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The Grammar of Choice: Charles Dickens's Existential Idea of Religion

HAI NA

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2014

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Hai Na

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the  
Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the  
dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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## Abstract

## The Grammar of Choice: Charles Dickens's Existential Idea of Religion

By Hai Na

Advisor: Professor David Richter

This dissertation challenges the received opinion that Charles Dickens's religious thinking is merely sentimental and philanthropic. Instead, I argue that there is in his works a very consistent "existential" sense of religion, especially in his mature novels. To be religious for him does not lie in the adherence to dogma or the study of theological arguments, but in the crucial choices people make every day. In order to illustrate this "existential" sense of religion, I analyze, in the first chapter, relevant works by Kierkegaard, Carlyle, George Eliot, and Dostoevsky, in order to establish the context in which Dickens's religious views can be discussed. In the second chapter I examine him in the context of twentieth-century writers such as Sartre and Camus to underscore Dickens's existential modernity. The central argument of this chapter is that the very possibility for characters to make a choice is rendered difficult by the widespread loss of faith. Two novels deal with this issue in particular: *David Copperfield* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The third chapter begins by examining the choice of good versus evil, which is shown to be a very complex issue for Dickens, even in his early works. Then I proceed to discuss the implications of this choice and conclude that knowingly to choose evil over good constitutes "sin" for Dickens, as he demonstrates in *Dombey and Son*. The last chapter focuses on Dickens's last published novel *Our Mutual Friend* and discusses the possibility of free choice, a religious issue complicated by the implications of Darwinian evolution.

## Acknowledgements

My first thanks go to Professor David Richter, my thesis advisor. Professor Richter carefully read my multiple drafts and provided me with many valuable suggestions concerning the argument, the structure, and the style of the dissertation. I am especially indebted to his Biblical scholarship which is so crucial in this project.

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I thank Professor Joseph Wittreich who taught me two Milton seminars, sat on my Orals examination, and kindly agreed to read my dissertation in his retirement. His Milton seminars will remain one of the fondest memories I have about the Graduate Center.

A very special note of gratitude is owed to Professor Felicia Bonaparte, who helped me to see the importance of thinkers like Kierkegaard, whose existential ideas, as I discovered, have relevance with regard to Dickens. Without her help this dissertation could not have been conceived in the first place. She not only devoted many hours and numerous insightful emails to discussing the project with me, but also kindly let me read her manuscript of her forthcoming book. For all of this I am deeply grateful.

Last but not the least, I thank my parents, my wife Alice, and, my angel: little Natalie.

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## Chapter I: “The Direct Paths of Truth” (Camus)

The mixture of opinions about the highest being or the world and of precepts for a human life  
(or even for two) you call religion!

Schleiermacher, *Speeches on Religion*

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

*Hamlet* 1.5

Human beliefs, like all other natural growths, elude the barriers of system.

George Eliot, *Silas Marner*

### The “Center” of the Dickens World

If we could borrow Orhan Pamuk’s definition of the “center” of the novel as “a profound opinion or insight about life, a deeply embedded point of mystery, whether real or imagined” (Pamuk, 153), we would proceed to ask what the center is in Dickens’s novels. In my dissertation, I would argue that the center is religion. However it is not religion in the ordinary sense, but a particular kind which Dickens defines in his imaginative way. Although religion is often only an undercurrent in Dickens, it nevertheless is a vital center that pulls together the historical, social, economic, and psychological aspects of the time of the Dickens world. However, Dickens’s religion has been largely misunderstood in our thoroughly, epistemologically secular time, the reasons for which I will analyze subsequently. Even in his own time, discussions of his works have not often taken him seriously as a religious thinker, or, for that matter, a serious thinker of any kind. Harriet Martineau wished that “he had a



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sounder social philosophy, and that he could suggest a loftier moral to sufferers; could lead them to see that ‘man does not live by bread alone,’” and proceeds to conclude that for Dickens, “happiness lies in those parts of his nature which are only animated and exalted by suffering”(Martineau 235-6). Others, like Lord Jeffrey, while able to capture the transcendental moment in Dickens, could not further determine the particular kind of transcendence in Dickens works. For instance, upon reading *Dombey and Son*, Lord Jeffrey writes to Dickens that “in reading of these delightful children, how deeply do we feel that ‘of such is the kingdom of Heaven;’ and how ashamed of the contaminations which *our* manhood has received from the contact of earth, and wonder how *you* should have been admitted into that pure communion...’ (Jeffrey 217). Lord Jeffrey stops short of specifying either the “kingdom” or the “communion.”

But the typical reaction was that Dickens’s domain is artistic creation rather than exposition of serious ideas, despite his constant reactions to recent thoughts. Harriet Martineau, one of Dickens’s contributors to *Household Words* until 1845 and to whom Dickens was indebted for her knowledge of political economy and of the new continent – America (Slater 176; 309), denies Dickens the ability to articulate serious thoughts by saying “there are many who wish that he would abstain from a set of difficult subjects, on which all true sentiment must be underlain by a sort of knowledge which he has not” (Martineau 237). When it comes to religion in particular, David Masson, in comparing Dickens and Thackeray, complained about Dickens’s intrusion of religion into his books:

Modes of thinking, doctrines, theological and speculative tendencies, likewise come in for a share of his critical notice. Passages might be quoted from his

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stories, for example, where he has distinctly attacked and denounced transcendentalism in philosophy, and Puritanism in religion...but it is a dangerous thing thus openly and professedly to blend the functions of the artist with those of the declaimer....For our respect for the talent a man shews as an artist, ought not, as a matter of course, to extend itself so as to shelter all his dicta as a moralist or practical politician..." (Masson 254).

Many of his contemporary readers missed the religious elements because of their own lack of religious-mindedness. As Linda Lewis says: "If a great many Victorians were unaffiliated with a church and others attended sporadically, it is worth speculating whether Dickens's reader noticed when a Dickens text quoted Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or alluded to John's Revelation" (Lewis 9). But it is surprising to find that even Christian reviewers of his time did not consider Dickens's works to contain particular religious value either. In a review of *The Chimes* in 1845, a contributor to *Christian Remembrancer* complained that there is "not a scrap or spark of religion in it: nothing more than morals: the realm of fact, not of grace; the kingdom of the individual will, not of the Spirit and strength of God" (*Critical Heritage* 160). Similarly, James Augustine Stothert, when writing to the Roman Catholic journal *The Rambler*, claimed Dickens is the icon of his age "which loves benevolence without religion," and lamented the fact that "morally there is probably not another living writer, of equal decency of thought, to whom the supernatural and eternal world simply *is not* (Stothert 294; my emphasis). These comments, especially those from Christian sources, are of great value because they make us ponder how the nineteenth century thought about religion, and what the distinction between religion and morality was at that time. In reading these comments, we are

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reminded of Kant's "phenomenal" world, Carlyle's definition of the "clothes" of religion, and Schleiermacher's "ordinary didactic controversies." If religion was defined in these terms, as it was for some thinkers, then Dickens's works perhaps have little to do with what they call "religion."<sup>1</sup> But if we understand an "existential" sense of religion, a term I will endeavor to define throughout this chapter, we will see that Dickens was immensely and profoundly religious.

A greater danger, which partly comes from the misunderstanding of the nature of religion in Dickens's work, lies in reducing his religion to mere sentiment, a tendency that started from his contemporaries and persisted into the twentieth century. While granting that Dickens is unrivalled "in his own sphere," Mrs. Oliphant in the *Household Words* cautions the reader that in his works, "the law of kindness has come to man under the very loftiest sanction, and kindness sublimated into charity, Love, is the pervading spirit of the Gospel," and she further holds Dickens responsible for "the very poor platitudes which scarcely would reach any public" (Oliphant335). We ought to be grateful for Mrs. Oliphant's withering comment, because it accidentally hits upon the central element of Dickens's religion – love, the defining element that distinguishes the New Testament from the Old Testament. In Dickens's own version of the New Testament – his *The Life of Our Lord* – written for his children, he starts off by defining Jesus as one "who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in anyway ill or miserable, as he was" (*TLOL*,

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<sup>1</sup> Critics have pointed out the notion that Victorian fiction, often considered as realistic, has a symbolic dimension as well. Edwin Eigner, for example, calls those novels with symbolic meanings "metaphysical novel," and he contends that these novels were written with a preconceived idea, a "charted voyage." See Eigner chapter I. Jane Vogel in *Allegory in Dickens* (University of Alabama, 1977) studies the allegorical aspect of Dickens works. Most recently, Felicia Bonaparte's forthcoming book *The Poetics of Poesis* challenges the very assumption of "realism" in the nineteenth century. See chapter one of *Poesis*. This is also one of the arguments in her class on the "double plots" in the nineteenth-century fiction, which largely influenced my reading of the Victorian novel.

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ch.1) . Though love comprehends “kindness,” in Dickens it has a transcendental element that allows his characters to be free from the inevitable human condition which he epitomized in the image of “prison.”

Modern Dickens criticism, while enriching our understanding, has not fully grasped the existential sense which is the core of Dickens’s idea of religion. Humphreys House’s chapter on religion in *The Dickens World*, for example, puts Dickens in the ‘liberal’ group against the more austere, Evangelical atmosphere in the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: “there were many lay people in every class willing to entertain Christian sentiment uncorseted by dogma. To such people Dickens appealed, and he increased their number” (House 109). However, House was satisfied with describing the phenomenon of religious liberalism and so did not further investigate the philosophical root. His conclusion, therefore, adds very little to the insights of those nineteenth-century critics when he asserts that “virtue is for him the natural state of man, and happiness its concomitant” (House 111). Dickens’s rejection of theology, according to House, signifies his half-hearted participation in religious dialogue, and sometimes totally disqualifies him from it: “His practical humanist kind of Christianity hardly touches the fringes of what is called religious experience, and his work shows no indication of any powerful feeling connected with a genuinely religious subject.” (131)

Besides critics who, like House, reduced Dickens’s religion to sentimental platitudes, there were others who did notice the religious elements in Dickens, but they focused on what Thomas Carlyle would call the “clothing” of religion, not the core. Dickens forcefully argues that the “clothing” often becomes a pretext under which people procure worldly possessions in the name of religion. Nevertheless, we are grateful for the following studies that lay a

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foundation for the discussion of Dickens's religion in formal aspects. For instance, Dennis Walder's study *Dickens and Religion* (1981) puts Dickens in the historical moment and examines his dialogues with Anglicanism, Unitarianism, and the Broad Church. The very same year, Karen Ann Kennett Hathaway's dissertation placed Dickens in the context of "Evangelical, Sacramental, and Incarnational groups active in nineteenth-century religious life."<sup>2</sup> Following a deconstructive presumption, Janet Larson offers a reading of the Biblical allusions in Dickens's novels entitled *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (1986), in which she argues that most of Dickens's allusions to the Bible, if read carefully, are unstable and so create ambiguities. Larson questions the very idea of the "intention" of the author and doubts whether the "intention" can be really fulfilled by the text. These readings are informative but not satisfactory. When these commentators look for religion in his fiction, they tend to think more or less in traditional terms of what religion had been in the past and this, as I shall argue, is something Dickens explicitly rejects. Only a few studies deal with Dickens's religion in depth, and their astute observations greatly aided my own work. Linda Lewis's *Dickens, His Parables, and His Readers* (2011) studies Dickens's use of the parables from the angle of the reader's response. She argues: "Dickens collaborated with his 'dear reader' by means of biblical allusion and quotation, direct address to the *narratee*, anachronistic use of the grammar of the King James Bible, prophetic language of a Victorian sage, and especially by the employment of parable and allegory" (19). What is of suggestive value is the sense of "engagement" implied in her thesis: Dickens engages his reader through parables. Andrew Sanders in *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist* (1982) examines the trope of death and how it is

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<sup>2</sup>Dissertation Abstract. *Entering Into the Kingdom: Charles Dickens and the Search for Spiritual Regeneration*. Kennett Hathaway, Karen Ann. Rice University, 1981. 8116964.

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extensively employed in Dickens's works. It is a timely reminder of the darker side in Dickens's work and forces us to rethink the nature of his religion before we reduce it to "universal benevolence."

### **Where to Locate Religion in Dickens?**

In the majority of cases, religion certainly cannot be found in churches, nor are religious principles usually exemplified by clergymen. Religious institutions are often his target of criticism. For instance, when Mr. Meagles explains the etymology of the name Tattycoram, he says the "tatty" part is derived from the name "Harriet Beadle." As for the beadle – the title for a minor parish official – Mr. Meagles says: "If there is anything that is not to 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" (*Little Dorrit* 33). Another example is "Sunday under Three Heads" written in 1836, in which Dickens describes two kinds of church services and shows both of them inadequate. There is a "fashionable church," which obviously serves only the privileged class. The clergyman only pays attention to the "style" of his preaching without any regard to 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" (ch.1). A contrast to the "lax" atmosphere is to be found in "a less orthodox place of religious worship," with the clergyman tormenting his audience with a "drawling tone," "frantic gesture," invoking the eternal punishment to visit upon the sinners – much like the preacher in Jonathan Edwards's "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." The content of his preaching is about Sabbath, the strict observance of which, as Slater tells us, is for

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Dickens a “perversion of Christian teaching” (Slater 71). Reactions to Sabbatarianism like this episode can be found in other Dickens novels as well. For example, in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, Kit Nubbles’ mother, at his son’s suggestion of taking Jacob to some play sometimes, expresses her concern that attending a play on Sunday would be “sinful.” Kit, associating his mother’s concern with the teaching of Little Bethel,<sup>3</sup> answers his mother with Dickens’s own idea of Sabbath. He asks his mother: “Can you suppose there's any harm in looking as cheerful and being as cheerful as our poor circumstances will permit?” (231).

Dickens is not against the material church itself as a place for worship or edification. Whether a church can be the “right place” for “amen,” argues Natalie Bell Cole, depends on whether it is the place where “human goodwill and general practices of faith” can actually “make up in strong feeling what they lack in shallow form” (213). Although in his novels Dickens rarely portrays the church positively<sup>4</sup>, he does, in an essay “Gone Astray,” describe his “romantic” idea 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 service in the temple of their patron saint” (35). Religious practices have to be invested with meaning, otherwise they are empty forms. That is why we often find genuine, meaningful rituals taking place in a non-religious venue, while those performed in

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<sup>3</sup> According to Valentine Cunningham, “Little Bethel in *The Old Curiosity Shop* was reputedly based on a Baptist Chapel in Goodman’s Fields, Whitechapel” (Cunningham 197).

<sup>4</sup> An exception is the country church in *Oliver Twist*. The narrator thus describes it: “There was the little church in the morning, with the green leaves fluttering at the windows, the birds singing without: and the sweet-smelling air stealing in at the low porch, and filling the homely building with its fragrance. The poor people were so neat and clean, and knelt so reverently in prayer, that it seemed a pleasure, not a tedious duty, their assembling there together; and though the singing might be rude, it was real, and sounded more musical (to Oliver's ears at least) than any he had ever heard in church before. Then, there were the walks as usual, and many calls at the clean houses of the labouring men; and at night, Oliver read a chapter or two from the Bible, which he had been studying all the week, and in the performance of which duty he felt more proud and pleased, than if he had been the clergyman himself” (263).

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churches are often parodies. For instance, the marriage ceremony for Lizzie and Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend* is held at Eugene's bedside as he is recuperating from his injury. 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). Even though it is removed from a religious setting, this wedding ceremony unites Lizzie and Eugene into marriage as a sacred institute. In sharp contrast to this scene is the wedding ceremony of Edith and Paul Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, which heralds the disastrous marriage that follows. Though held at the church, it is permeated with the atmosphere of death. Around the church, it is "cold and dark"; dawn "moans and weeps", with the night still lingering "in the vaults below, and sits upon the coffins" (476). Unlike the blissful wedding of Eugene and Lizzie which is told in simple manner, the ill-boding ceremony of Dombey is even reported by the narrator quoting directly from the *Book of Common Prayer*: "So, from that day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do them part, they plight their troth to one another, and are married" (483). For those who believe that religious formality can guarantee the fulfillment of its meaning, they will only need to wait and see what happens in Paul and Edith's married life.

The baptism scene in *Dombey and Son* offers another case in point. By nature a blissful and joyous occasion, it is described in the most dismal terms, only foreshadowing the gradual decay of little Paul, who is doomed to die. It is held on an "iron-grey autumnal day", at the church "so chilly and earthy"; the whole company seems to be "in mourning," in keeping



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with “the strange, unusual, uncomfortable smell, and the cadaverous light.” (67-71) But it should be noted that it is not the spirit of regeneration embodied in baptism that Dickens repudiates. In fact, spiritual rebirth is one of his most important themes (Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens: Resurrectionist*), to which I will return in chapter four. What Dickens rejects is the form of baptism, which, if without its religious spirit, can become a “stereotype” or a “cliché.” The form is human invention, temporal, subject to time and place, while the spirit is permanent. John Cunningham rightly points out that in *Great Expectation*, the real baptism works as a metaphor: although the novel begins with a scene that suggests baptism, Pip and Magwitch are in fact “born into guilt and death.” It is only toward the end of the novel, when the two persons “plunge into the Thames,” that Dickens “transformed the corrupted figures of baptism into genuine ones” (Cunningham 35). Both the beginning and the end of *Great Expectations* in formal aspects may suggest baptism, but only the baptism at the end is real.

We are therefore faced with the question: where to locate the religious experience in Dickens’s works? To answer this question, I would like to single out a passage in his novel, a typical scene in which Dickens gives the reader a clue to his idea of religion. In book three, chapter nine of *Our Mutual Friend*, 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 answers that:

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

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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)

A typical Dickensian heroine - patient, loving, and responsible, Lizzie stays with her father when the latter's reputation is falsely blemished, sacrifices her own education to support her brother Charley, withstands the threats of Bradley Headstone, and finally is instrumental in Eugene Wrayburn's "rebirth." Riah is a generous, kind-hearted Jewish man who shelters Lizzie when she is in a dangerous position. In a sense, Lizzie and Riah are the most religious characters in the novel, and yet, as seen in the passage I quoted, they do not care so much about the difference between their particular religions, let alone the "conversion". 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 come back later in the study. Also ingenious in this passage is that it is Mrs. Milvey, the wife of a kind-hearted clergyman, who asks Lizzie about the "conversion", and later is relieved to know 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). While Dickens himself is a devout Christian, he is giving us here a deeply compassionate, devoted Jewish man misunderstood by a good Christian. This detail shows that Dickens's concern transcends the boundaries of sects: he is in a quest of the core and common bond of all true religions. As William Howitt detected 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,

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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 takes 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 the human beings accountable for their choices, and it points to a unique vision of religion, one that started with the German Romantics, especially Schlegel and Schleiermacher, and was further developed by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky. In this study I will call it an existential idea of religion. 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<sup>5</sup>. 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, psychological dimensions of our relationship to ourselves, to those around us, and to the universe. In contrast to the prominence given to “dogma” by John Henry Newman in his *Grammar of Assent*, Dickens’s faith is expressed in what I would call a “grammar of choice,” which emphasizes the need of conscious choice to act in the spirit of Christianity. Newman was not only the guardian of the apostolic tradition, but also felt the insufficiency of the *via media* in

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<sup>5</sup> “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).

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Anglicanism and finally converted to Catholicism. But even Newman felt that the only way he could answer Charles Kingsley's accusation is not by offering abstract arguments, but by writing his whole life into *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, itself an existential gesture.<sup>6</sup>

But "existential" is also a term appropriate and troublesome at the same time. It is troublesome because it may generate two objections: first, whether Dickens formally subscribes to such a philosophic position, and second, whether it is similar to the ideas of Sartre and Camus, with whom we usually associate existentialism. To the first objection, I will answer that Dickens perhaps never read Kierkegaard or the other philosophers; his novels are rarely intended as demonstrations of philosophy<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, as I will show, Dickens and the existential thinkers in some sense do talk to each other, across time and space. To the second objection, I will reply that Kierkegaard on the one hand, and Sartre and Camus on the other, represent two versions of existentialism, the former religious, the latter secular, and Dickens's novels reveal both dimensions, as I will show in chapter two.

The best example of this "existential" sense of religion, which illustrates the various dimensions of this term, occurs in *Bleak House* in the contrasting characters of Jo and Chadband. Jo, as Trevor Blount rightly sees, is a case study of juvenile delinquency prevalent in the 1850s in England. He is on the lowest level of social hierarchy, deprived of any education and upbringing, and even refused to be recognized as a human being who can serve as witness in a legal case. As Blount pungently argues, "extreme ignorance", a term Blount borrowed from a contemporary document, "is not really Jo's disgrace but that of the society that can countenance it" (Blount 329). However, Blount fails to read the symbolic meaning of

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<sup>6</sup> This extra dimension of Newman's "existentialism" was suggested by Felicia Bonaparte in an email on August 24, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Except for *Hard Times*, in which he ingeniously *misreads* utilitarianism.

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Dickens's description of Jo's illiteracy, for, even though Jo cannot read and can hardly speak proper English, he has a heart that can read other human hearts: when dismissed as an inadequate witness, he muttered " 'He wos wery good to me, he was!'" In this line, says the narrator, is "a distant ray of light", shining through the darkness that surrounds the novel.

What we have here is a paradox: Jo cannot read what is perfectly intelligible to most other people, yet he possesses a quality which connects him to other human beings, but this quality cannot be adequately rendered in human language. He is observed by the narrator to be "unfamiliar with the shapes, and in utter darkness as to the meaning, of those mysterious symbols.... To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not, to have the least idea of all that language – to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb!" (*BH*, 257). Undoubtedly there is an element of social criticism in this passage, that it is the society's fault to fail to teach Jo what he needs to know in order to survive. "Education," argues Blount, is part of the solution, "in beating back the frontiers of ignorance and providing young people with the means of earning a living" (Blount 332). But this is indeed *part* of the problem. Embedded here is Dickens's skepticism of human language itself, which can be opaque, ambiguous, easily distorted and misused to become the barrier, instead of the bridge, between social groups.

