one of the "doorways and dust-heaps for such deaths and such despair," while Mr. Peggotty who "took her up in his arms; and, with the veiled face lying on his bosom, and addressed towards his own, carried her, motionless and unconscious, down the stairs" (728; ch. 50). This scene resonates with the Biblical scene in which Jesus forgives the sinful woman while his hosts, the Pharisees, are incapable of forgiveness (Luke 7. 36–50)[5].

Furthermore, the way Mr. Peggotty understands what's happening to him, relates himself to the external world, and acts in response to it, demonstrates authentic religion. Dickens never lets Mr. Peggotty discuss God openly or in abstraction, but the reader nonetheless feels the presence of God in the choices he makes. Mr. Peggotty himself may not know that in seeking and by forgiving Emily, he performs a religious duty prompted by sympathetic intuition rather than by logic or common sense. Asked by Ham where he would go to find her, he simply answers "anywhere." To David's inquiry about his thoughts he says, "'I don't rightly know how 'tis, but from over yon there seemed to me to come – the end of it like;'" as to what the "end"

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5 Compare David's image of Emily "on her knees, with her head thrown back, her pale face looking upward, her hands wildly clasped and held out, and her hair streaming about her," perhaps reminiscent of the woman in Luke who is "standing behind him at his feet, weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment." The difference is that Emily offers her repentance to Rosa Dartle, who is the opposite of forgiving.

is, again he says, "'I don't know,'" and later confesses that he is kind of "'muddled'" (464; ch. 32). In the realm of words, the signifier of abstract idea, he is clueless; but in action, he is a living testimony of the religious truth. Another telling moment occurs when, following Martha Endell, he confesses to David, "'I doen't know wheer it comes from, or how 'tis, but I am told as she's alive!'" As for the origin of this intelligence, Dickens has David suggest that it is indeed God's voice, for David reports how Peggotty "looked almost like a man inspired" (682; ch. 46).

By singling out the word "inspired," I don't mean to suggest a mystical interpretation, as if Mr. Peggotty were being called by the Holy Ghost. On the contrary, religion for Dickens has a practical import, one that demands each individual find purpose in life and take actions. Although Dickens calls Mr. Peggotty "the wanderer," his wandering is nothing like Steerforth's aimless roaming. A wanderer he is, on the literal level, but at heart he is a pilgrim, with a fixed destination. As we are told by David, the next time David meets him, he "looked very strong, and like a man upheld by steadfastness of purpose, whom nothing could tire out" (588; ch. 40). We might conjecture that when Dickens imagines Mr. Peggotty, he has Carlyle's essay "Characteristics" in mind, where a "good man" is presented as he who "works continually in well doing; to whom well doing is as his natural existence, awakening no astonishment, requiring no commentary"(7).

What makes Captain Cuttle, Mr. Peggotty, and Betty Higden profoundly religious are the decisions that inform their actions. For Dickens, to be religious means to have the willpower to make a choice instead of simply drifting. Characters such as Steerforth, Sydney Carton, Eugene Wrayburn (the latter two initially) exhibit the kind of "inertia," the inability to make act decisively. Lizzie Hexam, by contrast, deliberately sacrifices her own future for her brother and stands up against her father, exemplifying the possibility of free will in a Darwinian ecosystem.

Dickens's vision of religion, although presented in a unique way, represents a strain of thought in the nineteenth century, expressed by different writers from different angles. In stressing faith as a personal venture, Ralph Waldo Emerson in his 1838 Divinity School Address reminded students that religious sentiment is never "instruction, but provocation," and it cannot "be received at second hand." The constraining force of a religious system, so powerfully evoked in the character of Mrs. Clennam, is also shared by George Eliot, who in *Silas Marner* praises Nancy Lammeter for arriving at the wisdom that "Human beliefs, like all other natural growths, elude the barriers of system"(152; ch. 17). In *Middlemarch* she portrays Caleb Garth who, in helping Fred Vincy find his vocation, is reincarnating God, practicing a "religion without the aid of theology" (249; ch. 24). When Will Ladislaw asks whether Dorothea's religion is "mysticism," Dorothea protests

by saying "'Please not to call it by any name. […] It is my life. I have found it out, and cannot part with it'" (387; ch. 39). The "name" – the signifier of the essence, is simply too abstract for one's existence. The insights of Kierkegaard, Carlyle, Eliot, Emerson, and above all, Dickens, are responses to the increasing secularization in the west, arguing, as Matthew Arnold observed of the Christian religion in 1875, that "men cannot do without it [… but] they cannot do with it as it is ("Preface"378).

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