A revealing example of misusing the power of language is the character Chadband, the preacher in the novel who is supposed to take the responsibility to offer spiritual comfort and moral amelioration to the outcast, but who, by Dickens's ingenuity, is precisely the one who cannot perform this duty. His meaningless verbosity and circular arguments remind us of Mrs. Gamp in *Martin Chuzzlewit* and Mr. Micawber in *David Copperfield*, a type of character that

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shows 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 Blount acutely observes, he "degrades the missionary impulse to a verbal narcissism" (Blount 333). I would argue, however, that Dickens's criticism goes even further than that. In chapter 25, Jo is snatched from the street as a means to "affording a subject which Mr. Chadband desires to improve for the spiritual delight of a select congregation," and the topic Chadband selects is "Terewth" (truth). The reason Jo is a lost sheep, "devoid of flocks and herds", says Chadband, is that he is deprived of such "Terewth." 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 the society. A comparison of Chadband with Mr. Taylor, a preacher Dickens met in Boston and mentioned in *American Notes*, helps elucidate the point here. 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" (*American Notes* 107). In this sense Dickens is in the same tradition 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," and 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

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are the Soul and the Body” (*Pilgrim’s Progress* 63-65). 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 symbolises 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)

Mr. Chadband is also a nineteenth-century version of *Talkative*. The fact that Chadband is “attached to no particular denomination” is significant, because it makes Dickens’s criticism a more general one. That said, the emphasis in this scene in *Bleak House* is not only that Chadband is 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 being preached to. As we are told by the narrator that Jo feels himself to be “an unimprovable reprobate...for *he* won’t never know nothink”, Dickens here is probing into the gulf, the empty space between the privileged group and the social outcast. What prevents them from understanding each other is not any individual’s stupidity or hypocrisy, but rather their 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

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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)

Of course, in reality that Dickens portrays, “Jo never heard of such book” (*BH*, 415). Dickens himself, however, made the attempt to write such a book, one that records “deeds done on this earth for common men”, in *The Life of Our Lord (TLOL)*. Written in 1849 for his children and prohibited to be published in his lifetime, *TLOL* has only received some scanty attention from Dickens’s critics. The most recent biographies of Dickens by Slater and Tomalin barely touch on it at all. However, as Gary Colledge says in his meticulously argued study of this neglected work, although *The Life of Our Lord* is not a masterpiece in its own right, it nonetheless serves as an index to Dickens’s religious thinking (Colledge 2). Putting it against the mid-Victorian religious writings, Colledge painstakingly sifts through Dickens’s seemingly simple text, out of which emerges a somewhat complete picture of Dickens’s theology, which deals with the idea of God, Christology, death and punishment, and Providence. Colledge’s efforts which show stupendous erudition, however, are somehow beside the point that Dickens had in mind to intellectualize religious faith. He opens this little book by addressing his children: “My dear children, I am very anxious that you should know something about the History of Jesus Christ. For everybody ought to know about Him. No one ever lived, who was so good, so kind, so gentle, and so sorry for all people who did wrong, or were in anyway ill or miserable, as He was.” For Dickens, it is experiencing



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Jesus's love, not arguments about Jesus's status (deity or human), that is the core of religion. Not only does he conceive of religion existentially, the very means by which he imparts religion to his children is existential.

Colledge's study pinpoints Dickens's leaning toward religious existentialism, even though Colledge does not articulate it himself. According to Colledge, "Lives of Jesus" and "Harmonies" are the two principal modes of religious writing in the nineteenth century dealing with Jesus Christ, the former critical, questioning the historical truthfulness of the Gospels in the *New Testament*, the latter accepting the Gospels in their traditional sense. Colledge places *Life of Our Lord* in the company of the "Harmonies," together with other works of this kind by Henry Ware, Lucy Barton, etc. Even so, Dickens's work is still different in emphasis, according to Colledge, from those others, because writers like Barton and Ware:

compose their narratives by presenting the elements of a preconceived conceptual framework against the backdrop of the Jesus story to create a work that serves that conceptual framework. Dickens, on the other hand, attempts to replicate in *TLOL* as nearly as possible the story of Jesus, allowing only his selected episodes from the Gospels to shape and determine a portrait of Him.

(21-22)

We can see that even among "Harmonists," Dickens's emphasis is much more on the living experience rather than the "preconceived conceptual framework."

### **"Existential" Religion in Dickens's Time: Kierkegaard and Others**

It has become a truism that Dickens has a liberal idea of religion, which, for most critics

(House, Johnson, Ackroyd), is often considered vague, sentimental, and philanthropic. Few critics, however, have examined the existential dimension in his religion, a train of thought derived from the German Romantics and developed by Schleiermacher and Carlyle, as discussed above, and Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky as I will later argue. These ideas were assumptions of the time, which Dickens took up without having to read all the original works<sup>8</sup>. In *American Notes*, Dickens acknowledges the “healthful qualities” of Transcendentalists, and owns that “if I were a Bostonian, I would be a Transcendentalist” (*American Notes*, 107), a proof that Dickens may share the similar ideas with other thinkers without prior knowledge of their existence. When Dickens is put in an existential context, as I have been arguing, his attacks of institutions and theology cease being merely a negation. The living power of religion precedes and extends far beyond the scope of any intellectual and formal expressions of it. Dickens was actively emptying what he thought the extraneous and sometimes harmful part of religion by means of parody, distortion, and plain attack. He was religious precisely *because of* his negation of both theology and institution, not despite that.

All of these ideas were in the intellectual climate of his time. Their root, first and foremost, is historical. Christianity has to change to accommodate its time. Dickens’s sense of religion – and its analogues in Carlyle, Kierkegaard, Emerson – are ramifications of secularization in the west, as Matthew Arnold said of Christian religion in 1875, that “men cannot do without it...[but] they cannot do with it as it is” (Arnold 378).<sup>9</sup> As Asa Briggs

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<sup>8</sup> Géza Kállay explicitly associates Scrooge’s spiritual state with Kierkegaard’s work *Sickness unto Death*. Of the relation between these two writers, he says, “Dickens was Kierkegaard’s senior only by fifteen months, and though he outlived the Danish philosopher by fifteen years, the fact that they were contemporaries cannot but invite parallels.” He also mentions the works by J. Hillis Miller and Philip Weinstein in which this relation is established. Géza Kállay: ‘What Wilt Thou Do, Old Man?’-Being Sick unto Death: Scrooge, King Lear, and Kierkegaard.’ *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 9.2 (June 2011): p267-283.

<sup>9</sup> *Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*. Ed. R. H. Super. Vol. 7. University of Michigan, 1968.

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argues in *The Age of Improvement*, because of the consequences of the French Revolution, “it was necessary to emphasize the ‘vital’ rather than the ‘rational’ aspects of the Christian revelation” because “only moral standards, supported by ‘vital religion’, were guarantees of social order, national greatness, and individual salvation” (Briggs 172-3). Furthermore, from a philosophical point of view, Dickens’s time was post-Romantic, when the Romantic notion of religion was in the air. As Bernard Reardon argues: “Romantic religion [is] against both rationalism and orthodox dogma, with their common assumption of a duality of worlds, the natural and the supernatural, the here and the hereafter, the realm of humanity and the realm of God” (Reardon 4). The German Romantics, in particular, thought that people needed a new religion to rebuild the world. According to Felicia Bonaparte in *The Poetics of Poesis*, “the world needed to be remade and for that it was essential to find a new concept of religion as a new foundational principle” (*Poesis* ch.7). Recognizing the impact of empirical philosophy and the virtual death of God, Schlegel defines religion as “every relationship of man to the infinite.” Bonaparte then traces the embodiment of this view of religion in embedded genres, patterns, images, and names, to suggest how the nineteenth century expresses the urgency to find a new religion and how this religion is realized in fiction.

Dickens’s idea of religion in many ways resembles this German Romantic idea, as Bonaparte argues. My study, however, is to take the discussion a step further to show that there is a separate line of thought in perceiving religion, originating in but different in emphasis from the Romantics. To elucidate this I will enlist the help from thinkers like Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard and novelists such as Eliot and Dostoevsky. Each of these writers had a different background and perhaps wrote for diverse purposes, but also at some

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points in their creative life, each approaches religion as something whose “existence precedes essence,” in Sartre’s words. Dickens is in dialogue with them. The affinity between Dickens and these thinkers, of course, is a loose one, but Dickens does not have to have read these philosophers to possess this vision. As his contemporary Edward P. Whipple observed in 1849, Dickens was imbibing the thoughts of his time:

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... (Whipple 239)

#### The “Existential” Legacy of Carlyle

Dickens considered Thomas Carlyle his spiritual mentor, to whom he dedicated *Hard Times*, and claims, in a letter to Carlyle, that “it contains nothing in which you do not think with me, for no man knows your books better than I.”<sup>10</sup> That Dickens read *The French Revolution* (Slater 472-3; Goldberg 100-128) is a known 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 the English society with excessive “self-consciousness,” which belongs to “a diseased mixture and conflict of life and death,” while “unconsciousness belongs to pure unmixed life.” Carlyle traces this modern obsession with system and theory back to skeptical thinkers like David Hume who overthrew “reason” but failed to come up with a new foundation. We know from

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<sup>10</sup> Letter to Thomas Carlyle, 30 October 1859. *Letters*. Vol. IX. 145

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*Past and Present* that Carlyle's social vision points backward to the medieval world, but this essay gives us Carlyle the German Romantic who wants to go back to the ancient times, because the immediate and the transcendent were then at one with each other, achieving what Lukacs 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 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." 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

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subject, an intellectual sphere, for people to make speculations about.

In *Sartor Resartus* (1834), Carlyle's spiritual autobiography, Professor Teufelsdröckh's predicament in the "Everlasting No" is precisely caused by the separation of knowing *about* religion and being religious; he is described as "full of religion, or at least of religiosity," however, the narrator claims that "he is wholly irreligious" (124). As we are told, empirical inquiry, utilitarian philosophy, and Mammon-worship have chased the rational foundation of religious faith out of his mind, and Professor Teufelsdröckh, in consequence, becomes the prototype character who faces a seemingly meaningless universe; he is "void of life, of purpose, of volition." But being a Victorian and not a modern nihilist, Carlyle does not let Professor Teufelsdröckh wander in the wilderness too long before bringing him to the "purgatory": confronting the sheer experience of the world, Teufelsdröckh is rescued from the Utilitarian quagmire of viewing personal happiness as the highest end of life. The religious spirit, once lost, has to be restored by sympathetic human fellowship and the actual, visible work that men come together to do.

I bring Carlyle into the discussion not because he was an existentialist in any sense that this term is used in modern philosophy. But his ideas do have an existential element in that they challenge human intellect as a possible means by which to attain the "ideal." Instead, "ideal" should always be embodied in the "visible world," which, as Bernard Reardon nicely summarizes, "is the symbol of an invisible divine Power working its ends for the ultimate benefit of the human race" (Reardon 281). The "controversies," Carlyle argues, referring to the theological debates of his time, are irrelevant to personal faith, for they are human inventions and therefore "change...from time to time." The "clothes philosophy" in *Sartor*

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*Resartus* is employed to caution his reader about the “the dead Letter of Religion,” which must first “own itself dead, and drop piecemeal into dust, if the living Spirit of Religion, freed from this its charnel-house, is to arise on us, new-born of Heaven, and with new healing under its wings.” Inquiring what the “unalterable rules” are that govern the universe, Carlyle reminds us that they are not “works of Science,” nor can they be explained away by the “illusions and legerdemain-tricks of Custom.” These are the clothes, “the metaphor for all the varied, changing, wearing out, repaired, replaced, expendable, and provisional institutions of culture”, of which true religious spirit must be stripped off (apRoberts 111). Any system, be it scientific, moral, or philosophical, are only glimpses into the whole “mystery,” not the mystery itself.

Through the spiritual journey of an imagined character Carlyle announces the death of theological dogma. It is worth noting that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Deism also sought to do away with the theological dogmas and institutions, but their position was in fact contrary to that of the Romantics. Inculcated in an age which believed in the power of reason, the deists took the natural order of the universe as self-evident proof of God’s existence. According to Colin Jager, “the right of individual self-determination, combined with a Newtonian faith in the uniformity of Nature,” rendered unnecessary “the hierarchies and authorities that claimed to interpret God’s intervention or to represent him on earth” (44). Both antagonistic to the “clothes” of religion, the deists and the Romantics speak from different, almost opposite frames of mind, and for different purposes. The deists sought to demystify Nature, while the Romantics saw everything as mythical.

Yet Carlyle was not the first who compared religious institutions to “clothes”.

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Schleiermacher, when he envisions the ideal religious community, sees the potential danger of its being violated by political bodies, and says that “everything turns to stone as soon as it appears....the garment is of one piece with the body, and every unbecoming fold is fixed for eternity”(On Religion: 86). Before his vision finally rests on Christianity as the universal religion (in the fifth speech), his Romantic legacy allows him to roam in a territory that borders on pantheism. Defining religion as “the intuition of the infinite” (an echo of Friedrich Schlegel), Schleiermacher sees the human intuition and feeling as the real basis of creating a religious community. Any person who possesses this kind of spiritual faculty is a clergyman of some sort, “a priest to the extent that he draws others to himself in the field that he has specially made his own.”

Schleiermacher’s view of the “clergyman” actually brings us back to “Vita Apostolica,” a religious reform that aims to revivify the original spirit of Christianity. The three basic principles contained in the idea “Vita Apostolica” are, according to Ernst McDonnell: “imitation of the primitive church,” “a passionate love for souls at home and far afield,” and, finally, “evangelical poverty in common” (15). If all the “official” clergymen in Dickens’s works are found derelict (with the exception of the Milveys in *Our Mutual Friend*), we should perhaps follow the spirit of *Vita Apostolica* in order to locate the religious experience, to look for the reenactment of Christ in laymen. Being a layman himself, as 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). The earliest example we can find is Captain Cuttle in *Dombey and Son*, who, assuming Walter Gay dead in the ocean, performs



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the duty of a clergyman, not by observing the rituals, but by releasing his heart-felt sorrow. Opening the prayer-book and reading “softly to himself,” the Captain “in a true and simple spirit, committed Walter’s body to the deep” (513). Another example is Mr. Peggotty in *David Copperfield*. In his unswerving determination to go “anywhere” to find and bring back little Emily who has gone astray (460), he is reenacting the parable of the lost sheep, in which Jesus said to his disciples: “it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish” (Matt. 18.14).<sup>11</sup> Another character in the spirit of the “Vita Apostolica” would be Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*. 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” in chapter 30 of *Bleak House* 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), then, would give us a clue to Dickens’s idea of a “clergymen.”

Schleiermacher is pertinent to my argument because he points out that the sole reliance on human intelligence and conformity is inimical to the expression of true religious sentiment. “System of theology”, according to him, is not capable of moving “the mind in a peculiar manner, mingling or rather removing all functions of the human soul and resolving all activity in an astonishing intuition of the infinite”(On Religion 13). What gives this early Schleiermacher text a distinctly existential stance is his refusal to subject human religious experience to either systematic configuration or political regulations, which not only hampers

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<sup>11</sup> I will return to the discussion of Mr. Peggotty more extensively in chapter II.

the individual's ability of imagining the "absolute," but also is contagious to the whole religious community. The consequence is that "their communal action has nothing of the character of high and free enthusiasm that is thoroughly proper to religion, but instead is a juvenile, mechanical thing" (*On Religion*: 81)

In England, George Eliot, a novelist whose early works Dickens admired, happens to offer a footnote to Schleiermacher's idea of unhealthy religious community in "Janet's Repentance" in *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Typified in the Milby lawyer Robert Dempster, the community pronounces the new curate Mr. Tryan's evangelical preaching "demoralizing", "hypocritical," and Mr. Tryan an "insolvent atheist" and "deistical prater", before it actually knows either the man or his teaching (chapter I). People's minds are stuffed with prejudices so that "the town was divided into two zealous parties, the Tryanites and anti-Tryanites." However, although obsessed with the difference between sects, the religious atmosphere is "lax", the moral standard "not inconveniently high": the curate Mr. Crewe "was allowed to enjoy his avarice in comfort...having scraped together a large fortune out of his school and curacy." Observance of Sabbath for the young men becomes "displays of costume", accompanied by "considerable levity of behavior during the prayers and sermon" (chapter II). Distinguishing the form of religion from its spirit, Eliot is making a statement that these two do not always correspond to each other. As David Carroll observes that "the Milby church...has degenerated into vested interest and empty forms." (Carroll 337<sup>12</sup>)

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<sup>12</sup> David Corral in his essay " 'Janet's Repentance': the Myth of the Organic" examines the metaphor of "the organic" as a trope in Eliot's work – "an organic unity and its stability based upon the tension of opposites." He claims that the breaking of this unity will victimize the individuals as well as the community. I will add that religious faith and religious forms are not strictly "opposites"; in fact they largely overlap. But they are not identical either. The space that the forms cannot cover is Eliot's focus.

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The Milby people, one of whom is Janet, are locked in a “prison.”<sup>13</sup> (ch. 21) By nature kind-hearted, always ready to do charity work, Janet is prejudiced against Mr. Tryan, simply because he preaches Evangelicalism. The novella records the process in which Janet frees herself from this suffocating mentality. And the key is love, which, as Barry Qualls rightly puts, “begins in the recognition that (Christ’s) suffering connects us to our fellow human beings in communion” (127). Love – “not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty” – is understood as sympathy in *Janet’s Repentance*, which obliterates the boundaries of sects and transcends the limitations set by theoretical speculations. It is with this sympathetic understanding that Mr. Jerome very early becomes a Dissenter, on the basis of “goodwill, veneration, and condolence.” It is important that his choice is not due to “any clear and precise doctrinal discrimination,” considering that he “knew nothing of this theoretic basis of Dissent.” Such an attitude, reminiscent of what Carlyle calls “healthy religion,” is rare now, as we are told sadly by the narrator, when “opinion has got far ahead of feeling” (ch.8).

In *Janet’s Repentance*, Eliot seems to imply that religion is larger than what theories can accommodate, a quasi-existential position on religion that recalls Carlyle and Schleiermacher. Deeply versed in Biblical interpretation and church history herself, George Eliot knows that the essential element in faith is love, without which the knowledge would be extraneous: “our subtlest analysis of schools and sects must miss the essential truth, unless it be lit up by the love that sees in all forms of human thought and works, the life and death struggles of separate human beings.” But this is a lesson kept withheld from the characters until they

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<sup>13</sup> I will come back to the theme of “prison” in the conclusion where I will analyze *Dombey and Son*, *Bleak House*, and especially *Little Dorrit*.

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confront life and experience sorrow, a Wordsworthian theme that suffering is therapeutic.

Acknowledging that Evangelicalism has done much to ameliorate the moral standard of Milby people, Eliot is not celebrating Evangelicalism in its own right<sup>14</sup>: the narrator maintains that “the movement” itself is a “mixture of folly and evil.” At least Eliot is not implying that Evangelicalism as a set of intellectual doctrines is the guarantee of faith. What finally redeems Janet is not the indoctrination, but her personal interpretation of Evangelicalism. Faith in this sense is highly individual. The message of love can be shared, but Janet has to be brought, through her suffering, face to face with God, to experience this love. It is the same with Mr. Tryan. The narrator tells us that when he is young, he also “made the mistake of identifying Christianity with a too narrow doctrinal system.” When he is trying to comfort Janet, it is not his preaching of doctrines, but his confession, the sharing of his own experience, that brings him and Janet close. If Eliot wants to impart some wisdom of Evangelicalism to the reader, she does so through the life experiences of Janet and Tryan. Similar in its emphasis on experience rather than on abstract analysis is Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. Scrooge regains spiritual rebirth not through Marley’s teaching, but through the three visions in which he fully participates in the religious experiences.

The voice from the new continent that attacked Christianity in its old form is Ralph Waldo Emerson and his critique of the “historical Christianity.” In *American Notes* Dickens records his initial impression of the Transcendentalists that “whatever was unintelligible would be certainly transcendental,” but soon Dickens gives the Transcendentalists their due respect by acknowledging “there is much more that is true and manly, honest and bold”

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<sup>14</sup> This is despite her own Evangelical background. See Barry Qualls: “George Eliot and Religion.”

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(*American Notes* 107). The main advocate in this movement, as we know, is Emerson, who in 1838 wrote a speech addressed to the Harvard Divinity School. In this speech Emerson deplores the current condition of Christian faith: it is no longer an “intuition,” but has degraded into a collection of institutions. If there is any “doctrine” to follow, Emerson reminds us, it should be “doctrine of the soul,” not “the base doctrine of the majority of voice” (*Address* 72). Invoking Wordsworth’s line from the sonnet “The World is too much with us,” Emerson argues that it is even better to be a “pagan” who “suckled in a creed outworn,” – in other words, a downright unbeliever – than one who acts in an anti-Christian way but in the name of Christ. Isn’t this, in a way, anticipating Kierkegaard’s notion ten years later in *Postscript* that it is far better to pray truly, passionately, and ardently to the “false god,” than to pray falsely to the true god (*CUP* 212)?

#### Dickens and Dostoevsky

Dostoevsky, a great admirer of Dickens’s works<sup>15</sup>, also participated in the discussion of this “existential” sense of religion. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky creates three brothers – Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha – to demonstrate how the nineteenth-century responded to Christianity. The religious message conveyed in the novel is not unlike Carlyle’s or Dickens’s, namely that Christian faith can survive the collapse of theology and corruption of institution. The clash between the religious faith and the dogmas, between “spirit” and “letter,” is something every believer has to face, including the holiest of the brothers, Alyosha. When his mentor Father Zosima dies, he notices, quite to his astonishment, that the body of the deceased starts to decay, contrary to the tradition that “no signs of corruption” can be

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<sup>15</sup> Although biographers of Dickens mentioned their meeting, Dickens and Dostoevsky never met (Slater 502; Tomalin 321-2) Both Slater’s and Tomalin’s source were later discovered to be a case of academic hoax. See Eric Naiman, “When Dickens met Dostoevsky.”

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detected in the bodies of those who devote themselves to God. The consequence of this “odor of corruption,” we are told, is profound, that “by three o’clock those signs had become so clear and unmistakable, that the news swiftly reached all the monks and visitors in the hermitage, promptly penetrated to the monastery, throwing all the monks into amazement, and finally...spread to the town, exciting everyone in it, believers, and unbelievers alike” (*Karamazov* 309). This episode is critical because in a snapshot it crystallizes the historical moment in which the Christian faith is being challenged in the presence (or absence) of material proofs. Alyosha’s question “why did Providence hide its face ‘at the most critical moment’...as though voluntarily submitting to the blind, dumb, pitiless laws of nature” (319) is also the question of the century, the question that preoccupies Carlyle, Dickens, and George Eliot. But, as Father Paissy reminds Alyosha, “ ‘the science of this world...only analyzed the parts and overlooked the whole....Yet the whole still stands steadfast before their eyes, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it...A moving power in the individual soul and in the masses of people...is still as strong and living even in the souls of atheists, who have destroyed everything’ ” (156).

Father Zosima’s premature decay forces Alyosha to rethink the core of religious faith. What is the essence of being a Christian? It is certainly not in conforming to traditions and abiding by doctrines. To be a Christian is not to be confined by these imprisoning forces, but to be acting in the spirit of Christ in daily life. Mochulsky is certainly correct when he points out the reason that Father Zosima, before he dies, urges Alyosha to leave the monastery, is that “in Alyosha’s image a new type of Christian spirituality is projected – *a monk serving in the world*: he passes through the monastic asceticism, but does not remain in the monastery”

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(Mochulsky 790). The religious task for Alyosha, therefore, is precisely the task assigned by Kierkegaard, who claims emphatically that it is far from enough to be religious only on Sundays in the church.<sup>16</sup> The task for any individual who wants to be religious, says Kierkegaard, is to “transform his entire existence in relation thereto, and this transformation is a process of dying away from the immediate,” realizing that “the absolute conception of God does not consist in having such a conception en passant, but consists in having the absolute conception at every moment” (*CUP* 240).

It is against this larger background that Alyosha evaluates Ivan’s assertion that “I am not rebelling against my God; I simply don’t accept His world” (319). Ivan represents the other extreme, the rational being who approaches religion philosophically. Although he makes a passionate argument on the relationship between church and state, he is an avowed atheist. In his cool, detached analysis of Christianity he has gone far from the original spirit of Christ, perhaps even farther than his violent brother Dmitri. Part of his inner world is revealed by the Grand Inquisitor, a character he creates, who rationalizes the impossibility of “free will,” and thereby denies the legitimacy of Christ, to whom he says, “for the sake of that earthly bread the spirit of the earth will rise up against Thee and will strive with Thee and overcome Thee” (233). This is the voice of the Enlightenment, and of its offspring: utilitarianism. By promising to grant people “the quiet humble happiness,” the Grand Inquisitor forestalls the promised Second Coming of Christ. He further declares: “if anyone has deserved our fires, it is Thou. Tomorrow I shall burn thee” (241). By creating the Grand Inquisitor, Ivan is venting

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<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Dickens also emphasizes the inadequacy of Arthur Clennam’s Calvinistic upbringing during his childhood, which is associated with “Sundays” that are “dreary,” “sleepy,” and “resentful.” The narrator says: “There was a legion of Sundays, all days of unserviceable bitterness and mortification, slowly passing before him” (*Little Dorrit* 44-5). It should be noted that the religious atmosphere of Sundays which Dickens describes, however, is almost the opposite to what Kierkegaard deems a true religious spirit.

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part of his unconsciousness. Ivan realizes the insufficiency of rationalizing only after he hears the voice of the “devil” in his nightmare. The devil points out that “nothing but hosanna is not enough for life, the hosanna must be tried in the crucible of doubt and so on.” Although banished by God from heaven, the devil vindicates his position by claiming that the presence of “evil,” the only singular voice not singing “hosannah,” is necessary because it reminds people that their lives are real – in other words, they exist. Because of his intervention, says the devil, people “suffer, of course...but then they live, they live a real life, not a fantastic one, for suffering is life” (609).

Perhaps not any single brother’s voice is the author’s own<sup>17</sup>; Dostoevsky’s own view of religion is the synthesis of the three distinct voices. His idea, like Kierkegaard’s, is also “existential.” To cling to the traditions and dogmas on the one hand, or to rationalize Christianity on the other hand, are both dead ends to genuine religious faith. This is why Dostoevsky creates Dmitri, who represents the vital force of nature and finds himself under control of the absurdities of nature. The moment in which he is assured of Grushenka’s love and when he possesses the means to make her happy, is also the moment he realizes that he has committed a murder and will probably lose everything, as the narrator tells us, “now he had everything to make life happy...but he could not go on living, he could not” (413). But the meaning of life, Dmitri later reflects, is not in the enjoyment, but in the suffering, because, as he tells Alyosha, he “could stand anything, any suffering, only to be able to say and to repeat to [himself] every moment, ‘I exist’” (561).

So far we have singled out several instances that respond to the crisis of faith, and as

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<sup>17</sup> I cannot agree with D. H. Lawrence’s assertion that “the Inquisitor speaks Dostoevsky’s own final opinion about Jesus” (Lawrence 830), and the reason is offered in my discussion above.



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argued above, their reactions are “existential” in that they all emphasize the human experience of religion rather than rationalizing Christianity. But any discussion of this “existential” sense is bound to be incomplete without probing to its root, and that root is Kierkegaard. To bring Kierkegaard into discussions of Dickens would seem, at first, far-fetched. However, in the context of religious existentialism he was not unlike Schleiermacher or Carlyle, and, as ultimately I hope to prove, not unlike Dickens, in demonstrating that the existence of religion transcends perhaps all the intellectual and formal expressions of it, emptied of which, the concern of religion turns from “God” to “God-relationship”, that is, men’s relation to God. I do not attempt to prove or argue that Kierkegaard had any direct influence whatsoever upon Dickens’s thoughts and writings. One is deeply versed in the philosophical tradition, long contemplative of getting ordained by the Church; the other never has formal education, reticent on profound philosophical questions, and writes only novels. Yet a careful reading of their works brings them closer than ever.

Both Kierkegaard and Dickens are deeply religious, attending Church most of their lives, yet both are ferocious attackers of the religions institutions. By dint of their distrust of any attempt to intellectualize or formalize religion, both turn their attention from the object to the subject of faith: human existence, the fundamental concept for both Kierkegaard and Dickens. Since faith is not objective but subjective, the ultimate responsibility of making choices rests on human beings. That is why I would examine the “grammar of choice” through which Dickens’s idea of religion is expressed. But Dickens’s idea of choice can be understood only from the point of view of “existence,” an idea which Kierkegaard brought to the attention of the modern mind.

Individual existence is the epistemological foundation for Kierkegaard. Although critics have questioned whether Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel does justice to Hegel's thoughts (Pattison; Stewart), it is generally agreed that Kierkegaard finds the Hegelian philosophy unsatisfactory in answering the basic question of human beings: religious faith. If we follow Gardiner's argument that Kierkegaard, in criticizing Hegelian philosophers, "considered that they had succumbed to an impersonal and anonymous mode of consciousness which precluded spontaneous feeling and was devoid of a secure sense of self-identity," and, as a result, "living had become a matter of knowing rather than doing" (Gardiner 34-5), then, Kierkegaard's and Carlyle's critique, though one of Hegelian idealism and the other of skeptical philosophy, can be taken as reverberations of the century's call for both a departure from "abstraction" and a deeper engagement of human experience.

Kierkegaard calls into question the efforts of the 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. But in Kierkegaard's view, this kind of system can be constructed, but can only be 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 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

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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. (*CUP* 120)

It is *comical*, Kierkegaard says, because, in the attempt to achieve human knowledge, to forget the human condition is like a dancer trying to fly.

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 dismal, 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, but are, as Pattison nicely points out, “entirely permeated by temporality or becoming, and yet also sensing that, in their humanity, they have a claim to be acknowledged as persons, as free, spiritual beings who are not reducible to a mere chain of temporally conditioned causes” (Pattison 40).

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It is from this epistemological angle that Kierkegaard criticizes the propensity to rely heavily both on historical investigations of Christianity, which he thinks achieve at best “approximation,” and on the “speculative” work of philosophy, to each of which Kierkegaard devotes a chapter respectively in part I of *Postscript*. “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” (*CUP* 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. In a certain sense, Kierkegaard cracks open the much-debated issue of reason and faith, which had been treated by Kant and Hegel, but Kierkegaard gives it a distinctly existential sense: “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” (*CUP* 43).

It is misleading to understand Kierkegaard’s critique of doctrinal or institutional religion as his suggestions of a shortcut to faith, a route that circumvents “intimate knowledge of antiquity, obtained by indefatigable diligence” (*CUP* 26). In fact, by distinguishing religious faith from almost all other kinds of human faculties, Kierkegaard was showing the unique yet insurmountable difficulty to attain religious faith. He confesses that, “moved by a genuine

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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, the priests, or the doctrines. Picking up the theme of the “crowd” and the “individual” 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” (“The Present Age” 245).

It is true that religion as subjectivity operates in the most ineffable, impenetrable part of human psyche, and in terms of existentialism, 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 to break 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).

It needs to be emphasized that this turn from “God” to “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.”

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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 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, where "detachment" is definitely a preoccupation, but without ambiguity. It is the very thing the Existentialists wanted to do away with.

The corollary of the move from "God" to "God-relationship" is the exaltation of the existing individual who confronts the concrete life and makes choices. The individual's life illustrates what I will call "a grammar of choice," displaying all its dilemmas and intricacies. As I will argue later, not all individuals have the same capacity for making choices which can realize the "God-idea": some make the opposite choices; some are not capable of making *any*

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choices at all. For those who can, their life *is* the enactment of religion, rather than what we take for granted as a quest *for* religion, as if religion is an objective entity. By tracing the inner experience of Abraham, the “knight of faith,” Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* demonstrates that even ethics, a category I mentioned earlier which people tend to confuse with religion, is unable “to comprehend the phenomenon of faith” (Gardiner 55).

Kierkegaard’s Abraham epitomizes human belief in all its essential qualities. A true “knight of faith,” as Kierkegaard calls him, must be lonely. The function of religion may be social, but the nature of faith must be personal, *asocial*. Reminding the audience that “a dozen sectarians link arms, they know nothing at all of the lonely temptations in store for the knight of faith” (*Fear and Trembling* 107), Kierkegaard here echoes the Romantic distrust of both intellect and institution. More specifically, God’s command that Abraham sacrifice Isaac puts him in a dilemma between the world of ethics and the world of religion, the former forbids killing one’s own son while the latter *in this instance* demands it as a sacrifice. The conflict between the two is intended by God to test Abraham: in order to manifest his faith Abraham has to choose the path that is condemned by universal values. Comparing Abraham with Agamemnon whose sacrifice of Iphigenia is predicated on his concern for the fate of Greece, Kierkegaard maintains that a knight of faith is different from a tragic hero precisely because faith requires the individual to be in direct confrontation with God, even if what it entails is at war with all other considerations, domestic, social, or even ethical. What this episode means for our purpose is that in this existential conception of religion, the individual is always placed at the center, taking full responsibility of his choice, as Kierkegaard explains: “Faith is just this paradox, that the single individual as the particular is higher than the universal, is

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justified before the latter, not as subordinate but superior” (*Fear and Trembling*, 84).

Moreover, Kierkegaard stresses the absurdity of Abraham’s “right” choice, for the loving, protective fatherly God is precisely the one that enjoins the immoral, filicidal act. It is true that in most cases the religious choice is often not at odds with the social and moral choice, as I’ll show in many examples from Dickens’s novels; however, the dissonance in Abraham’s case is a reminder for modern reader that under the surface of social, economic, and moral meaning, there might be a larger, religious undercurrent.

In conclusion, I am arguing that, like these contemporaries of his, Dickens is responding to the crisis of faith in his own way – with the instincts not of a philosopher but of a novelist. He depicts the human frailties and sins that are closely related to modern, industrialized English society, especially London and Manchester. He sees the ills of political, religious, and social institutions as agents of evil, as he figures them in the more allegorical aspects of his fiction, that entice human beings from their right paths. Dickens is not satisfied with the notion that man is imprisoned in the Utilitarianism’s oversimplified version of the harsh, bleak world of Newton, a world where only the pursuit of happiness matters. His Romantic impulse leads him to imagine men as free beings, capable of salvaging the world. His attention rests on the individual. It is in the constant making of moral choices that men become free beings. It is within this larger existential frame of thought that Dickens’s argument about choice takes on a religious meaning. But the capacity of making a choice at all must be discussed before going into details of all other aspects of “choice.” In chapter 2 I will analyze the spiritual conditions of James Steerforth and Sydney Carton, for whom the power to choose is debilitated by a numbing *despair*. The journey through despair to



affirmation is the essential theme in a *Bildungsroman* like *David Copperfield*. The next chapter will show that Dickens is not only in dialogue (whether consciously or unconsciously) with the Romantic and religious thinkers, but his fiction is also looking ahead to twentieth-century existentialists, to diagnose the modern predicament.

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## Chapter II: Voices “from the Underground”: The Inability to Choose

I am a sick man...I'm a spiteful man. I'm an unattractive man....I'm not absolutely certain which part of me is sick.

Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

The self ... is not satisfied till it has found itself, till content be adequate to form, and that content be realized; and this is what we mean by practical self-realization.

F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*

### The Existential Situation

In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett argues that the human encounter with “nothingness” renders us “homeless.”<sup>18</sup> Modernity is a project of secularization - in which man gradually gains power over nature - a project that so far has been realized. But at the same time, the modern man “found himself for the first time homeless. ... With the loss of this containing framework man became not only a dispossessed but a fragmentary being.” (35) This is the modern predicament of human beings, a problem that existentialism directly addresses, which Kierkegaard deals with especially in *The Sickness unto Death* and *The Concept of Anxiety*, which Dostoevsky personifies in a man “from underground,” and which Dickens, as I shall argue, identifies as anxiety, dissipation, listlessness, and irresolution. Dickens’s existential religion in part confronts this condition, a malaise that impedes or impairs our ability to make choices, the key to “being religious” for Dickens. I maintain that this inability to choose has been a persistent concern for Dickens. Of course characters make all kinds of mundane choices in their everyday life, but by “choice” I mean deliberate and significant ones, those

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, Georg Lukacs identifies “transcendental homelessness” as the fundamental reason why the novel has to be the genre of the modern society. See especially chapter 3 in his *Theory of the Novel*.

which people make to choose who they will be. Aristotle believes such “choices” constitute the very idea of character (*Poetics*, VI). To illustrate this point I will analyze two examples by Dickens: the first one centers around James Steerforth in *David Copperfield*, the second, Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I will also discuss in passing Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*, Arthur Clennam and Henry Gowan in *Little Dorrit*, and Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*.<sup>19</sup>

This concern is by no means unique to the nineteenth century. Hamlet perhaps offers an archetype of a modern man caught in an existential moment. His revenge is meant to be a metaphor, synonymous with all kinds of real choices that make life meaningful. Not only is the world to him “weary, stale, flat, unprofitable” (1.2), he also calls his own identity into question, calling himself a “dull and muddy-mettled rascal” and a “coward” (2.2). When he responds to the “murder” revealed by his father’s ghost by saying “with wings as swift / As meditation or the thoughts of love / May sweep to my revenge” (1.4), we expect him to take the action, but when we hear his reasoning of sparing Claudius that “A villain kills my father; and for that, / I, his sole son, do this same villain send / To heaven. / O, this is hire and salary, not revenge” (3.3), we already know Hamlet’s tragedy lies in his inability to meet the demand of the moral order to make choices. Ironically, however, as James Baker puts it, Hamlet is “doomed to responsibility of choice as long as he draws breath.” I agree with Baker’s argument that Shakespeare in this play anticipates Existentialism: “if we find him with a sense of human absurdity, with a sense of alienation, a sense of being a stranger, then we

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<sup>19</sup> The “restless young man” as a type of character was suggested to me by Felicia Bonaparte, in her class on the Victorian Fiction, in 2009 at CUNY. Also, Jerome Buckley, in discussing the “pattern of conversion” in Victorian literature, talks about individuals’ “milder frustration in their pursuit of ‘self-culture.’” He argues that “the so-called age of individualism was remarkably conscious of the individual’s limitations.” He also mentions the relevance of Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness unto Death*, a work which, according to Buckley, examines “despair,” which “meant the refusal to realize the true self by devotion to the Eternal.” See Buckley *The Victorian Temper*, pp 91-2.

should have to agree that *Hamlet* does have an existentialist theme” (34). It does not mean, however, that for Shakespeare or Hamlet, the world itself has become meaningless or absurd, as it does for Sartre or Camus, because in Shakespeare the moral order still exists: the ghost of his father still demands revenge, and Fortinbras is still bent on actions to avenge his own father. Rather, *Hamlet* is existential in that Shakespeare places the entire responsibility of choice upon an individual, who cannot decipher the meaning of the world.

In *The Sickness unto Death* Kierkegaard defines and specifies different kinds of despair<sup>20</sup>. Using the biblical story of Lazarus upon whose ailment Jesus says “this sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God” (John 11), Kierkegaard points out that Lazarus’s is not a deadly sickness because Jesus exists, and that Lazarus believes in Jesus. This specific context in which men can rely with certainty on belief, according to Kierkegaard, is no longer available for the modern time. Deprived of this totality, each human being has become a “synthesis” of infinite and the finite, temporal and eternal, freedom and eternity. The spiritual condition of modernity is precisely the continuous striving of the self to reach the infinite and eternal and the failure thereof is the “sickness unto death.” He further diagnoses that this sickness is an extremely ubiquitous spiritual condition, far too common to be noticeable in daily lives. Ironically, this condition cannot be canceled by physical death, for “the torment of despair is precisely the inability to die” (47). People who lead an apparently enviable worldly life are quite likely to be in despair. “Despair” can take many forms: people who are devoted to the “abstract” or “fantastic” forget that their life is concrete –he is in despair because he “loses himself more and more” (61); people who immerse themselves entirely in

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<sup>20</sup> I am using the English translation by Alastair Hannay. “Despair” in his edition is the English counterpart of the Danish word *Fortvivlelse*. I will be quoting examples of this word used by English writers, when they are closest to what Kierkegaard means.

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worldly affairs forget that in their “self” there is a spiritual dimension, a “divine sense,” and their despair makes it “much easier and safer to be like the others, to become a copy, a number, along with the crowd” (63).

What distinguishes human beings from animals, according to Kierkegaard, is precisely the *consciousness* of being in despair, of which he further divides into two kinds. For some, despair comes from outside, something “earthly,” while “of the loss [of the eternal] he says nothing, he doesn’t dream of it” (82). When we encounter the word “despair,” this is the sense in which it is almost invariably used – simply “losing hope. Fagin in the end of *Oliver Twist*, for example, when incarcerated gives up hope for life, when “other watchers are glad to hear this church-clock strike, for they tell of life and coming day. To him they brought *despair*” (Ch.52). A more typical example is Robinson Crusoe’s “Island of Despair,” when Crusoe realizes the “dismal circumstances” he is facing (Ch.5). Kierkegaard’s emphasis, however, is on a higher level of despair, the “loss of the eternal and of oneself” (93).

Human beings suffer because of our consciousness, according to Kierkegaard, just as we have anxiety (*Angst*) when we realize the boundless freedom we have. In *The Concept of Anxiety*, Kierkegaard compares anxiety to “dizziness,” a sensation we feel when we look down from a cliff, knowing that the possibility to fall depends on our own decision, and that we have the freedom to choose to jump (61). He claims that even in prelapsarian state, as in the case of Adam, anxiety existed and functioned as a precondition to sin. Kierkegaard examines these two conditions – despair and anxiety – because they prevent the individual from making choices, the ultimate thing to do to become “religious.” To be aware of the spiritual, the eternal, yet unable to face it, is precisely the modern predicament.

But for a devout Protestant like Kierkegaard, both anxiety and despair can be sublimated to religious faith. To be anxious, he says, “is an adventure that every human must go through...in order that he may not perish either by never having been in anxiety or by succumbing to anxiety” (CA 155). To be in despair, then, is sinful – “the opposite to being in despair is to have faith,” says Kierkegaard, but it is actually also “the first requirement of faith” (72; 110). It is the self’s denial of its own dimension of spirit and its unwillingness to stand before God. In this light, both the “aesthetic” way of life that he describes in *Either/Or*<sup>21</sup> and those who are intoxicated by the “idea” of God but are not committed to it are in despair. The “despairer” in this context is already different from those who are not conscious of the spirit in the self – the former is much closer to salvation, says Kierkegaard. The antidote to despair (in its most profound sense) is Christianity, and he even claims that those who lived before the Christian era or outside Christian influence are all in despair. Nevertheless, that is not to say that to be in Christianity is a guarantee of deliverance. From *Fear and Trembling to Attack upon Christendom* Kierkegaard never ceases examining the true meaning of “faith.” Just as in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* where he says his mission is to make things more difficult rather than easier, in *Sickness unto Death* he against wages war against Christian institutions, pointing out that there is also paganism in Christianity, a paganism of a worse kind than that in general, because “although paganism lacks spirit, it is pointed in the direction of spirit, while paganism in Christendom lacks spirit in the opposite direction ...and is therefore in the strictest sense spiritlessness” (77).

Interestingly, the monologue delivered by the narrator of part I of Dostoevsky’s *Notes*

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21 A typical example is Don Juan in the section “The Immediate Erotic Stages or the Musical Erotic” in which Kierkegaard analyzes Mozart’s Don Giovanni and sees Don Giovanni as the ultimate incarnation of sensual desire, who “simply doesn’t come within ethical categories.” (See *Either / Or*; page 104).

*from the Underground* could well have been written by Kierkegaard. Just like Kierkegaard who takes issue with the Hegelian philosophy, Dostoevsky in this story also questions the basic assumption that man only acts for his own advantage.<sup>22</sup> Like Kierkegaard, he doubts whether “system” can solve all human problems: “all these attractive systems – all these theories explaining man’s real, normal interests by saying that in striving to achieve them he inevitably at once becomes good and honourable – are in my opinion, for the time being, nothing but sophistry!”<sup>23</sup> (24). Kierkegaard’s idea of objectivity and subjectivity is translated into “reason” and “desire” here: the former “only satisfies man’s rational faculties,” while the latter “is a manifestation of the whole of life” (28-9). The narrator thinks that the modern mindset is epitomized in the creation of the Crystal Palace, a symbol of human complacency in its boundless trust in scientific knowledge. The narrator, then, is struggling between the rational world and the human world, and the consequence, we are told, is “inertia”: he becomes a self-loathing, self-deprecating and even self-destroying person: he would rather remain a nonentity, a man “from the underground.”<sup>24</sup> He can fully identify with Hamlet’s failure to take the revenge because the despair which Hamlet experiences is precisely his own despair: he is blessed with too much “consciousness” to act upon it. He’d rather be a “spontaneous” man, whom he regards as “the real, normal person, such as tender mother nature herself wanted to see as she lovingly planted him on earth” (13). In reality, however, he is too far away from the spirit of the earth. He is forced to relinquish his volition, as he tells his reader: “all out of boredom, gentlemen, all out of boredom; crushed by inertia. You

<sup>22</sup>Malcolm Jones specifies this influence as “the New Enlightenment,” represented by N. G. Chernyshevsky. See Jones (xi).

<sup>23</sup> All quotations from this work are taken from the translation of Jane Kentish in the Oxford World Classics series.

<sup>24</sup> Jones thus summarizes the narrator’s situation: he “experiences an oppressive sense of impotence and frustration in his dealings with other and encounters a philosophy which implies that everything is predetermined and any attempt to alter things by imposing one’s will is foredoomed” (Jones xii).

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see the direct, legitimate, spontaneous result of consciousness is inertia” (19). It is perhaps a coincidence that this was written in mid 1860s, after Dickens had written most of his works, but such a statement about “inertia” could well have been made by Steerforth, Arthur Clennam, Sydney Carton, and Eugene Wrayburn, as I will show later.

In the following section I will prove that like Kierkegaard, Dickens deals with “despair” in relation to man’s spiritual dimension, the absence of which paralyzes man’s ability to choose. But in Dickens we already sense the dawn of a bleaker world where deliverance from despair is not promised by any religious belief, a world already hinted at by Dostoevsky but more fully envisioned by Albert Camus and other twentieth-century existentialists. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus distinguishes himself from religious existentialists, whose religious solutions, for Camus, “suggest escape” from this absurd universe: “Through an odd reasoning, starting out from the absurd over the ruins of reason, in a closed universe limited to the human, they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them” (*The Myth of Sisyphus* 27-32). For Camus, escape is not possible. Unlike Kierkegaard who wants to “cure” the despair, Camus asserts that the only way available for the mankind is to live with the absurdity and to create meaning by the mere fact of living, just like Sisyphus in the Greek Myth, whose life meaning is not established by *finishing* the task of rolling up the boulder up the hill, for that can never be done, but by the very act of rolling.

Unlike Kierkegaard who sees the absence of God as a state of despair, Camus identifies the world itself as absurd, and for him despair comes from the very effort of trying to decipher the meaning of the fundamentally meaningless universe. The protagonist in *The*



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*Stranger*, for example, commits a murder and is being legally tried. “Taciturn and withdrawn” in others’ eyes, he is not able to give any plausible answers in response to the constant questioning of his motives. As to why he is armed when he walks to the spring, he answers, “it just happened that way” (85). When the judge inquires about the motive, he told him “c’était à cause du soleil” (98). His philosophy of life is summed up by the way he responds to the questions of the chaplain, to whom his defiant refusal to believe in God signifies an unredeemable sin. The fact is that in the protagonist’s frame of reference, there is no God; only chance and inevitability. In his final “confession,” as it were, he asks a series of questions: “what would it matter?” the answer to which is that nothing matters.

Dickens’s view of despair, as I will argue later, stands in between the two extremes. On the one hand, unlike Camus, Dickens still works within the solid framework of Christianity and in his works, as Valentine Cunningham observes, “the biblical ideas, words, phrases, and episodes got ingrained early, and stuck” (Cunningham 255). In this sense, for many of his fictional characters, despair comes from the lack of faith, and his works are a reminder of the validity of religion in the increasingly secularized world. In this regard Dickens is akin to Kierkegaard. Yet the world was indeed secularized, so Dickens’s works do prefigure the secular universe of Camus and Sartre, because for him religion takes on a more non-doctrinal and practical meaning.

Although the focuses of this chapter are Steerforth/David and Sydney Carton, Dickens creates a group of characters who manifest different aspects of “inertia,” but one thing is in common among these characters: they cannot make a choice. Furthermore, “inertia,” or “akrasia,” is addressed by many Victorian novelists as a consequence of empiricism. It is

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vividly described by Andrew Miller in the first person point of view:

Fixated upon moment of choice and conceiving them to be primary in my ethical life, I am distracted from all those moments when no choices truly present themselves to me, when my perspective on the world forestalls them. I am otherwise absorbed or blinded so that no choice appears; a choice appears but appears to have been already made, or not mine to make; a choice appears but only one path opens from it. (56)

In Dickens specifically, the social aspect of inertia is stressed in Richard Carstone in *Bleak House*, to whom John Jarndyce urges to “make some choice” (121). Carstone is faced with a vocational problem: deluded by the promise of inheriting a large fortune from the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, he can never settle in life. Through Carstone’s tragedy Dickens attacks the British legal system which, like a monster, devours lives. Yet there is a philosophical dimension to his tragedy too: while explaining his loss of will to Ada, Richard says he “was born into this unfinished contention with all its chances and changes” (371). Instead of seeing his life as a constant striving and becoming, Carstone’s view of life is static. In his endless dreaming about good fortune befalling him, he has forsaken the will to make changes in his life. Secondly, inertia as a consequence of the loss of identity is best illustrated in the character Arthur Clennam in *Little Dorrit*, who likens himself to an unidentified property: “I am such a waif and stray everywhere, that I am liable to be drifted where any current may set” (35). Clennam loses his will because he is troubled by his questioned identity, as Eigner argues: “the feeling of tentativeness is aggravated by a nagging anxiety that he may have no moral right even to his modest and unimproved position in that society, that his place may

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have been gained at the expense of someone else, perhaps of Little Dorrit” (Eigner 113). Also in *Little Dorrit* is presented Henry Gowan, an artist who does not take his vocation seriously, who is always “in the halting state” and “loitering moodily about on neutral ground.” His *despair* is transformed into a self-deprecation, as the narrator tells us: “The habit, too, of seeking some sort of recompense in the discontented boast of being disappointed, is a habit fraught with degeneracy.” In a word, Gowan suffers from “a certain idle carelessness and recklessness of consistency” (510-1). This type of character is later invested with a historical significance in *A Tale of Two Cities*, then disappears briefly in *Great Expectations*, and finally resurfaces in *Our Mutual Friend*. When Eugene Wrayburn questions the existence of “design” and claims the world to be “ridiculous,” Dickens is exploring the existential meaning of not being able to make a choice.<sup>25</sup>

### ***David Copperfield* and the Journey from Despair to Affirmation**

“Despair” is an important theme in *David Copperfield* with different layers of meanings. “To despair” in the most literal sense is to lose hope of something concrete, as when Mr. Micawber finds himself in a financial difficulty, or when David realizes his bleak prospect of ever marrying Dora just before he learns of Mr. Spewlow’s death, he says “I confided all to my aunt when I got home; and in spite of all she could say to me, went to bed despairing. I got up despairing, and went out despairing” (562). But despair of this kind is more of a mood than of a spiritual condition, because in such cases we still have the longing for something, and our hope can be restored just by fixing our attention onto a new thing, as Mr. Micawber, at David’s suggestion of drinking punch, his “recent despondency, not to say despair, was

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<sup>25</sup> I will discuss Eugene Wrayburn and Arthur Clennam in detail in chapter IV and conclusion respectively.

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gone in a moment” (419).

But despair can also imply a void in the existential sense, which renders the “self” incapable of finding any purpose or value in the “other”. I argue that understanding the implications of this type of despair, coming to terms with it, and coping with it, is the most essential theme in *Copperfield*, a theme that brings together people from every phase in David’s life: Steerforth, Little Emily, Martha, Mr. Micawber, Mrs. Grummidge, and, of course, David himself. Bert Hornback rightly argues that the most sound instruction of this novel is “resolution,” and of all the characters only Tommy Traddles and David “approach the world with total honesty and courage, and in the end they alone seem capable of leading it” (Hornback 662). I would add, however, that even David sometimes falls into a state of despair, which makes “choosing” difficult. But all these characters are awakened out of their despair and coerced into choice. In the end, only Steerforth does not make responsible choices, for which he is to perish in the sea.

Until Agnes’s warning that Steerforth is David’s “bad angel,” he is David’s hero, whom David tries to emulate and identify with. David tells us: “no veiled future dimly glanced upon him in the moonbeams. There was no shadowy picture of his footsteps, in the garden that I dreamed of walking in all night” (99). He dominates David’s memory of their school years to such an extent that “except that Steerforth was more to be admired than ever,” says David, he “remember[s] nothing” (133). Steerforth’s “dashing” way of treating people, the “effortlessness” and “lightness” in his manners, his sheer confidence in his own power over other people (calling David his own “property”), all accounts for the infatuation that people have with him, not only David, but also Rosa Dartle and Emily.

In a sense, Steerforth is an alter ego of David, a fact David recognizes only much later and whose injurious influence he learns to eradicate through Agnes. If one of David's missions in this novel is to find and define the "hero" in his life – a task he sets for himself at the beginning of the narrative – then Steerforth is certainly a Byronic version of hero which David ultimately rejects<sup>26</sup>. Donald Stone maintains that the Steerforth's Byronic "spell" is manifested more in its disastrous consequences than in the portrayal of how it works (Stone 261). I would argue that Dickens is also diagnosing the very notion of "Byronic hero," which conveys his understanding of the morbid modern disease of "despair" and his gaze into the "emptiness" that many of Dickens's characters inhabit.

In his letters from the years leading up to 1850, Dickens often quotes Byron, as in 1849 when he twice quotes "the watch-dog's honest bark" from *Don Juan*<sup>27</sup>. We don't know how deeply Dickens has read Byron, but one of his letters in 1843 in which he talks about the possibility of himself turning "misanthropic, Byronic, and devilish" does offer an inkling of a Byronic hero in Dickens' mind: charismatic, but amoral, frivolous. The speaker in *Don Juan* tells us ambition and fame for him only mean "to fill / a certain portion of uncertain paper," something we leave behind when we die, "a name, a wretched picture, and worse bust" (I. 218.1737-44). Even love, Don Juan's credo, is not allowed any sanctity, as we learn in Canto II when Byron not only lets the carnivorous people decide whom they will eat by drawing lots, but also allows their lots to be made from Julia's love letter. Love is equated with pure chance. Hence, we are not surprised when the speaker defines man as "a phenomenon, one knows not what / and wonderful beyond all wondrous measure," followed by his lament that

<sup>26</sup> William Harvey points out the Byronic personality of Steerforth in "Charles Dickens and the Byronic Hero,"

<sup>27</sup> Canto I stanza 123; quoted in a letter to Miss Burdett Coutts in August 15, 1849. *Letters*. Vol. V. 594.

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“Pleasure’s a sin, and sometimes a sin’s a pleasure” (I.133.1057-60).

What perhaps left the earnest Victorians further astounded is the speaker’s nihilistic commentary upon the relationship between sin and pleasure, especially when he contemplates the questionable existence of afterlife: “What then? – I do not know, no more do you – and so good night” (I.134.1065-6). Be this voice from the speaker or from Byron himself, what we hear is a modern man sneering at the seriousness of the world. Harry W. McCraw points out that in the nineteenth-century the received opinion of Byron, citing Arnold as a representative voice, was that Byron’s works had little “meaning.” But the meaninglessness is indeed the meaning. Harwell himself argues – and I concur – that in *Don Juan* Byron depicts a world “of constant and meaningless violence in which all aspirations to goodness and nobility serve only to intensify the inevitable calamity,” and this is an “anticipation of the philosophy of the Absurd” (79; 85).

The denial of value and purpose in *Don Juan* offers a gloss on Dickens’s work and enables us to see another dimension of the Byronic hero in *Copperfield*, a hero with no serious purpose in life, who is simply dragged down by his own “lightness.” At Salem House, when David tells stories from *Arabian Nights* to Steerforth, what was the beginning of artistic creation for David, who has “a profound faith in them,” was for Steerforth a pure pastime, to lull himself to sleep (103). Unlike David who has to work hard to establish himself, Steerforth is privileged to enter Oxford. But he confesses he is “bored to death there,” and upon David’s inquiry about his prospect of taking a degree, he admits not having “the least desire or intention to distinguish myself in that way” (ch. 19 & 20). When David refers to his aunt’s letter which reminds him to “look about” himself, meaning to acquire experience and

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wisdom – to find his vocation, Steerforth gives his own understanding of “look about”:

“ ‘Look to the right, and you’ll see a flat country, with a good deal of marsh in it; look to the left, and you’ll see the same. Look to the front, and you’ll find no difference; look to the rear, and there it is still’” (351). Repartee it is, admittedly, but it also suggests that Steerforth is unable to look beyond his immediate concerns.

In a way, Steerforth’s cynical attitude toward life is nothing more than a problem of adolescence, a psychological condition unique to the “adolescent hero,” as James William Johnson calls it. Johnson is writing about the adolescent hero in twentieth-century fiction, and he describes this type of character as “an intellect lacking both the innocence of childhood and pragmatic acceptance of adulthood” (4). That is certainly one side of Steerforth: we see him always so fidgety and so anxious. But Dickens seems to want to suggest more depth to it. The consciousness (not ignorance) of the distance between the inner void and the external life creates *Angst*. After their welcome party at Yarmouth, David thanks Steerforth for showing sympathy for his friends, upon which Steerforth answers, “I believe you are in earnest, and are good. I wish we all are” (326). Thus he is *not* totally ignorant of the meaning in life; he just cannot bring himself to commit to it. Toward the end of their stay in Yarmouth, after encountering Mr. Peggotty and Ham, “that sort of people,” who in a simple way live an honorable life, Steerforth begins to ponder the (in)significance of his life. Right before their return trip, we catch a moment of his consciousness gnawing at him, as we are told that “there was a passionate dejection in his manner,” and he was “more unlike himself” than ever. Asked by David what his trouble is, Steerforth answers: “I have been afraid of myself” (330) – a Kierkegaardian moment, a manifestation of the “sickness unto death.” Furthermore,

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Steerforth is also trying to self-diagnose, when he tells David that he wishes “to God [he] had had a judicious father these last twenty years.” With all the characters without a father in this novel – David himself, Emily, Uriah Heep – we know Steerforth is just like them, lost in and bewildered at the strange world; but unlike David and Emily who have a surrogate parent (Aunt Betsy and Mr. Peggotty respectively), Steerforth remains astray throughout the novel, which brings disasters upon other people beside himself.

Steerforth is one of Dickens’s portraits of the dandy. R. D. McMaster argues that the dandy – he uses Mr. Turveydrop, Mr. Skimpole, Mrs. Skewton, and Mr. Dorrit as examples – is Dickens’s expression of his view of Nature in the Romantic imagination, the invocation of which can become a cliché for the Victorians and an excuse for “heartless superficiality and unearned social eminence” (133). To this group of characters Steerforth might be added, who, among other things, insists on calling David “Daisy.” A genuine love of nature, suggests McMaster, is found in Mrs. Plornish in *Little Dorrit*, who decorates her shop parlor with an unsophisticated painting and also lives up to the ideal expressed in the Romantic vision. For her, nature is not an excuse or a facade, but is “part of the reality” (144).

It is hard not to associate these figures with what Carlyle calls “dandyism” in *Sartor Resartus*. Drawing on the “clothes-philosophy” established earlier in the text, Carlyle defines dandyism as “a witness and living Martyr to the eternal worth of Clothes,” meaning their energy is devoted to appearances rather than their inner life. What’s worse, dandyism is “self-worship.” Bearing in mind Carlyle’s definition of worship as “transcendent wonder” and his recognition of hero-worship as the foundation of society, “self-worship,” then, is the fundamental decadent force that drains man’s creative power. Michael Goldberg’s comment



is certainly incisive when he sees dandyism as a more destructive force than Mammon-worship, the former he sees as “one of the forces which constrain life and obstruct progress, the ‘perpetual stoppage’ ...the social counterpart of the political ‘Do Nothingism’ to which Carlyle’s dandies subscribe” (68). Because it is the worship of the “self,” it is opposite to sympathy, an out-reaching force conducive to understanding. We find shadows of this Carlylean dandy in Steerforth. “Sincere and sympathetic”, says Carlyle, are almost synonymous, but Steerforth is anything but sincere. When he lightly brushes aside David’s concern about Rosa Dartle, after he introduces David to his family, he proposes a drink to the both of them, referring to himself as “the lilies of the fields that toil not, neither do they spin” (304), a quote from the gospel of Matthew. Obviously he seizes upon the phrase “toil not,” not realizing that in the Bible Jesus uses lilies to symbolize people who have faith, whose life depends not on their own striving. But faith is totally foreign to Steerforth. This is where the Kierkegaardian despair comes into play, for Steerforth is without either faith in the transcendent or concerns for worldly affairs – an even more perilous condition than people in the New Testament, people who at least “lay up treasures upon earth” (Matt. 6.19). And perhaps he does not even know the biblical context, that right before Jesus says “lilies”, he cautions his disciples not to “take thought for raiment,” the very thing Steerforth stands for.

We can summarize that Steerforth embodies a mental condition destitute of faith, of motivation, and of purpose. Yet this condition is not singularly presented in Steerforth; it is, I argue, a theme persistently pursued in this novel through many characters. The next one that comes to the discussion is Little Emily. In a way, the spiritual wasteland in Steerforth functions as a “vacuum,” which magnetizes Emily who is in a similar condition. When David

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comes back to Yarmouth with Steerforth, he hears from Omer, the mortician to whom Emily is apprenticed, that Emily is a little “wayward,” who “didn’t know her own mind quite” and couldn’t “exactly bind herself down” (313). The next time David goes back to Yarmouth to attend the dying Barkis, Mr. Omer tells him that Emily is “unsettled at present,” and he thinks she needs “a strong pull.” The fact that Mr. Omer runs a funeral home is of special significance in that he is like the grave-digger in *Hamlet*: in dealing with the business of “dying,” they contemplate both death *and life*. Mr. Omer can penetrate the truth which is only later revealed to David, that Emily’s and Steerforth’s “restlessness” belies the hollowness of their existence, the real tragedy of their lives.

In stark contrast to Emily is 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 is lost, the land, then, would suggest rootedness and peace. It is worth noting that Mr. Peggotty’s house is an old boat *on the land*. Here I obviously disagree with Bert Hornbeck’s reading that Mr. Peggotty’s home – although he acknowledges that the boat symbolizes Noah’s Ark – is an “artificial” one, and therefore “only a retreat,” which “seems safe only to that kind of romantic-or childish-imagination which foresees nothing but the best of fortunes” (Hornbeck 654-655). I would argue, however, that Mr. Peggotty is in fact reenacting the *Vita Apostolica* in this novel. 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).

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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 the lost girl. When the dreadful news of Emily’s elopement reaches him, his first reaction is to “seek [his] niece through the world...and bring her back,” explaining that seeking Emily is his “dooty evermore”, 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). 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, one of which is to “put a candle ready and the means of lighting it” (683). 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 unconditional forgiveness to 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), a resolution not resulting from contemplation, but an instinct to love. In fact, I would suggest that the story of Emily and Mr. Peggotty invokes, simultaneously, two Biblical stories: Emily is the Prodigal Son (daughter

here), 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). This scene resonantly alludes to the Biblical scene in which Jesus forgives the sinful woman while his hosts, the Pharisees, are incapable of forgiveness (Luke 7. 36-50<sup>28</sup>).

Furthermore, the way Mr. Peggotty understands what’s happening to him, relates himself to the external world, and acts in response to it, demonstrates the “existential” sense of religion which I laid out in the first chapter. Dickens never lets Mr. Peggotty discuss God openly or in abstraction, but the reader nonetheless feels the presence of God in him. Moreover, he himself may not know that in seeking and forgiving Emily he is performing a religious duty. His guidance is not common sense or logic, but a sympathetic intuition. Asked by Ham where he would go to find Emily, he simply answers “anywhere.” To David’s inquiry about his thoughts he says ““I don’t rightly know how ‘its, but from over yon there seemed to me to come – the end of it like’”; and as to what the “end” is, again he says “I don’t know,” and later confesses that he is kind of “muddled” (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

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<sup>28</sup> This might be insignificant: the 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” is 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 in Dickens Emily’s repentance is offered to the wrong person (Rosa Dartle) who is the opposite of forgiving.

religious truth. Another existential moment is the scene in which he and David decide to follow Martha: when Mr. Peggotty believes that Emily is still alive, he says, “‘I doen’t know wheer it comes from, or how ‘its, but *I am told* as she’s alive!’” As to by whom he is told of this intelligence, Dickens has David suggest that it is indeed God’s voice, for David says Peggotty “looked almost like a man *inspired*” (682; emphasis mine).

By singling out the word “inspired”, I do not, however, interpret this narrative as a mystical one, as if Mr. Peggotty were being called by the Holy Ghost. On the contrary, the religion of Dickens has a fundamental practical import, that it demands each individual find purpose in life and take actions. Although Dickens calls him “the wanderer” (title of chapter 40), his wandering is nothing like Steerforth’s aimless roaming in the midst of possibilities but never settling on one. 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” (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 welldoing; to whom welldoing is as his natural existence, awakening no astonishment, requiring no commentary”.

This is the lesson that David ultimately will learn to complete his own *Bildung*. But the lack of volition is so central a theme that it weaves almost every character into it, as Edwin Eigner astutely points out: “The sub-characters of *David Copperfield*, which is both an allegory and a novel of development, perform a multitude of possible and unsatisfactory careers, and the hero responds to them so strongly because he recognizes each of their lives

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as potentially his own” (Eigner 73). Mr. Micawber, for example, the ultimate comic creation, virtually lives on the word “if” and is always waiting for something to “turn up.” He is confident about his career, “if anything turns up,” and it would give him immense pleasure “if” he were able to financially support David (179). It is almost ludicrous to hear, toward the end of the novel, that Mr. Micawber chastises his son for not putting his abilities “in any given direction whatsoever” (767). His recurrent appearances in the novel, as Julia F. Saville remarks, are a reminder to David of the importance of substituting diligence for hope, but I cannot subscribe to Saville’s assertion that Mr. Micawber’s eccentricity is portrayed intentionally to disturb the “bourgeois morality” in his refusal to “view his financial difficulties as shameful” (Saville 790). Class ideology is certainly an issue in this novel, but not our focal point. As discussed above (and in the following), the lack of volition is not limited to the middle class, and Mr. Peggotty who exercises volition to the utmost happens to be from the lowest stratum of society.

Mrs. Gummidge, a self-loathing widow whose catch phrase is “I am a lone lorn creetur”, offers another contrapuntal part in this theme. Unlike Steerforth or Emily, Mrs. Gummidge is neither irresponsible nor unsettled, but her unwillingness to step outside of her egocentrism suggests an inability to choose, a moral failure for herself and for those who care about her. Her self-assessment – “I an’t what I could wish myself to be” – reveals the distance between the *knowledge* of life’s demands and the will power with which to meet them. It’s important to note that the way she copes with the difficulties in life is to escape, either by dwelling on the past or by abandoning herself to despair. The fact that she’d “better go into the House, and die and be a riddance” is in contrast to Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, who

voluntarily refuses to be taken to the almshouse but would rather die in solitude. One resorts to illusion, the other faces reality. But what is of comfort to the reader and of instructive value to David is that Mrs. Gummidge finally turns into a Betty Higden type of character, as, in the end, she fears Mr. Peggotty will not take her to Australia and says “I can dig...I can work. I can live hard. I can be loving and patient now” (745). What brings about this change is the misfortune that befalls Mr. Peggotty – a recurrent theme in Dickens that we learn from suffering. Immediately after she hears of the bad news, she starts to make herself useful, and, as to deploring her misfortunes, she appears to have entirely lost the recollection of ever having had any. She preserves an equable cheerfulness in the midst of her sympathy, which is not the least astonishing part of the change that had come over her (465).

So far my analysis might suggest that the paralysis of will is shared by many characters but to which our hero David is somehow immune. That is not true. Hornbeck is certainly right about the importance of all these characters, writing “what holds the whole novel together is that everything in it belongs to David. The stories of the Peggottys, the Micawbers, Miss Betsey, Mr. Dick, and Dr. Strong are all parts of David's comprehension” (664). A Bildungsroman asks us to read whatever David perceives and experiences as part of his education. After surveying these “supporting” roles we naturally come to ask whether David himself has fallen prey to this kind of “despair” or not. Reading the novel we know the answer is certainly in the affirmative. But the crucial element in David’s growth is for *him* to be aware of that despair, that desperate yearning for purpose. This awareness, obviously, is not available to him until he himself has undergone a series of disillusionments. For example, he needs to recognize, only gradually, that the heroism meaningful to his life is not the one

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modeled on Steerforth, otherwise he would not have congratulated Steerforth, saying “how ardent you are in any pursuit you follow, and how easily you can master it” (331), nor would he have thought only unfavorable circumstances can make people miserable, as when he asks what happened that makes Steerforth sad, when in fact Steerforth is struggling with his meaning of existence. Like Mrs. Gummidge, and perhaps Martha, David needs to learn from suffering, which can enable him to realize that what he had admired in Steerforth “was a brilliant game, played for the excitement of the moment, for the employment of high spirits...in a mere wasteful careless course of winning what was worthless to him” (318; the narrator here obviously recalls the past with hindsight).

But David’s void cannot be filled up by his first marriage, which, according to Catherine Waters, belongs to the category of “grotesque or fractured families.” Citing the early twentieth-century journal *The Dickensian*, Waters summarizes the traditional view of Dickens as “the prophet of the hearth” (Waters 120-1). This notion, which consigns women to the private sphere in which they become the “angel of the House,” has been subsequently attacked by feminist critics, and in the case of *David Copperfield*, a number of studies have been done to remedy the wrong done to Dora and Agnes by Dickens’s text (Darby; Langland). Darby, for example, argues that Dickens maneuvers the storytelling in a way that it obscures the truth that David is less mature than Dora, whom the narrator kills just as Murdstone kills Clara, and the second marriage with Agnes works out only because Agnes “will pamper him endlessly with perfect housekeeping, and, like an angel, grant him absolution without genuine confession, forgiveness without honest repentance” (Darby 166). Agnes is indeed an angelic figure, but her absolution is never given to the undeserved, and David only learns to deserve



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it through his failed marriage. Darby's feminist reading, in pointing out that Dora is not to blame for this failure, brings us closer to the true meaning of "marriage" in this novel.

Rightly after the first record of their argument concerning domestic keeping, David writes, "I could have wished my wife had been my counselor; had had more character and purpose, to sustain me and improve me by; had been endowed with power to fill up the *void* which somewhere seemed to be about me" (653).

What, then, is this void? It's quite clear from this passage that it is not the marriage itself but is what this failed marriage has made him realize. David's two marriages, then, are not to be compared as if they were alternatives for him to choose; rather, they stand in different stages in David's quest for his self. In fact, the marriage with Dora is more comparable to his infatuation with Steerforth. This is confirmed when he loses both Dora and Steerforth: in the chapter of his "absence" – absence from his associations, but also absence from his former self – he bids farewell to his "child-wife, taken from her blooming world, so young", and to "him who might have won the love and admiration of thousands." David describes his bereavement as the "burden" that he carries everywhere, and he "felt its whole weight" and said "it could never be lightened." The "void" that he experiences during his first marriage resurfaces now, as he says, "I had proceeded restlessly from place to place, stopping nowhere; sometimes, I had lingered long in one spot. I had had no purpose, no sustaining soul within me, anywhere" (820).

What Steerforth and Dora have achieved – from David's point of view – is that they have awakened David into an urgent need to become a more useful and responsible person. Their hold upon him made David realize the "pain," the "void," and the "burden," and they

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also, inadvertently, tell David that neither Byronic hero-worship nor fantasies about Edenic love can help alleviate the pain, fill the void, or lighten the burden. Nor can Agnes alone. The task of finding purpose and acting upon it fundamentally falls upon David himself. That is the significance of his journey abroad, his self-exile, which, as Jerome Buckley says, is David's "Everlasting No," when he "endures a dark night of despair before he finds hope and purpose and even true identity; he moves through the 'pattern of conversion'" (Buckley 40). As in a Bildungsroman David acquires worldly wisdom in his journey, his health "quite restored," he had "seen much...been in many countries...had improved [his] store of knowledge." Yet the most important epiphany, as it were, is the knowledge of himself. He is starting to understand "the mystery of [his] own heart" (823).

The mystery is about Agnes. Only at this point does he reflect that "in my wayward boyhood, I had thrown away the treasure of her love." As we know, Agnes's typical gesture of "hands pointing upward" and her association with the "stained glass window" have always been duly observed by David, but David can only gradually learn to understand their meaning. In the course of the novel, the "stained glass window" occurs in two pivotal moments. The first time is the turning point for David. Under his aunt Betsy's guardianship, he begins "[his] new life, in a new name, and with everything new about [him]" (225). A lodger at Mr. Wickfield's, he meets Agnes for the first time, "in the grave light of the old staircase" under "a stained glass window," and he says he "associated something of its tranquil brightness with Agnes Wickfield ever afterwards" (233). The "stained glass window" appears again when David is thrown into depression by his aunt's sudden loss of fortune. As "Hope embodied," Agnes comes to offer a secretary's position for Doctor Strong. It is the idea of

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“work,” which Agnes believes in and has been practicing, that re-establishes the order in David’s disordered world:

She filled my heart with such good resolutions, strengthened my weakness so, by her example, so directed...the wandering ardor and unsettled purpose within me, that all the little good I have done, and all the harm I have forborne, I solemnly believe I may refer to her. (525)

From these passages we know that David interprets Agnes’s influence perhaps in the same way he interprets Aunt Betsy’s, when she counsels him to have “resolution,” “determination,” and “strength of character” (283), or Peggotty’s, when he demonstrates his ‘steadfastness of purpose’ (588), or even Ham’s, when he exhibits “frankness” and “honesty” in his treatment of Emily (333). They embody the Victorian work ethic, an important element in David’s growth as an artist, and the very thing Dora lacks. The marriage with Agnes, then, is the result of David’s recognition of the “void” – what he calls the “undisciplined heart” – and of his resolution to deal with it. Their matrimony does not imply David will renounce his worldly ambitions and become religious – as Agnes’s association with the church window or her “pointing upward” might suggest. Rather, Agnes is the translation of the phrase “agnus dei” in the modern, secular setting. If she is in any sense a “divine” figure, her divinity lies the power to reform David, to guard him against the tendency of sloth, to have him realize how he had “strayed so far away,” to direct him to “that sky above [him],” and to show him how he, too, could “love her with a love unknown on earth” (849). With Agnes he can become a hero, if the heroism he is seeking throughout the narrative, at least one sense of it, is Carlyle’s “hero as poet.” It’s a moment of David turning from a mere observer of the world

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– loss of parents, loss of friend, social injustice and its consequence (Martha), human hypocrisy (Heep), etc. – to a creator of his own identity.

For her earnestness Agnes has been the target of critical attacks. Michael Léger, for example, blind to the philosophical background that informs this novel and determines the life/death dynamics, gives a reversed reading of the David – Steerforth plot as homoeroticism, to repress which David has to bear with the “deadline of his second marriage” (302). Léger fails to notice that the narrator persistently associates Agnes with life and Steerforth with death. A similar argument is made by Martha Nussbaum. While acutely recognizing Agnes’s plot as suggesting “innocence and the ubiquity of morality,” Nussbaum proceeds to argue that “Dickens made the gesture of morality equivalent to the gesture of death” (Nussbaum 357-8). Nussbaum tries to demonstrate the vitality of *amoral* love, especially in contrast to the lifelessness of moral standard, but she fails to see that Agnes’s morality is not “death in the heart,” but rather life-giving. Not only has her love for David rejuvenated his much-wearied heart, it also inspires David’s love, a love hitherto unknown to him either from Dora or from Steerforth. Nussbaum admirably claims that “we feel there is...morality *in* the willingness to enter into that world of love, loving Steerforth without judgment,” but at the same time maintains that Dickens’s text “ends with a moral marriage, children, and the victory of Agnes” (359). I would answer that it is Agnes who enlarges David’s sympathy, so that when he recalls his life in retrospect (i.e., writing the novel), he can truly feel with Steerforth, and exclaims “my sorrow may bear involuntary witness against you at the Judgment Throne; but my angry thoughts or my reproaches never will, I know!” (462).

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### The Historical Moment of Choice in *A Tale of Two Cities*

Similar to Agnes's "hands pointing upward" is Lucie Manette's voice "impelling" Sydney Carton "upward" in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Like David, Carton is also given an existential task to work out the meaning of life. In the first half of the novel Carton is also like Steerforth, the "idlest and most uncompromising of men" (90), with "no energy and purpose" (93). And in response to Mr. Stryver's counsel that he has "no business to be incorrigible," Carton replies that he has "no business to *be*, at all" (145; emphasis mine) – a remark so pregnant with philosophical meaning that it leads us to suspect in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens is still exploring the full extent of "despair."

Dickens characterizes Sydney Carton by placing him in a series of contrasts. While the novel ends with Carton self-martyring out of his love for Lucie, he enters the novel a most jaded and cynical young man. On the other hand, although he bears physical resemblance to Charles Darnay, his manner, so "reckless" and "disreputable," is so different from Darnay's that in the court when Darnay is first tried for treason, "many of the lookers-on, taking note of him now, said to one another they would hardly have thought the two were so alike" (79). Although he is instrumental in Darnay's acquittal, he later denies both the motivation and capacity to save him. The reason that he has done so, Carton says, is that " 'it was nothing to do, in the first place; and I don't know why I did it, in the second'" (98). If we can say that in this novel, Charles Darnay and Dr. Manette both strive to escape from the past (for Darnay, the aristocratic heritage; for Manette, the years in Bastille); and that Mr. Stryver, Carton's colleague, only lives for the future, "to get into the front rank"; then Sydney Carton initially lives in a world of moral skepticism where neither the past nor the future matters, as testified

by his dialogue with Darnay when he confesses that “the great desire” he has is to forget that he “belongs to this terrestrial scheme” (87). An ethereal figure, Carton strives to flee from both time and space.

The power that redeems Carton in the end is his faith that he finally attains, only made possible by his love for Lucie. Like Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield*, Lucie is also a symbol of familial responsibility. Her work ethic has guarded her from the “idle despair” at the news of her husband’s imprisonment, as we are told that “as soon as they were established in their new residence, and her father had entered on the routine of his avocations, she arranged the little household as exactly as if her husband had been there” (285). Her domestic virtues are also inspiring in gradually helping Carton find his purpose in life. From the moment when he falls in love with Lucie, the reader notices a change in Carton’s manners and behaviors. Lucie, he confesses, is the source of the inspiration which brings about in him the “unformed ideas of striving afresh, beginning anew, shaking off sloth and sensuality; and fighting out the abandoned fight” (157). Lucie also has faith in Carton that he is “capable of good things, gentle things, even magnanimous things,” despite Carton’s self-loathing that he’s “incapable of all the higher and better flights of men” (214-7). When he tries to gain an advantage over Barsad to obtain a chance to save Darnay, Miss Pross notices in Carton “a braced purpose in the arm and a kind of inspiration in the eyes, which not only contradicted his light manners, but changed and raised the man” (310). Similarly, in contemplating the possibility to gain access to Darnay, we are told in Carton “there was a true feeling and respect both in his tone and in his touch” previously unknown to Mr. Lorry, “who had never seen the better side of him” (321). Carton’s regeneration finally culminates in his

self-sacrifice.<sup>29</sup> When he is purchasing the narcotic drug, he announces that “there is *nothing* more to do...until tomorrow” (325). The word “nothing” may sound nihilistic and remind us of his confession earlier in the novel that “it was *nothing* to do,” but it is exactly opposite in its intention, for, at this point, Carton has found the work in which he can anchor his energies. This time when “nothing” is uttered, it is not in the “reckless manner,” but in “the settled manner of a tired man, who had wandered and struggled and got lost, but who at length struck into his road and saw its end.” (325). In terms of the historical relevance, a crucial theme of this novel, then, is the conversion of Carton from a dilettante who disregards the requirement of his time to a responsible man who voluntarily martyrs himself into history. In the early part of the novel, Carton seems indifferent to what his country (place) or his time requires him. As he himself said, he wants to free himself from “terrestrial scheme.”

Nonetheless Carton belongs to history, despite his unwillingness to do so. In the first place, Carton on the scaffold is derived from historical records. According to Michael Goldberg who provides us with a detailed analysis of the interrelations between Dickens’s novel and his source – Thomas Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, Sydney Carton’s final scene corresponds to a number of historical events recorded by Carlyle, among which is “the death of Mme. Roland, who at the scaffold asked for pen and paper,” and his death in the place of Charles Darnay is possibly suggested by Carlyle’s records of an old man Loiserolles, who died in his son’s place (Goldberg 117-8).<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Many critics have denounced the “sentimental” ending of the novel. Dickens himself acknowledges the dramatic element in the ending, and wishes to highlight it: in a letter to Francois Regnier in 1859, Dickens gives his permission for the novel to be dramatized for France. He says the story “is an extraordinary success” in England, and “the end of it is certain to make a still greater sensation.” But the dramatic element does not detract the moral seriousness of the novel. As Andrew Sander says, “the plot offers a scheme by which we can understand personal decision and the meaning of an historical crisis” (Sanders 87). In this light, the most unbelievable and melodramatic incident in the novel – Carton’s self-sacrifice – should be taken very seriously. To a certain degree, it is the only significant choice he has ever made in his life.

<sup>30</sup> A print of this scene is made by Alexandre Fragonard.

Yet the strength of this historical novel lies not only in its mimetic representations of historical events, but also in its metaphorical symbolism. As Andrew Sanders rightly comments on Dickens's contribution to this genre, "history [in Dickens] is examined not by marrying of factual with fictional characters but by placing a purely fictional group into a given historical situation" (Sanders 88). This is because history as seen by Carlyle – and we have reason to believe that Dickens shares Carlyle's view<sup>31</sup> – is not merely a collection of specific dates and characters, but rather an *embodiment* of certain ideas, itself a Hegelian notion.<sup>32</sup> As Carlyle has Professor Teufelsdröckh tell us in *Sartor Resartus*, "All visible things are Emblems; what thou seest is not there on its own account; strictly taken, is not there at all; Matter exists only spiritually, and to represent some Idea, and *body* it forth" (*SR* 56).<sup>33</sup> Seen in this light, the early Sydney Carton, though lacking specific historical counterparts, is part of history too. Though an Englishman, the "irresolute and purposeless" (155) Carton epitomizes the kind of "inertia" that Carlyle sees infecting different strata in the French society during the Revolution. Most ostensibly, for instance, Carlyle names the chapter describing the preliminary work of the National Assembly "Inertia" (I; 5; ch. 1). But even in the early chapters of *The French Revolution*, Carlyle already diagnoses the French society preceding the revolution with a "passive inertness, the symptom of imminent downfall" (*FR*; 30). The upper class, among which Carlyle portrays the Queen Marie Antoinette, "mingles not with affairs; heeds not the future; least of all, dreads it" (I; 2, ch.1).

<sup>31</sup> John Gardiner in the essay "Dickens and the Uses of History" argues that "It was Carlyle's view of history that Dickens most readily assimilated in pondering the significance of [the historical] evidence," and claims that Carlyle's view of history is "essentially apocalyptic." See *A Companion to Charles Dickens*. Edited by David Paroissien. Pages 250 -254.

<sup>32</sup> For Hegel's notion of history and of French Revolution in particular, see Terry Pinkard *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* pages 236-7.

<sup>33</sup> For Carlyle's notion of history, see Fred Kaplan's biography pages 207-9, where Kaplan thus summarizes Carlyle's view of the "right history", that "any history that aimed to present the objective facts founded on the delusion that external reality had some absolute, identifiable quality."



On the other hand, the dire economy has rendered the working class “a dumb generation,” “dreary, languid,” and “aimless” (I; 2; ch.2).

Contrary to John McWilliams’s assertion that in this novel “all [major characters] except Carton influence historical events” (McWilliams 20), I argue that Sydney Carton is the most historically loaded character. It is true that *A Tale of Two Cities* is a tight, plot-driven novel, without much of Dickens’s typical humor and rich array of characters. In such a novel, “the plot,” says Andrew Sanders, “offers a scheme by which we can understand personal decision and the meaning of an historical crisis” (Sanders 87). In this light, the most unbelievable and melodramatic incident in the novel – Carton’s self-sacrifice – should be taken very seriously. To a certain degree, it is the only significant choice he has ever made in his life. His situation in the novel is exactly France’s position in history. Just as Carton who is at a profound loss about his vocation and even claims that he has “no business,” France also faced a dubious prospect as to which path it could take: monarchy, constitutional monarchy, or republic. Just as the “unsubstantial” Carton (214), who shows contempt for everything including himself, the French society busied itself in “not work, but hindrance of work” (FR I; 2; ch.1).<sup>34</sup>

What, we might ask, is the cause of this idleness, the paralysis that annuls the power to choose? Carlyle himself asks this existential question that how, “in this wild Universe, which storms in on him, infinite, vague-menacing, shall poor man find, say not happiness, but existence, and footing to stand on,” and goes on to provide the answer that besides by

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<sup>34</sup> James Eli Adams also sees this connection between Sydney Carton and Carlyle. He says “Sydney Carton enacts a broadly Carlylean quest for a vocation, which is figured in the very image that typically distinguishes the Carlylean hero, that of the wanderer in the wilderness.” But Adams later modifies this claim that Carton’s heroism depends not only upon his final martyrdom, but also, importantly, on his identifying himself as a “dandy.” I cannot agree with the latter assertion because it simply overlooks the Christian overtone in this novel and its deeper connection with Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*. See James Eli Adams *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Manhood*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995), pp. 55-60.

“girding himself together for continual endeavour and endurance,” man cannot do without a “devout Faith” (*FR I*; 2; ch. 7). It is to be remarked that both in Carlyle’s and in Dickens’s contexts, faith cannot be narrowly understood as a belief in God or doctrines. Rather, religion itself has become a metaphor for something vital that gives shape to the chaotic universe and enables man to make meaningful choices. Although Carton dies having recalled three times the promise in the Gospel of John: “I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me, shall never die” (John 11:25-6), his resurrection has already taken place *in this life* in finding a purpose for his otherwise empty and meaningless life. Avrom Fleishman thus interprets the ending of the Carton’s death: “in the absence of a redeemer who dies and lives again and also brings others to life again, men in history must die that others may live. Personal salvation in Christ is translated into and is designed to give authenticity to the promise of social regeneration through sacrifice” (Fleishman 122-3).

In this sense, I argue that *A Tale of Two Cities* hinges upon the search for this “faith.” It is also in its emphasis on faith that this novel is fundamentally different from *David Copperfield*. If the early Sydney Carton is reminiscent of Steerforth, Carton is ultimately saved by his faith and enters history with promising visions while Steerforth is finally devoured by the ocean, lost both in time and space.<sup>35</sup> And if Agnes’s name and her gesture of “pointing upward” have only a vague devotional implication, the tone of *A Tale of Two Cities* is decidedly religious.<sup>36</sup> It is in the religious frame of reference that “death” and

<sup>35</sup> It is noteworthy that Sydney Carton’s final vision is “one great heave of water.”

<sup>36</sup> A telling evidence is that one of the most popular dramatizations of this novel was done by two clergymen, the Revds Willis and Langbridge in which Carton was played by Sir John Martin-Harvey. See page 564 in *The Oxford Companion to Charles Dickens*, edited by Paul Schlicke.

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“resurrection” pulls through different plot lines in the novel: Dr. Manette is brought back to life by his daughter’s filial love, and Darnay’s release from the trial for treason is compared to being “recalled to life” by Jerry Cruncher, who digs up graves in order to sell the disinterred corpses, is a parody of the theme. As Andrew Sanders rightly reminds us that, in this novel, “death looms larger and more brutally than in any other of Dickens’s novels, but it is here integrally linked to the idea of resurrection” (Sanders 92). Yet the most important resurrection is Sydney Carton’s, who is cured of his “sickness unto death,” in Kierkegaard’s term. In this respect it is also drastically different from Wilkie Collins’s *The Frozen Deep*, where the religious significance of the self-sacrifice is absent.

But Carton’s resurrection is not merely a personal experience of miracle, nor does its power reside in the “theatricality”, as James Eli Adams comments on his sacrifice, “realized through Carton’s capacity to capture the gaze of an eager, public ‘curiosity’ that is riveted by his features yet incapable of fathoming them” (Adams 56). Rather, Carton’s resurrection is a “prophetic” move, a visionary impulse whose meaning needs to be completed in the larger historical background. He is a “scapegoat” figure, whose death “is offered to the reader as the most noble of deaths because it resonates with Christianity’s God who sacrificed himself for the *human* family, for generations and times yet unborn” (Lewis 206).

The lack of faith is not peculiar to Sydney Carton, but is seen by Dickens as a common malady prevalent among the revolutionaries, as Linda Lewis notes: “the Revolution is not only violent, bestial, insane, and gendered, but also atheistic” (209). The “Jacques” and “Vengeance,” though seemingly willful and energetic, are precisely like the early Sydney Carton who is unable to make a right choice. They fall prey to what McWilliams calls the

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“false religion of Revolution,” conveyed in the patterned ecstasies of the Carmagnole” and “the sacramental blood markings beside the grindstone.” (McWilliams 29) For one thing, the revolutionaries are repeatedly associated with the image of “wine,” but instead of the Dionysian association with vitality and creativity, the wine they drink destroys the life force of the partakers. We are told that Saint Antoine is stricken with “hunger,” whose “abiding-place was in all things fitted to it,” and that “nothing was represented in a flourishing condition” (32-33). The Reign of Terror is a “season of pestilence,” during which time the spirit of the Saviour is replaced by the idol of Guillotine as, sarcastically, “the sign of the regeneration of the human race.” The Guillotine has “superseded the Cross,” and models of which “were worn on breasts from which the Cross was discarded, and it was bowed down to and believed in where the Cross was denied” (294). If, I argue, the Cross – the sign of spiritual rebirth – is replaced by the Guillotine, then Carton’s death on the Guillotine in the end of the novel is a re-enactment of Jesus’s suffering. Carton’s self-sacrifice redeems the sin of his time.

Therefore I argue that Dickens draws an analogy between Carton and the French revolutionaries. The “inertia” – a word that can capture the conditions of both – renders Carton unable to settle in a serious vocation on the one hand, and on the other hand renders the revolutionaries “blind” and “drunken.” Carton manifests “inertia of rest,” while the revolutionaries, “inertia of motion.” However, I do not mean that Dickens is unsympathetic with the revolutionary enterprise; but, as McWilliams points out, this novel demonstrates that the “popular energy” needs to be “guided by some sense of political principle, individual dignity, and social justice” (McWilliams 20). Carton’s death (in place of Darnay’s) is the

consequence of the frenzied politics and, at the same time, a quiet commentary upon the revolution, that without “faith” in something beyond class politics, the vision of the “beautiful city” and “brilliant people rising from this abyss” shall never be realized. Even if Chris Vanden Bossche is right about Sydney Carton’s final visions, that they are not completely affirmative since they “introduce unsettling ambiguity,” yet one thing remains true that the process of restoring to life has started with these visions, because what Carton finally “sees” fulfills the expectancies he has harbored, political, domestic, and emotional. In contrast to it is the description of the revolutionaries, whose tone is more apocalyptic than promising. For instance, the Year One of Liberty witnesses “the deluge rising from below, not falling from above, and with the windows of Heaven shut, not opened” (283). At the same time citing and reversing the myth of Noah’s Ark and the Revelation (“windows of Heaven opened”) Dickens seems to show his ambivalent attitude toward the Revolution.

This chapter deals with the modern condition of man. The next chapter will tackle the most fundamental issue in religion: good versus evil, the choice between which is a motif Dickens frequently uses to define his characters and thereby to establish the identity of man. Despite having been accused of creating stock characters, Dickens rarely gives us naturally depraved figures. Instead, good and evil often coexist even in the “flattest” characters, such as Ralph Nickleby, Daniel Quilp, Jonas Chuzzlewit, each with potentially redeeming virtues which they ultimately choose to cast aside. Dickens holds them responsible for their choice, and their regeneration often requires a second choosing.

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### Chapter III. The Choice between Good and evil

Didst Thou forget that man prefers peace, and even death, to freedom of choice in the knowledge of good and evil?

Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

#### The Complexity of Good and Evil in Dickens's Works

This chapter examines the most foundational point in Dickens's religious imagination: the choice between good and evil. I argue that Dickens's works exhibits a great degree of complexity in the issue of good versus evil, and to sin is to knowingly choose to do evil. As Father Zosima tells Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "hell is voluntary and ever consuming: they are tortured by their own choice. For they have cursed themselves, cursing God and Life" (*Karamazov* 303). Dickens's view is similar, although he only gradually achieves this vision. In this chapter I will first analyze characters from his early novels to show that even in his early career when his sense of religion is still inchoate, Dickens starts to ponder over the source and the consequence of evil. He produces a plethora of characters that are both incarnations of the devil but at the same time the trigger of the reader's hearty laughter. As we read on, the comic aspect of these characters tapers off, and Dickens begins a serious investigation of sin. The culmination of these early characters is Mr. Dombey in *Dombey and Son*, in whose repeated rejection of Florence's love Dickens thoroughly examines the full import of "choice."

Yet many readers tend not to take Dickens's bifurcation of "good" and "evil" characters seriously. This is true also of his contemporary critics. Writing in 1851, when comparing

Thackeray's *Pendennis* and Dickens's *David Copperfield*, David Masson pointed out the lack of "proportion" between good and bad in his characters, that some are "thoroughly and ideally perfect" whilst others are "thoroughly and ideally detestable", and for Masson, this disproportion made Dickens's work unrealistic (Masson 256). George Henry Lewes made a somewhat similar comment when he reviewed John Forster's biography of Dickens. He reduced Dickens's characters to "types," which are "unreal and impossible," who speak "a language never heard in life, moving like pieces of simple mechanism always in one way"(Lewes 572).<sup>37</sup>

Such remarks are not without their validity if we consider the dramatic elements in Dickens's works.<sup>38</sup> Indeed we can find a perpetual desire on Dickens's part to create exaggerated, large-than-life characters that remind us of the theatre. Take a look at Daniel Quip in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, a character whose origin has fascinated critics. Robert McLean, for example, speculated that the Yellow Dwarf from folklore, Shakespeare's Richard III, and perhaps a real-life little dwarf named Prior all contributed to the creation of the character Quilp (McLean 337-9). We see him entering the novel as a "dwarf" (and he continues being referred to as a "dwarf"), "grotesque", with a "ghastly smile" and "discolored fangs" and "crooked, long and yellow" fingernails (65-66). And the description of the way he

<sup>37</sup>From a review of VOL.I of Forster's *Life.Fortnightly Review*. February 1872, xvii, 141-54

<sup>38</sup> Wonderful insights into Dickens and the dramatic tradition can be found at: Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre* (1965), especially its chapter 1 on the dramatic style of Dickens. Using the opening passage of *Little Dorrit*, Garis points out that the heavy-handed artifice, i.e., verbal figurations, the contrived sentences, the narrators as "performers", "maker", and "doers" are in fact characteristics of theatre. Leigh Woods's essay "Dickens and Theater: Recent Publications" (1991) reviews several important studies of the relationship between Dickens and drama, the most relevant one among which is Paul Schlicke's book *Dickens and Popular Entertainment* and Edwin M. Eigner's book *The Dickens Pantomime*. Juliet John's study of melodrama and Dickens: *Dickens's Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (2001) studies the melodrama as a genre and its influence on Dickens. The fourth chapter counters the view represented by Barbara Hardy, that Dickens's characters lack interiority, by arguing that Dickens's "violent villains provided the vehicle for the most universally admired evocations of 'interiority' in the Dickens canon. Jeremy Tambling's essay "Dickens and Jonson" (2012) examines the relation between Jonson and Dickens. Particularly revealing in the essay is the discussion of the influence of Jonson's humor in *Everyman in His Humor* on Dickens's characters such as Quilp and Pecksniff.

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eats would be ridiculous if it was not for Dickens's intended theatrical effect: he "ate hard eggs, shell and all, devoured gigantic prawns with the heads and tails on, chewed tobacco and water-cresses...drank boiling tea without winking, bit his fork and spoon till they bent again..." (86). Furthermore, the main action he takes in the novel is to "pursue," with unexpected appearances, deviously intruding upon Little Nell's life and consciousness. Likewise, Fagin in *Oliver Twist* is also often presented as a caricature. For instance, when he is ruminating the scheme to get rid of Nancy, he bites his "long black nails," and "disclosed among his toothless gums a few such fangs as should have been a dog's or rat's" (390). As Humphrey House observes, "the bad characters," especially in his early works, have "a concentrated personal malignity which comes near to making them the devil" (House 112).

To read and accept these characters is to be reconciled with the idea that characters have a hollow interiority, the meaning of which depends totally on their physical attributes. If Masson's and G. H. Lewes's conclusions were based solely on these characters, no wonder they would fail to confer credibility to Dickens's characters<sup>39</sup>. As Juliet John points out, a melodramatic villain is characterized with a "one-dimensional transparency," and "he is a type before he is a character" (48-9). It is in the same spirit that Dickens creates Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the schoolmaster who has only one eye, "of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fanlight of a street door" (44).<sup>40</sup>

The tendency to create purely innocent figures is as much a theatrical trait as the propensity to the grotesque. Tom Pinch in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, for instance, has an unbounded

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<sup>39</sup> E.M. Forster makes a similar comment, that Dickens's characters are flat but he makes them "vibrate" so we don't notice they are made of cardboard.

<sup>40</sup> According to the notes provided by the Penguin Edition of the novel, Dickens borrowed the idea of Squeers having only one eye from Sheridan's play *The Rivals* (1775).



and unconditional trust on Pecksniff. For the first half of the novel he remains a simple-minded creature who lacks discernment to tell a “scoundrel” from a saint. In order to defend Pecksniff’s reputation he even parts ways with John Westlock and Martin Chuzzlewit. Only when Mary Graham discloses Pecksniff’s proposal and his threatened action against Martin does Tom realize that “the star of his whole life from boyhood, had become, in a moment, putrid vapour” (467). Tom Pinch’s disillusionment seems to indicate that disproportionate and ill-informed goodness can compromise one’s judgment. However, Tom does not become lovable *after* he is disillusioned and sees the truth; he is lovable almost because he can be easily duped. As John Westlock asks Martin Chuzzlewit, “ ‘Strange, is it not, that the more he likes Pecksniff (if he can like him better than he does), the greater reason one has to like *him?*’ ” (199). In other words, Tom Pinch functions more as a theatrical type whose main attribute is simple-mindedness, and whose function is, at best, to entertain.<sup>41</sup>

It is these characters – Fagin, Quilp, and Tom Pinch – that have led critics to doubt whether Dickens’s works, especially the early ones, have any genuinely serious moral or religious intent. “The good characters,” said Thomas Cleghorn, “do not seem to have a wholesome moral tendency...They act from impulse, not from principle,” and therefore they are “uninstructive.”<sup>42</sup> “He pleases and amuses, but he does not instruct,” said one critic in the 1840s<sup>43</sup>. These, however, were not how Dickens himself perceived the dramatic elements in his novels. Writing to Mrs. Austen in 1856, Dickens said he and she had a complete agreement on drama, that a genre “so wholesome and humanizing,” he maintained, was

<sup>41</sup>In fact, melodrama can also be instructive. Juliet John mentions Peter Brooks’s work *The Melodramatic Imagination* in the chapter “The Villain of Stage Melodrama,” and introduces Brooks’s view that in the post-theological era when there is no longer a central sacred text as a foundation for moral and religious sentiments, melodrama takes its place. It is “a realm where large moral forces are operative” (quoted by Juliet John, 46).

<sup>42</sup> “Writings of Charles Dickens”, *North British Review* May 1845, iii, 65-87 See *Critical Heritage* 191

<sup>43</sup> From a review of R. H. Horne’s *A New Spirit of the Age*, *Westminster Review*. June 1844, xlv, 374-7.

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“more needed by an over-worked, over-driven, over-repressed, over lectured, over-bothered People, than all the Blue Book writing and Didactic speechifying.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, a moral purpose was at work in his efforts to create dramatic types, a way to capture the essence of human beings. Even G. H. Lewis, who disparaged Dickens’s works later in the 1870s, claimed early in the 30s that Dickens’s works are “volumes of human nature,” and “amusement” was by no means his only goal.<sup>45</sup> Thomas Henry Lister made a similar remark in observing that the most admirable quality in Dickens’s work is his “comprehensive spirit of humanity” (Lister 73).

It is my plan, therefore, to demonstrate in this chapter the development in Dickens’s thinking on the issue of good and evil. I maintain that except in a few cases where Dickens indulges in a melodramatic mood, as in *Quilp* or *Tom Pinch* as I have mentioned, the issue of good versus evil has never been a straightforward question with a ready answer. Dickens perceives the reality as a mixture of both, one often coming out of another. Moreover, as Dickens’s art matures, good and evil cease to be mere theatrical spectacles, but become a central theme in Dickens’s religious imagination. Rather than measuring his character against theological arguments, Dickens takes the character’s “choice” between good and evil as a moment to probe into the most profound, yet often misunderstood aspect of his religion: the idea of sin. In the following space I will show the implications of good and evil and the ways in which they are embodied and interrelated in four early novels: *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. Then I will take *Dombey and Son* as a seminal text in which the idea of the “choice” between good and evil is fully examined.

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<sup>44</sup>Letter to Mrs. Austen, Nov. 5 1856. *Letters*. Vol. VIII. 219.

<sup>45</sup>From a review of *Sketches*, *Pickwick*, and *Oliver Twist*, in the *National Magazine and Monthly Critic*. December 1837, I, 445-9.

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We must acknowledge that in his early career, when Dickens still believes that the evil of the world can be easily vanquished, he betrays a tendency to conceive of good and evil as two disparate and irreconcilable human instincts, thus the narrator of *The Old Curiosity Shop* says “Everything in our lives, whether of good or evil, affects us most by contrast” (ch. 53; 493). These two instincts are often identified, respectively, with purely innocent figures and downright depraved figures. Moreover, they are often externalized in the forms of home, asylum, or heaven on the one hand, and slum or hell on the other.

Such bifurcations usually come from a child’s perspective. Take *The Old Curiosity Shop* for example. Fleeing the pursuit of Quilp and the temptation of gambling, Nell takes her grandfather on an arduous journey. Although lacking any clear notion of a destination, Nell believes firmly in the existence of an earthly paradise where no sufferings exist. She encourages her grandfather, when the latter falters, to imagine those “places [that] lie beyond these...where we may live in peace, and be tempted to do no harm” (ch. 45; 422). When she is recovered from a physical breakdown, she tells the schoolmaster Mr. Marton, who helped restore her health, that her destination is an “asylum in some remote and primitive place, where the temptation before which he [her grandfather] would never enter, and her late sorrows and distresses could have no place” (ch. 46; 435). Only in his early novels does Dickens create in his story world a “haven” to shield all the evils of the world from the victimized child, like the one Nell later finds in an old church where the schoolmaster is appointed to be a clerk, and for which Nell starts to serve as a church-keeper: “It was another world, where sin and sorrow never came; a tranquil place of rest, where nothing evil entered” (ch.54; 498).

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A similar “asylum” is found in *Oliver Twist*. When Oliver is rescued by the family he is forced to participate in robbing, the Maylies, he enjoys three peaceful months, without “fear or care,” without “languishing in a wretched prison,” or any associations “with wretched men” (B.2; ch. 9, 262). On Sundays he goes to a little church in the village and learns from the Bible a way of life he has never experienced before. It is one of very few instances in which the church is presented as a positive image (another being the church in *The Old Curiosity Shop*), one that provides solace and revitalizing energy for the poor. As noted by Natalie Bell Cole, the country church in *Oliver Twist* still maintains its function as an institution that “can teach habits of reverence” (Cole 209).

Both examples conform to a pattern of the protagonist in quest of and attaining an “asylum” – an almost enclosed space where no evil can intrude: Oliver is tricked into theft by Fagin’s pupils and rescued by Mr. Brownlow, and Nell is chased by Quilp before being offered the position of the church-keeper. Both characters are thrown into the hands of an evildoer and both are mercifully ushered, by the narrator, into a world of goodness. What is implied by the pattern is a tragic, deterministic sense of the universe in which an individual has very little freedom to choose; they are either in heaven or in hell, as Oliver tells Mr. Brownlow, “Heaven is a long way off, and they are too happy there, to come down to the bedside of a poor boy” (ch. 12; 87). Neither Oliver nor Nell can imagine the possibility of a “paradise within,” which is “happier far,” as Michael promises Adam (*Paradise Lost* XII: 587).

It is no surprise, therefore, that the idea of sin is inconceivable from the perspective of Oliver or Nell. Ivor Brown, for example, rightly points out that Dickens “did not believe in

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original sin,” but Brown’s subsequent assertion that “sin is a word which occurs scantily in his vocabulary” is worth some reconsidering (Brown 178). Dennis Walder also denies “natural depravity” in Dickens, a central idea for the Evangelicals, for which, argues Walder, Dickens substitutes a “more optimistic, Romantic, but none the less Christian notion,” that “‘crime and depravity everywhere’ come from ‘our want of sympathy with the poor’” (Walder 178). Carolyn Oulton also stresses Dickens’s denial of original sin and his emphasis that man’s salvation is through “personal justification” rather than through “assurances of divine mercy” (Oulton 95-6). All these remarks convey a correct understanding of Dickens’s rejection of the Evangelical notion of “depravity” – some of Dickens’s characters are born in abominable places or reared by incompetent parents, but they choose to embrace their innate good, rather than reject it. But they fail to make a distinction between “original sin” in theology and “sin” in a larger, religious sense. I argue that “sin” in Dickens means to deliberately make a wrong moral choice with a full understanding of what this choice entails. The moment of committing a sin, then, is the moment of knowingly choosing evil over good. Such moments punctuate Dickens’s works by which he establishes the identity of his characters as autonomous beings. Dickens holds his characters responsible for their choices, and he pronounces judgment on those who make the wrong choice, as, for example, we can see when the narrator comments upon Daniel Quip’s ending:

Retribution, which often travels slowly—especially when heaviest—had tracked his footsteps with a sure and certain scent and was gaining on him fast. Unmindful of her stealthy tread, her victim holds his course in fancied triumph. Still at his heels she comes, and once afoot, is never turned aside! (611)

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Moments that illustrate Dickens's resistance to the notion of man's "natural depravity" can be found throughout his career. An early example is in *Oliver Twist*, when Charlotte, maidservant to Mr. Sowerberry to whom Oliver is apprenticed, pronounces Oliver to be one of those "dreadful creatures that are born to be murderers and robbers from their very cradle" (ch. 6; 50). The "austere and wrathful" lessons that Mr. Murdstone heaps on David are another telling example to reveal "the potential damage done to children by an insistence on original sin" (Oulton 97). Finally, we have the godmother of Esther in *Bleak House*, who believes in a "distorted religion which clouded her mind with impressions of the need there was for the child to expiate an offence of which she was quite innocent" (ch. 17; 276). These examples show how Dickens resists the idea of "original sin": all these "condemned" figures later prove to become virtuous and responsible people through *making the right choices* in their lives. Dickens rejects the Evangelical sense of the world as made up of either blessed or condemned creatures. He demands, instead, that we look for the "real hues" of the world, as the narrator of *Oliver Twist* comments: "men who look on nature and their fellow men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the somber colours are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts. The real hues are delicate, and require a clearer vision" (B2; ch. 11; 180).

But sin – in the larger sense – is undoubtedly one of the "real hues" for Dickens; in fact, the idea of "sin" permeates Dickens's works. The permeation is often insidious, the discernment of which requires the "clearer vision" – the perspicacity of someone well versed in the way of the world. When the young and naïve Nicholas is offered the position as an assistant at Dotheboys Hall, he immediately gets overwhelmed by the "visionary ideas" – i.e.,

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ideas depicting the bright future of his family. His euphoria, however, is attributed by the narrator to an unfamiliarity with “the world,” which is defined by the narrator as “a conventional phrase which, being interpreted, signifieth all the rascals in it” (ch.3; 41). The word “rascals” might mean villainous figures like Ralph Nickleby or Wackford Squeers, but it also suggests the prevalence of sin. When he explains to Smike why he might leave the Dotheboys Hall, he says, “ ‘the world is before me, after all’ ” – a phrase echoing Milton’s Adam and Eve taking leave of Eden upon which the narrator comments, “The world was all before them, where to choose / Their place of rest, and providence their guide” (*Paradise Lost* XII, 647-9). What is similar for both scenarios is the existential stance: their understanding of sin of this world is not acquired through argument (otherwise Raphael’s admonition might have prevented them from sinning), but is acquired while they are in the midst of the experience: after Adam and Eve have encountered Satan, and Nicholas has witnessed Squeers’s treatment of the pupils. His understanding of sin is never final; it is continually deepened in his encounters with the world. Astonished at the intelligence that Smike is actually Ralph Nickleby’s son, Nicholas complains about the incidence being “unnatural,” that “nature does not seem to have implanted in his breast one lingering feeling of affection for him.” This kind of reasoning is corrected by Charles Cheeryble, who says Nicholas makes “the very common mistake of charging upon Nature, matters with which she has not the smallest connexion, and for which she is in no way responsible” (ch. 46; 563-4). In other words, man is not predestined to be sinful, either by God or Nature; rather, men choose to do evil when they have the option to embrace virtue.

What, then, constitutes “sin” in Dickens’s context? Substituting the Evangelical sense of

sin – an inevitable condition in which “the majority of the human race was eternally doomed”<sup>46</sup> (Oulton 95), Dickens laid special emphasis on human responsibility: for Dickens, to sin is not a predestined human condition, but a deliberate choice. Interestingly, Kierkegaard’s definition of sin in *The Sickness unto Death* nicely captures the Dickensian notion of sin, though as far as we know Dickens never read or heard of Kierkegaard. According to Kierkegaard, sin “does not consist in man’s not having understood what is right, but in his not wanting to understand it, and in his unwillingness to do what is right” (*Sickness unto Death*; 127). A quick footnote to this definition can be found in the conversation between Rose Maylie and Doctor Losberne: when the latter reminds Rose that under Oliver’s innocent appearance might be a corrupted nature, for “vice...takes up her abode in many temples,” Rose asks, rather provokingly, whether the doctor can “really believe that this delicate boy has been the *voluntary* associate of the worst outcasts of society” (Bk 2; ch.7; 239 emphasis mine). By shifting the responsibility from predestination to human responsibility, Rose absolves Oliver from sin – the kind of sin in the eyes of Charlotte, Murdstone, or Esther’s godmother. Another crucial moment is in *A Christmas Carol*. When Scrooge is given a glimpse of his dire future, he asks the Ghost: “ ‘Are these the shadows of things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only?’ ” Upon this the Ghost answers: “ ‘Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead....But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change’ ” (124). Man’s destiny, therefore, is in his own hands.

Dickens’s first large-scale inquiry into the idea of sin is achieved in *Martin Chuzzlewit*,

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<sup>46</sup>See also pp 25-48 of Valentine Cunningham’s *Everywhere Spoken Against: Dissent in the Victorian Novel*. In the section “The Variety of Dissent” Cunningham mentions Dickens’s hostility toward “revival phenomena,” an important aspect of Evangelicalism at that time.



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a novel that continues his previous endeavor to imagine heaven and hell, but also is markedly different from its predecessor in its richness and intensity, as Stuart Curran argues that “before *Martin Chuzzlewit* the Satanic forces are either alienated grotesques like Quilp or, as with Fagin's boys and Gordon's hordes, comfortably relegated to a recognizable class. In this novel, however, they erupt in all degrees of society and all psychological types” (Curran 54). The seemingly “Pickwickian” novel, says Curran, achieves coherence by virtue of its theme of the fall and regeneration of mankind, a theme that links it to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. For the present study I will concentrate on Jonas Chuzzlewit’s murder of Montague Tigg, which illustrates the nature and the dynamic process of committing a sin.

Critics have always found in the character Jonas Chuzzlewit an interesting psychological study of sin. For example, contemporary critics said Jonas was “scarcely worthy of the pencil that drew Sikes, and Quilp, and Sir Mulberry Hawk” because he was “too hideous and revolting an incarnation of evil” (Thomas Cleghorn 186). What Jonas commits is a sin and not only a crime because neither before nor after the murderous act does Jonas show any repentance whatsoever. At this moment, a series of motives coalesce into Jonas Chuzzlewit’s choice to commit the murder of Tigg: monetary gain, the wished-for but unfulfilled patricide, the vision of the paraphernalia of execution and the vision of the Last Day – all these crystallize into an either / or proposition, and he has no scruple in perpetrating the murder. By way of free indirect discourse, the narrator dramatizes the moment of Jonas’s choosing: “He made no compromise, and held no secret with himself now. Murder! He had come to do it.” We are reminded, time and again, of the nature of sin when we read that he “was not sorry for what he had done,” and “if the thing could have come over again, he would have done it

again” (ch.47; 677-681). All these details reinforce the idea that Jonas’s choice is made with a full consciousness. When we watch Jonas making his decision in this scene we are in fact watching his consciousness unfolding its possibilities, the same consciousness that perhaps accompanies Milton’s Satan, when Satan proclaims himself to be “one who brings / a mind not to be changed by place or time. / The mind is its own place, and in itself / can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven” (*Paradise Lost* 1.254-5), or the consciousness of Iago, who, calling himself “Divinity of hell,” confesses that “when devils will the blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows / as I do now” (*Othello* 2.3. 340-3).

And Dickens does not allow a sin to be committed without being judged. In fact, the idea of Judgment has a central place in the later novels. Linda Lewis, for example, argues that the Judgment pulls together all the concepts examined in *Bleak House*: self, society, and the law (Lewis 88-119)<sup>47</sup>. Or recall the attempted escape of Bill Sikes after he murdered Nancy, an apocalyptic scene: “The broad sky seemed on fire. Rising into the air with showers of sparks, and rolling one above the other, were sheets of flame, lighting the atmosphere for miles round, and driving clouds of smoke in the direction where he stood” (403). Similarly, toward the end of *A Tale of Two Cities*, the narrator judges the French Revolution by conjuring up an apocalyptic picture: “What private solicitude could rear itself against the deluge of the Year One of Liberty – the deluge rising from below, not falling from above, and with the windows of Heaven shut, not opened!” (*Tale* 283) What I want to emphasize, however, is that such a crucial theme as Judgment starts to develop from the very early novels. At least Dickens hints at it, for example, when Nicholas warns Ralph Nickleby that “there will be a reckoning

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<sup>47</sup>Although Dickens rejects the Old Testament judgments. See Linda Lewis 125-6.

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sooner or later” (ch. 20; 250), or, in the end of *The Old Curiosity Shop*, when the journey of Nell and her grandfather comes to an end, the narrator literally kills off Daniel Quilp by having him commit suicide and reports to us that Quilp “was left to be buried with a stake through his heart in the centre of four lonely roads” (665). The most powerful judgment is given to Jonas Chuzzlewit who has an apocalyptic dream, in which “...a terrible figure started from the throng, and cried out that it was the Last Day for all the world. The cry being spread, there was a wild hurrying on to Judgment” (ch. 47; 676). Reading his dreams cultivates an expectation on the reader’s part that Jonas will wake up penitent, but his failure to do so forces the reader to experience what to sin must be like. Although Jonas could be spared legal judgment by killing himself, he has to face the eternal judgment, which perhaps deprives him of the chance to resurrect, when the narrator pronounces him “dead, dead, dead” (ch. 51; 743). Although Jonas is not preordained to be a sinner, he is guaranteed by Providence to be punished. Let’s remember the narrator’s comment upon Bill Sikes: “Let no man talk of murderers escaping justice, and hint that Providence must sleep. There were twenty score of violent deaths in one long minute of that agony of fear” (OT 402). Dickens’s most explicit religious discourse, *The Life of Our Lord*, rests upon the theological idea of Providence (Colledge 42), and many plots from his early novels drew upon such a providential ordering of events. The villain often gets punished and the worthy is ultimately rewarded, as in the case of *Nicholas Nickleby* mentioned by Steven Marcus, where the Brothers Cheeryble are placed in Nicholas’s life to rescue him out of difficulties (Marcus 124). Such a fairy-tale quality, a Romantic stance which serves as an antidote to the Victorian spiritual crisis (Manson 6), is essential in most of Dickens’s works. In terms of plot, this

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quality satisfies the reader's expectation of a *Cinderella* narrative, in which good things ultimately happen to the worthy and punishment is inflicted on the villainous. But Dickens himself is never satisfied with this fairy-tale scheme. Even if he sometimes employs the structure and tone of a fairy tale, he would enrich, qualify, and even question this paradigm, as Cynthia Manson in her discussion of *Great Expectations* argues that "Dickens revises the Sleeping Beauty narrative to portray an alternate, spiritual conception of reality" (Manson 58).

Manson provides an example from Dickens's late works to show his ambivalence about fairy tales. I would argue that even in his early career Dickens begins to question this Romantic outlook on life. For Dickens reality has to be blended with Romance, a view that good and evil are not static, but fluid, categories, as Geoffrey Thurley comments on *Oliver Twist*, in which "the evil is consistently a means of arriving at the good, and vice versa"; a pattern, argues Thurley, that "runs through the book" (Thurley 104). In this world picture human beings are often caught in the quandary of having to choose between them. Similarly, John Noffsinger points out that in *The Curiosity Shop*, the world of innocence and the world of harsh reality are not isolated, but somehow connected by Nell's "dream": "dream as an insulating barrier between the inner and outer worlds is converted into dream as a mediator between these worlds" (Noffsinger 26).

Ralph Nickleby offers a perfect example here. The chief villain of the novel, Ralph is defined by two traits, the avaricious desire to acquire money, and the readiness to hate those who stand in the way of his acquisition (ch. 44; 536). These are the two attributes which Dickens always gives to the "devil" figures – Fagin, Daniel Quilp, and the elder Dombey are

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all Mammon-worshippers, and their avarice often generates hatred. Ralph is a devil figure because he is not able to comprehend the worth of anything beyond the gratification of his own avarice, and he cannot imagine anyone else doing so, as we are told that he “considers himself but a type of all humanity” (536). But Dickens refuses to cast him into a stereotype, for there are brief moments of revelation that haunt Ralph’s conscience. Here I beg to differ from Irving Kreutz’s observation that Ralph is “the least colorful of Dickens’s major villains”, who spares no efforts to ruin Nicholas out of mere “jealousy.” For Kreutz, Ralph exists for the sake of the plot, for he adds little, if any, to the idea of a “villain” already achieved in Fagin and Sikes (Kreutz 335). On the contrary, we are told over and again that even as he schemes against Kate or Nicholas, Ralph is often troubled by, as it were, his good angel. For instance, he enjoys the prospect of procuring large fortunes out of the potential marriage of Kate and Lord Frederick Verisopht, which he himself orchestrates, but he is also tormented by the idea of ruining his niece, a thought, we are told, “tinged with compassion and pity.” In his world of avarice and hatred, there is some residual goodness, “the faintest gleam of light – a most feeble and sickly ray at the best of times” (ch.26; 329).

Although these moments are brief and ineffectual, and this “light” is too feeble to dispel the darkness that defines the “devil” Ralph, these moments are revealing because they show Dickens’s refusal to succumb to the easy dichotomy of “good” and “evil.” We appreciate Ralph as a real character instead of a type when we are sometimes allowed to enter into his inner world, as, for example, when he feels himself “friendless, childless, and alone,” and when he imagines what his home would be like if Kate were there, there is “something humanizing and even gentle in his thoughts at that moment” (ch. 31; 384).

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It is the uncertain boundary between good and evil that makes it a trying, religious task for the characters to make the right choice. Nancy's dilemma in *Oliver Twist* perhaps exhibits all the contingencies and potentials of a "right" choice. Born and raised in the most abominable company, Nancy has to experience constant mental struggles for her innate goodness to triumph. The narrator only tells us half of the truth when he says "there was something of the woman's original nature left in her still" (332). This "something", namely, innate goodness, needs to be tested in moments of choice: as I've shown above, Ralph Nickleby also possesses this innate goodness but he ultimately allows his baser nature to take over. But Nancy's choice is not an easy one. " 'I am chained to my old life. I loathe and hate it now, but I cannot leave it,' she thus tells Mr. Brownlow who offers to rescue her from Bill Sike's clutches (388). She is torn between her conscience and guilt on the one hand, and her love and fear for Bill Sikes on the other. Within her limited range of freedom she resolves upon the most selfless decision, which ultimately costs her life. The moment of choice, then, is a moment of atonement: through her sacrifice of her life Nancy atones for the sins of her past. At the end of her life she even tries to open up the possibility of atonement for Bill Sikes, as she tells him that "it is never too late to repent. They told me so – I feel it now – but we must have time – a little, little time!" (Bk 3; ch. 9) Nancy's moral choice illustrates the kind of conversion that Barbara Hardy takes to be in common with those provided by George Eliot and Henry James, which "qualify a belief in determinism by a belief in freedom: environment, heredity, and chance combine to make conversion necessary, but individuals are given the insight and power to re-make themselves" (Hardy 49).

To conclude the analysis of *Nicholas Nickleby*, we need to analyze the scene describing

the internal struggle of Nicholas before he sets about to abort a fatal marriage, a treacherous plan of Ralph Nickleby's to marry Madeline Bray off to Arthur Gride, the former "a young, affectionate, and beautiful creature," and the latter "a wretch." For Nicholas the potential union of such two different people for a despicable purpose is so disturbing and incomprehensible, that it requires him to re-examine his perception of the world. It dawns upon him that such a "monstrous" deed is only one of those regular things which "went on from day to day in the same unvarying round." He considers "how youth and beauty died, and ugly gripping age lived tottering on – how crafty avarice grew rich, and manly honest hearts were poor and sad...." To sum up, Nicholas thinks "how much injustice, and misery, and wrong there was, and yet how the world rolled on from year to year, alike careless and indifferent, and no man seeking to remedy or redress it" (653). In order to turn the course of the event, therefore, Nicholas needs to try to convince Madeline not to take this fatal step, and to conceal his own affection for Madeline. To choose to do so means that Nicholas has to hide his own affection for Madeline. We are told that Nicholas "gradually summoned up his utmost energy, and by the time the morning was sufficiently advanced for his purpose, had no thought but that of using it to the best advantage" (653-4). He realizes that the "dark side" of the world won't be illuminated *for* him; he must make the right choice. To choose is to be a voluntary moral agent to bring about the desired end.

### **Dombey's Choice and Its Implications**

The previous section attempts to explain why for Dickens, the issue of good and evil – a moral theme – becomes a religious theme when we realize that Dickens perceives this issue as contingent upon human choice. This following section will continue this discussion by

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focusing on *Dombey and Son*, a work that, in a sense, summarizes Dickens's view of this issue. Before plunging into the depth of the novel, I would offer an observation that might help us see the connection between this novel and its predecessors. The "devil" figures such as Ralph Nickleby, Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Bill Sikes that Dickens created in his early career find their way into *Dombey and Son* in the character James Carker. Mr. Carker the manager is "sharp of tooth, soft of foot, watchful of eye, oily of tongue" (329), and his devious nature is often compared to a cat waiting for his prey, e.g., in a road trip of Mr. Dombey, Carker, Mrs. Skewton, and Edith, when we are told that "Mr. Carker cantered behind the carriage, at the distance of a hundred yards or so, and watched it, during all the ride, as if he were a cat, indeed, and its four occupants, mice" (423).

But despite the repeated suggestions of Carker as a devil figure, Dickens does not deny him a touch of humanity, which forces the reader to see Carker as a character, instead of a "type." In the scene that precedes his death, when Edith proudly withstands his threats and exposes his intrigue, he is compared to a fox whose "hide" has been "stripped off", and then he "sneaked away, abashed, degraded, and afraid" (829). Instead of subjecting him to a melodramatic ending like that of Quilp who was "buried with a stake through his heart," Dickens allows Carker moments of revelation, which, as inefficacious as they are, enable him to imagine the possibility of an alternative path he could have *chosen* to tread. These visions (835-8) culminate in the image of the "sun", the source of light and warmth: "he turned to where the sun was rising, and beheld it, in its glory, as it broke upon the scene" (841). It is the glory of the sun, "awful...transcendent in its beauty, so divinely solemn," that brings out the "light" from within his self, when the narrator asks us, "who shall say that some weak sense



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of virtue upon Earth, and its reward in Heaven, did not manifest itself, even to him? If ever he remembered sister or brother with a touch of tenderness and remorse, who shall say it was not then?" (842). As these examples demonstrate, Dickens's view of human nature has gradually evolved from a melodramatic presentation of sharp contrasts to a more realistic picture, a picture that recognizes the contradictions to reside in a human being, as the narrator reflects upon Mrs. Brown and her daughter Alice Marwood: "in this round world of many circles within circles, do we make a weary journey from the high grade to the low, to find that they lie close together, that the two extremes touch, and that our journey's end is but our starting place?" (540).

In this more realistic rendition of the world, "sin" is not confined to "villains" and attributed to their predestined nature, nor is "circumstances" held solely responsible. "Sin" is more like Milton's Satan who seizes every opportunity to tempt human beings. Whether to fall or not – whether to be Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost* or to be Jesus in *Paradise Regained* depends on the very choice people make. It is possible, therefore, for "villains" to do the second choosing, as it is inevitable for the "good" people to degenerate. In a letter that Dickens wrote to John Forster in 1846, he outlines his charted plot for the novel. In his original conception, Walter Gay, the young man who Florence finally marries, would turn into a sort of "villain." That is not, of course, what actually happens in the novel Dickens ultimately published, but what matters is the point that Dickens is trying to make. In a letter to Forster he writes:

I think it would be a good thing to disappoint all the expectations ...and to show him gradually and naturally trailing away, from that love of adventure and boyish

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light-heartedness, into negligence, idleness, dissipation, dishonesty, and ruin. To show, in short, that common, every-day, miserable declension of which we know so much in our ordinary life; to exhibit something of the philosophy of it, in great temptations and an easy nature; and to show how the good turns into bad, by degrees.<sup>48</sup>

This “philosophy” that Dickens endeavors to exhibit signifies the emergence of a world picture that makes “choice” all the more important.

Dickens seems to be emphasizing this notion of “choice” in Alice Marwood’s two responses to her sufferings, first in the middle of the novel, second toward the end. When Alice first encounters Harriet Carker to whom she relates her misfortune, Harriet asks her if she is “penitent”, to which Alice retorts, “ ‘Why should *I* be penitent, and all the world go free. They talk of me of my penitence. Who’s penitent for the wrongs that have been done to me?’” (526 emphasis original) As the novel unfolds, her refusal to repent, however, gradually turns into a willingness to take the responsibility of her wrongdoings. In their final encounter, Alice confesses to Harriet: “ ‘I had heard so much, in my wrong-doing, of my neglected duty, that I took up with the belief that duty had not been done to me, and that as the seed was sown, the harvest grew. I somehow made it out that when ladies had bad homes and mothers, they went wrong in their way, too’” (891). She seems to be voicing Dickens’s belief that it is the personal choice, the existential task for everyman, that ultimately determines who we are, and for Dickens, as it is for Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, this choice must be resolved into Christian principles: Alice finally resorts to divine help, as she asks Harriet to read more of

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<sup>48</sup> Letter to John Forster July 25-6, 1846. *Letters*. Vol. IV. 593.

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the “blessed history” to her (892).

If *Dombey and Son* is a novel that emphasizes, and even hinges upon this notion of “choice,” particularly the choice between good and evil, then no other character exhibits all its complexities, dynamics and consequences more fully than Paul Dombey senior. On the surface, he prefers his son Paul to his daughter Florence, which almost becomes a motif in the novel, and the reading of the novel is a process of constantly inquiring into the reason behind Dombey’s preference. Of course Paul is not the incarnation of “evil,” nor is Florence the naïve representation of pure good like Little Nell. Dombey, Paul, and Florence are all figural characters, and their relations with each other generate new moral significances. In the following space I will try to unravel the meanings of this group of characters and to answer what this “choice” entails in the novel.

One way to read Dombey’s treatment of his daughter is to see him as a derelict parent, a character in league with Mrs. Jellyby in *Bleak House*, Mr. Dorrit in *Little Dorrit*, and Jenny Wren’s father in *Our Mutual Friend*. But this is not our approach here. If we say Dombey sins and we want to pinpoint in what way he sins beyond the mention of his “pride,” we need to see that his sin lies in his consciousness of his choice. For one thing, the idea of Florence is a haunting presence looming in Dombey’s consciousness. For example, in the trip with Major Bagstock after Paul dies, the image of Florence’s face in his mind troubles Dombey and makes him reflect upon the death of Paul: “why was the object of his hope removed instead of her?” The choice he makes is not based on a failure to recognize Florence’s virtue, but is a deliberate decision to banish the goodness: “He rejected the angel, and took up with the tormenting spirit crouching in his bosom. Her patience, goodness, youth, devotion, love, were

as so many atoms in the ashes upon which he set his heel” (313).

We see again and again Dombey resisting Florence’s good influence, in the course of which his dislike escalates. The sight of Florence pampering Paul annoys him (69-71), as does the mention of Florence’s name by Mr. Carker does when he refers to the prospect of Walter Gay, upon which “angry thoughts in reference to poor Florence brooded and bred in Mr. Dombey’s breast, usurping the place of the cold dislike that generally reigned there” (402). It finally turns into downright hatred,<sup>49</sup> when Dombey realizes that the bond between Florence and Edith, something he longs for between Edith and himself, is a challenge to his pride and a threat to his authority in the house. These thoughts make him realize, perhaps to his own horror, that “he DID hate her in his heart”; he also makes the deliberate choice to hate her, as the narrator says, “yes, and he would have it hatred, and he made it hatred....In his sullen and unwholesome brooding, the unhappy man...made a distorted picture of his rights and wrongs, and justified himself with it against her” (609-10). And, just as Kierkegaard says, that “every unrepented sin is a new sin; and every moment it is unrepented is a new sin” (*Sickness unto Death* 138), Dombey cancels the possibility of redemption, the “awakened feeling in his breast,” when he “silenced the distant thunder with the rolling of his sea of pride” (610). The passages I quoted above chart the downward journey of Dombey’s soul, accentuated with decisions to reject the angel. But to stop here is to have a valid, but oversimplified, unsatisfying reading of the novel. It is perhaps more rewarding to probe into the cause and implications of Dombey’s choice.

Dombey’s neglect of his daughter is symptomatic of his alienation from human

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<sup>49</sup> In the letter to Forster Dickens makes a specific point about Dombey’s indifference turning into hatred. He says “I purpose changing his feeling of indifference and uneasiness towards his daughter into a positive hatred.” (1846 June)

interrelations. He interacts with other people in a mechanical, non-human, and matter-of-fact fashion, and in his point of view human beings are transformed into inanimate things. A few examples might suffice to illustrate this point. His newly born son, for example, is a “muffin” (11); he reminds Polly, the woman whom he hires as Paul’s nurse, that between the son and herself there is no need to form an attachment (28). If he feels sorrowful at his wife’s imminent death, it is only as if “he would find a something gone from among his plate and furniture” (15). His second marriage with Edith is conceived, from the very beginning, as a “bargain,” and when cornered by Edith whether he knows she has never loved him, he answers that questions like this “are all wide of the purpose” (615).

We can read Dombey’s callousness as characteristic of what classical political economy calls an “economic man.” The “whole of man’s nature”, says John Stuart Mill, is not given to this economic man; rather, he is only “a being who desires to possess wealth, and who is capable of judging the comparative efficacy of means for obtaining that end.”<sup>50</sup> Dickens purposefully depicts such a man to show that he is flawed, with the “one idea of the Son taking firmer and firmer possession of him, swelling and bloating his pride to a prodigious extent.”<sup>51</sup> Dickens’s commentary on Dombey’s philosophy is not unlike John Ruskin’s essays *Unto This Last*, published some thirteen years later. In these essays Ruskin critiques the basic assumption of political economy, whose fault, he says, lies precisely in “the negation of a soul.” What lies behind the political economy theory is the assumption of utilitarianism, which Ruskin refutes. He says, “No human actions ever were intended by the Maker of men to be guided by balances of expediency, but by balances of justice.” The

<sup>50</sup> See Mill’s ‘On the Definition of Political Economy, and on the Method of Investigation Proper to It’ (1836).

<sup>51</sup> Letter to Forster, July 25-6 1846. *Letters*. 592-4.

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“political-economical view,” says Ruskin, would be universally adequate if the people it deals with are “an engine of which the motive power was steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any other agent of calculable force.” But human beings, he maintains, are “an engine whose motive power is a Soul” (*Unto This Last* 169-70)<sup>52</sup>.

The details of Dombey’s treatment of other people which I quoted earlier point to an explanation that Dombey represents the Utilitarian worldview, a view in conflict with the one of love and sympathy, symbolized by Florence. Dombey’s choice is a choice between these two worldviews. According to Jeremy Bentham, the founder of modern Utilitarianism, the only self-evident and ultimately fundamental principle in human sphere is what he calls “the principle of utility,” a principle “which approves or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question” (*Principles* 12). Other principles, therefore, are either derivatives or illustrations of this foundational principle, such as the principle of sympathy and antipathy, the principle of right and wrong, and the theological principle. No motives are constantly good or evil, says Bentham; “good, on account of their tendency to produce pleasure, or avert pain: bad, on account of their tendency to produce pain, or avert pleasure” (100). Sympathy in particular is only a “circumstance” that influences the pursuit of pleasure, or, in other words, “a secondary pleasure,” e.g., understanding from other people that only serves to enhance the pleasure of one’s own. This is only a simplified version of Benthamite philosophy, a philosophy largely responsible for John Stuart Mill’s mental crisis, in order to recover from which he later modified the utilitarian principle. “Bentham’s idea of the world”,

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<sup>52</sup> We know that Dickens had read Ruskin and admired his work. See Edgar Johnson page 504.

says Mill, “is that of a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest or pleasure” (“Bentham, 70). In this world a particularly essential faculty is missing, namely, the faculty of fellow feeling, which transcends the physical conception of the world and immortalizes personal happiness, which in Bentham’s is to be cut short by one’s death: “those who have also cultivated a fellow feeling with the collective interests of mankind, retain as lively an interest in life on the eve of death as in the vigour of youth and health” (Mill, 145).

But all that matters is Dickens’s own take on utilitarianism. We have more or less accepted the idea that in *Hard Times* Dickens satirizes utilitarian principles,<sup>53</sup> but his encounter with this kind of skeptical thinking dated back at least twenty years before *Hard Times*. J. K. Fielding, for instance, argues that *Oliver Twist* is a novel that revolts against “the rationalistic Utilitarianism of its particular time (the 1830s)”; otherwise, how else, asks Fielding, can we account for Nancy’s voluntary sacrifice which is clearly against her best interest? (Fielding 50-9). Fielding’s study gives us ample reason to suspect that the “philosophers” mentioned in *Dombey and Son* might refer to Utilitarian thinkers. The explanations given to Dombey’s partiality for his son are remarkably akin to Bentham’s analysis of sympathy – both stem from selfishness, which is “at the root of our best loves and affections”, and we are told that “There is no doubt his parental affection might have been easily traced, like many a goodly superstructure of fair fame, to a very low foundation” (108-9).

It is unfair to judge Dombey to be a soulless character; it is perhaps more appropriate to read him as a soul afflicted, alienated, and imprisoned. By what force is his soul engaged I

<sup>53</sup> See Edgar Johnson pp 802, 1065; Michael Slater pp 375-384.

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will discuss later, but alienation itself is a sign of sinfulness, a statement Dickens makes again and again in his works (think about the cohort of Ralph Nickleby, Jonas Chuzzlewit, and Scrooge). Not only has Dombey been so long “shut up within himself”(315) and he “hides the world within him from the world without”(773), his house is also “solitary and deserted.” A picture of living hell is conjured up with “keys rusted,” “dust,” “fungus,” “spiders, moths, and grubs.” The extinguishers outside of the door seem to say, “ ‘Who enter here, leave light behind!’” By invoking Dante’s *Inferno*, Dickens suggests that the Dombey house is a spiritual wasteland and the master of the house is a condemned soul waiting to be saved. The only redeeming force, the light that breaks through darkness, is Florence. The sin of Dombey lies precisely in his resisting this light. If Satan’s refusal to repent is the very condition of being cursed, then so is Dombey’s resistance of Florence:

It is the curse of such a nature – it is a main part of the heavy retribution on itself it bears within itself – that while deference and concession swell its evil qualities, and are the food it grows upon, resistance, and a questioning of its exacting claims, foster it too, no less. The evil that is in it finds equally its means of growth and propagation in opposite (608).

It is revealing to examine the Dombey - Florence scenes in the course of novel, from which a pattern emerges: Dombey is shown to be consistently shunning direct encounter with Florence. In fact, his coldness also extends to everyone with whom he encounters, as Elizabeth Gitter observes, “he gives orders and makes pronouncements, but never exchanges pleasantries” (Gitter 101). The first time ever we see him talk to Florence, we are warned by the narrator that Dombey “was ill at ease about” Florence, which makes him unable to see



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“how her overcharged young heart was wandering to find some natural resting-place, for its sorrow and affection.” But when we hear him talk to Florence, we notice, perhaps with bewilderment, that he address her in the third person: “ ‘come in,’” he said, when she stops at his door, and asks her, “ ‘what is the child afraid of?’” Substituting the objective, third person “the child” for “you” – a simple, straightforward, and perhaps humane address, Dombey distances himself infinitely from his daughter. (43) When Walter Gay comes to ask for a loan from Dombey, he is introduced by Florence, upon which Dombey asks “ ‘What does she mean? What is this?’” When Florence confirms that Walter is the man who saves her before, Dombey again asks, “Does she mean young Gay, Louisa?” (149) It is as if Dombey is by instinct unable to communicate with Florence. We also read variations of this pattern when we find, for example, that many of Dombey’s conversations with Florence are narrated, instead of being quoted in direct speech. We read about his cold, mechanical “kiss” to his daughter (99), his inability to enjoy the sight of Florence pampering little Paul (192), and his “stiffly” greeting Florence after her long absence : “how do you do?” (443)

If Florence represents the angelic impulse in human nature, then to resist Florence is to resist the infinite, to deny the possibility of transcending the human limitations. Dombey’s downfall lies in his inability to face Florence, to talk to her, and to understand her. That is why his final redemption is not brought about by the *knowledge* of his past misdoing, for we know that no matter how much he thinks about “what might have been, and what was not,” he is still a “spectral, haggard, wasted likeness of himself” (907-9). Rather, his suffering ends the moment he allows himself to actually *hear* Florence’s voice and express himself by saying “Oh my God, forgive me, for I need it very much”, after which they remain “clasped

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in one another's arms, in the glorious sunshine that had crept in with Florence" (911).

"Communication" itself has become a trope for this novel, as Patricia Ingram wonderfully argues, and much of the novel is centered on the failure of communication: "Once Dombey accepts communications from the outside world his monstrous delusion crumbles and he crumbles with it.... In the final sentence of the novel he expresses his love for Florence to her daughter in direct speech with what seems like a half-pun, but no trace remains of the 'great' Dombey evoked earlier" (Ingram 153).

If we could borrow Martin Buber's "primary words," then, Dombey's choice is ultimately the choice to employ the "*I – It*" attitude toward the world over the "*I – Thou*" attitude. According to Buber, the world itself and men's experience in the world, including the "pleasure" and "pain", the two key words in Utilitarianism, are all in the realm of "*It*": "I perceive something. I am sensible of something. I imagine something. I will something. I feel something. I think something.... This and the like together establish the realm of *It*" (Buber 44). The "*Thou*", on the other hand, signifies direct relations. In fact, everything in the realm of *It* has the potential of becoming "*Thou*", if man steps into direct relation with it. Buber specifies this relation as "love", a divine quality that is fundamentally different from empirical "feelings." He says, "Love ranges in its effect through the whole world. In the eyes of him who takes his stand in love, and gazes out of it, men are cut free from their entanglement in bustling activity." In other words, it is love that transforms the "objects" in the realm of *It* into *Thou*: everything, says Buber, if the man is willing to meet with love, "steps forth in their singleness, and confront him as *Thou*" (Buber 48).

We can better understand Dombey's "coldness" if we come to see his inability to allow

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himself to live in the “*I-Thou*” relation. An alternative way of understanding his “coldness”, as Elizabeth Gitter does, is to read it in the material sense. Dombey’s chief humor, in the language of ancient humoralism, is “melancholy,” the one characterized with cold and dryness. Noticing the obvious lack of biographical reasons for Dombey’s coldness in the novel, Gitter argues that “in his portrait of Dombey, the most self-enslaved and self-defeating of his major characters, Dickens reanimates the dead metaphors of the humors to evoke this dynamic interaction of body and mind” (Gitter 106-7). Gitter’s reading, however, fails to see the philosophical foundation of utilitarianism that defines Dombey. Every kind of relation he forms with people – with his servants, his wife, and his daughter – is formal, mechanical, and loveless. He performs rituals as formalities and deprives them of their real meaning, for instance, the baptism of Paul, and the marriage with Edith. He lives in the mere abstraction. In a word, the “world” for him is an *It* – “what the world thinks of him, how it looks at him, what it sees in him, and what it says...the haunting demon of his mind” (774). He refuses to come to embrace the world with love, and in the end, the “world” would in turn refuse to offer companionship: when Edith leaves him, “Mr. Dombey and the world are *alone* together” (781, emphasis mine).

But the most pungent irony is that even his son, for whom Dombey’s purported love can be traced “to a very low foundation,” is also only an “object” for him, someone he does not even understand. It is the “idea” of the son that he entertains, a son whose utility can only be realized in the future. In Buber’s vocabulary, the idea of the son constitutes one of the “*Its*” in Dombey’s conception of his world, and for Buber, the “*It*” has no present: “in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his

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moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been” (Buber 47). By implication, we might say that “objects” has content both in the past and in the future, but not in the present. That is why we are told that Dombey is always impatient “to advance into the future, and to hurry over the intervening passages of his history” (109), regarding any extra time for Paul’s recuperation “a stoppage and delay upon the road the child must traverse, slowly at the best, before the goal was reached” (116), and when he discusses the education of Paul with Mrs. Pipchin he makes it clear that his son’s life “was clear and prepared, and marked out, before he existed” (160).

But Dombey is troubled by the vision of *I-Thou*, nevertheless. If Dombey were only surrounded by people like Mr. Carker or Mrs. Skewton – people who, like Dombey himself, treat other people as if they were commodities, he would have had a happy existence. But Florence, the symbol of love, intrudes into his world of *I-It*, the world of calculation, the world. In Buber’s wonderful metaphor for this intrusion, for men who cannot see anything beyond the *It*, “the moments of the *Thou* appear as strange lyric and dramatic episodes, seductive and magical, but tearing us away to dangerous extremes, loosening the well-trying context, leaving more questions than satisfaction behind them, shattering security” (Buber 54). This explains why Dombey’s indifference to Florence gradually turns into positive hatred (609). He has chosen the *I-It* as his credo, but he is tormented by the world of sympathy and love from which he cuts himself off. Once again, Buber provides a perfect footnote to Dombey when he describes the man who cannot say “*Thou*”: “He finds himself unable to say the primary word to the other human being confronting him. This word [*Thou*] consistently involves an affirmation of the being addressed. He is therefore compelled to

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reject either the other or himself” (Buber 49). In rejecting Florence, the “*Thou*,” Dombey has denied himself the possibility of becoming the “*I*”, the ultimately existential task “of becoming subjective” (Kierkegaard Anthology 207).

The incompatibility of these two worldviews, the “*I-It*” versus “*I-Thou*”, or the world of utilitarianism versus the world of love and sympathy, accounts for Little Paul’s premature death. The reader might recall the only significant conversation between father and son on the use of money, when Paul seems to challenge the Utilitarian view that his father holds: “ ‘Why didn’t money save me my mama?’”(111) Dombey’s explanation that money ensures the greatest amount of happiness in this world cannot satisfy little Paul, who realizes that there are certain laws – the law of nature, for instance – above the utilitarian principles. Paul is “predestined” to be the sole inheritor of the family business, but he has, in Mrs. Chick’s words, a soul “too large for his frame” (113), a soul that yearns for the transcendent, something that cannot be realized in the Dombey house. Paul Dombey Junior’s death, therefore, is metaphorical, as argued by Michael Goldberg: “it is the burden of the whole context of Dickens’s moral fable to make it clear that his death is the result of some deep inward rupture” (Goldberg 55).

This further explains the description of little Paul’s poor constitution, a metaphor that bespeaks the incompatibility between his natural temperament and the expectations placed on him. His death is also Dickens’s prophecy about the sterility of the Dombey family: without love people cannot reproduce. “Naturally delicate,” his health is exacerbated after the sympathetic nurse Polly is dismissed, and he “seemed but to wait his opportunity of gliding through [his family]’s hands, and seeking his lost mother” (107). Instead of thriving in Dr.

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Blimber's establishment, as his father wishes, Paul gives everyone an impression that he is "old-fashioned." He imagines the happy life in the future with Florence in "a beautiful garden, fields, and woods", but he also has a presentiment that he might not live to fulfill his dream. The harsh reality is that his father, with his Utilitarian philosophy and an attitude to treat everything and everybody, his son included, as an *It*, can never allow Paul's fancy to be realized. But this is too much for him to understand at his age, so he wonders what being "old-fashioned" could mean, "with a palpitating heart, that was so visibly expressed in him; so plainly seen by so many people!" (215) Paul is a child misplaced in his time, who prematurely experiences senility in his juvenility, an anachronism Dickens stages to attack the withering effect that Utilitarian principles exert on the vulnerable faculty of imagination. An analogy to this child misplaced in his time is the son of Jude and Arabella in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. Nicknamed "Little Father Time," the child is described as "Age masquerading as Juvenility," who finally hangs himself together with his two little brothers for the reason that "we are too many" (*Jude*, 325). The difference between these two equally disturbing pictures is that for Hardy, almost every major character is temporally misplaced, including Jude himself; Dickens, on the other hand, is more optimistic in giving Florence, the incarnation of love, the power to redeem Dombey.

Yet Paul is always hearing the waves, the voice of the sea. Rather than seeing this as a way in which Dickens "introduces his interest in mesmerism," as Stella Pratt-Smith argues (16), I contend that in Paul's interaction with the unseen world, he is expressing his yearning to capture the moments of transcendence in his benumbing routine life, which is why he explains to Florence that he hears something beyond the mere "sound," and then he would

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“try to understand what it was that the waves were always saying; and would rise up in his couch to look towards that invisible region, far away” (129). He would imagine being beckoned to the sea, where his mother is (191). The sea has a “mysterious murmur” that speaks to him, and “even his old-fashioned reputation seemed to be allied to it.” What’s significant is that these moments, instead of disturbing his peace of mind, actually make him happy, when he “sat musing, listening, looking on, and dreaming” (227). The imagery of water and sea has attracted the attention of many critics. Some, like Claire Senior, reads the sea as a symbol of femininity, set in contrast to the world of masculinity represented by Dombey. “Water within this novel,” says Senior, “seems to represent...a shared community of feminine feeling (though not limited in its expression to the female gender) which excludes Dombey” (Senior 108). Paul’s death, he argues, results from his inability to survive in the masculine world. We can see that “in spite of his father’s attempts to separate him from the feminine world – from his mother, from his wet-nurse and finally, from Florence – he defines himself in relation *to* them, rather than *against* them, as his father wishes him to do.” Senior concludes that Paul’s “identity...is invalidated because he cannot perform his gender” (Senior 111)

This gendered reading, Senior points out, shows Dickens’s “inability to decide whether to privilege the masculine or the feminine (117). But Dickens does not have to decide. If Dickens is configuring some kind of choice, then, the choice is not about gender but about worldviews, as I have argued before. Some critics have been willing to take Dickens’s own word that the waves and the sea are a symbol of eternity.<sup>54</sup> It is, furthermore, set in contrast

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<sup>54</sup> See chapter 12 in *The Poetics of Poesis* by Felicia Bonaparte, in which she discusses Dickens’s use of the water imagery.

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with the image of “river”, especially the “rushing river” in Paul’s dying vision that he believes is “bearing [him] away.” We are told that in Paul’s last days, “his only trouble was the swift and rapid river. He felt forced, sometimes, to try to stop it—to stem it with his childish hands—or choke its way with sand—and when he saw it coming on, resistless, he cried out” (248-50). The river – often a symbol of time, as argued by Bonaparte– stands for development and progress, utilitarian values designed for Paul to represent, but for which Paul is ill prepared. It is worth noting that time in this novel is both progressive in this sense and repetitive and impersonal, as Michel Ginsberg argues, because “Mr. Dombey sees history as a repetitive process by which a son joins and then replaces his father, to be then joined and replaced by his own son, to the end of time” (Ginsberg 59).

The mystery of infinity is not accessible to everyone, but is privy to those who are endowed with sympathy and imagination. After Florence’s wedding ceremony with Walter, the narrator tells us that ‘the voices of the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring, of love – of love, eternal and illimitable, not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time’ (876). For instance, Edith is said to be standing upon the margin of the sea alone, “listening to its waves”, while her mother Mrs. Skewton, the woman behind the mask of her own make-up, who treats her daughter as a commodity in a bargain, has no connection with the invisible world. Though physically close to the sea, Mrs. Skewton “lies and listens to it by the hours; but its speech is dark and gloomy to her”; what she perceives is only “a broad stretch of desolation between earth and heaven” (634).

But Paul dies, after all, and the longing for the eternal, logically, seems to die with him. This conclusion somehow contradicts our experience of reading this novel. In fact, the death



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of Paul Dombey complicates the choice between the world of utilitarianism and the world of eternity, warning the reader that it's not adequate simply to imagine the infinite. Rather, the infinite needs to be realized in the actual living experience, and the site of this experience is assigned by Dickens to the Wooden Midshipman, where the Christian virtues of love and duty is exemplified in the characters Solomon Gills, Walter Gay, and especially Captain Cuttle.

If the sea represents infinity and eternity, ideas foreign to the House of Dombey, then the Wooden Midshipman, by virtue of the nature of its business, is also symbolic of transcendental values. Its stock comprises, we are told, "barometers, telescopes, compasses, charts, maps, sextants, quadrants, and specimens of every kind of instrument used in the working of a ship's course, or the keeping of a ship's reckoning, or the prosecuting of a ship's discoveries" (47), things which, according to Claire Senior, indicate a "sophisticated degree of understanding" of the sea (Senior 114). Juxtaposing Paul Dombey with the cast found in the Wooden Midshipman, both in some way associating with the sea, Dickens is signaling two kinds of relations with the eternal. He seems to imply that it is not enough to long for, and simply impossible to live in the abstract infinite (to which Paul's death testifies). Rather, we need to embody the infinite in the concrete everyday life, an existential position Dickens maintains all his life (see the discussion of *The Life of Our Lord* and *Bleak House* in chapter I). As Ella Westland astutely observes, "the archetypal ocean is a void, elemental, unsayable, whereas the sea of Gills, Gay, Cuttle, and Bunsby is a cultured zone, peopled with vivid characters and teeming with wonderful narratives"(Westland 88).

It is in the Midshipman that Florence finds her shelter after being struck by her father

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and realizing that “she had no father upon earth, and...orphaned” (721). Ella Westland reads Florence’s retreat to the Wooden Midshipman as an “escape route for Florence from the repressive coldness of a patriarchally controlled bourgeois household to the relaxed warmth of an extended family,” which is further parallel to Dickens’s own escape from “repressiveness of realism into the comparative freedom of popular culture” (Westland 89). Westland’s is a shrewd observation, adding the dimension of popular culture (melodrama; Victorian shadow show) to the richness of the novel, but I cannot agree with her assumption that Dickens is struggling between the “repressive realism” and the fantasy world. As I argued before, Dombey himself is a larger-than-life character, representing the kind of “economic man” who is imprisoned in the world of Utilitarianism. What this world lacks and rejects – love (that’s why Paul would die and Florence would be disowned), is found in the Wooden Midshipman, the inhabitants of which in their daily life embody the eternal values. Take Walter’s purported death for example. Upon the news, both Solomon Gills and Captain Cuttle commemorate the immortality of the soul, each in his own way. Gills, although often complaining about his being “behind the time,” loses no time in undertaking the pilgrimage to look for Walter, not unlike Mr. Peggoty’s search for Emily in *Copperfield*. Captain Cuttle, on the other hand, “opened the prayer-book at the Burial Service...reading softly to himself....The Captain, in a true and simple spirit, committed Walter’s body to the deep” (513).

Up to this point I have examined the significance and implications of Dombey’s choice and argued that his choice is not simply about family heir or heiress but about worldviews. The idea of choice is so important that Dickens strengthens it by constructing parallel plots.

Harriet Carker, for example, chooses to stay with her once errant but later repentant brother John. We are told that she “went over to him in his shame and put her hand in his, and with a sweet composure and determination, led him hopefully upon his barren way” (515). When he was young John once made a wrong choice by stealing money from Dombey’s company, but the consequence of this choice, which would have been disastrous, is obliterated by Harriet’s choice of forgiveness, which finally becomes the agency of John’s redemption. On the other hand we have Rob the Grinder who, although having been instructed by Captain Cuttle in the Christian virtues,<sup>55</sup> finally chooses to be the spy for James Carker. These subplots reinforce the point I have been trying to make in this chapter, that in Dickens’s mature works, characters are never purely good or purely evil; they inhabit the moral realm by making choices. In the following chapter, I will proceed to argue that his characters’ choices can also go beyond the category of good and evil. Just like Kierkegaard’s Abraham, sometimes Dickens asks his characters to choose the impossible.

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<sup>55</sup> Cuttle reads him a section of the Bible every day. See page 590.

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## Chapter IV: Natural Selection, Free Choice, and *Our Mutual Friend*

Better, tho difficult, th' right way to go,  
Than wrong, though easie, where the end is wo.

John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Growing up brought responsibilities, he found. Events did not rhyme quite as he had thought. Nature's logic was too horrid for him to care for. That mercy towards one set of creatures was cruelty towards another sickened his sense of harmony.

Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*

### Design, Darwin, and Dickens

This chapter examines the possibility and the implications of free choice, an important aspect of Protestant tradition of Christianity to which Dickens belongs.<sup>56</sup> The text in which this issue is contextualized most thoroughly, hence my focus in this chapter, is his last published novel *Our Mutual Friend* (1865). By pairing this idea with this particular text I do not, however, imply that any idea in Dickens's religious thoughts can be isolated. Dickens's religious imagination is to be treated as an organic whole, so is his entire oeuvre required to be seen as a homogeneous entity. For example, the issue of free will has always been Dickens's concern, as in Nancy's choice to save Oliver in *Oliver Twist* and in Sydney Carton's voluntary sacrifice of his life in *The Tale of Two Cities*. What we are exploring is the sense of continuity in his career as well as the sense of development. For my present

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<sup>56</sup> Humphrey House claims that "the Anglican Church is firmly built into the Dickens Landscape" (House 110); Ivor Brown argues that about the Protestant tradition, Dickens hates the nonconformists for their hypocrisy but felt "less hostile to the Anglican Church," which for Dickens had to "purge its guilt by drastic reforms" (Brown 172); Dennis Walder points out Dickens's distrust of Catholicism. "If, in *Barnaby Rudge*, Dickens promotes a liberal Protestant attitude towards Roman Catholics, it is evident from subsequent works, most notably *Pictures from Italy*, and *A Child's History of England*, that he came to feel powerful antipathies towards the characteristic features of the Catholic religion" (92); later Walder summarizes Dickens's attitude toward the Anglican Church: "despite his anti-clericalism, Dickens did not ever break entirely his connections with broadly Anglican faith and practice" (209).

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purpose, I find that characters that are infected with *akrasia*, or *Angst* – James Steerforth, Richard Carstone, Arthur Clennam, and Sydney Carton – a group of figures I examined in the second chapter who cannot bring themselves to make a choice, have their counterpart in the character Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*.

The first impression we are given of Eugene is that he is a passive, inert figure in the banquet given by the Veneerings, among a group of guests reflected in the “mirror,” where he is described as being “buried alive”(21). A colleague and partner of Lightwood Mortimer, Eugene is also in the legal profession, but he has no passion for his vocation, which, he confesses, was “forced upon [him]” because they “wanted a barrister in the family.” “Energy” is the word he detests most, as he says, “if there is a word in the dictionary under any letter from A to Z that I abominate, it is energy. It is such a conventional superstition, such parrot gabble” (29-30). When Mr. Boffin reminds him of bees whose main virtue is diligence, Eugene retorts that the bees “are so incessantly boring and buzzing at their one idea till Death comes upon them,” and that he “protests against the tyrannical humbug of [Mr. Boffin’s] friend the bee” (99).

In terms of this chronic lethargy, Eugene is in line with several Dickensian characters I discussed more fully in chapter two, but this anguish over the lack of will is by no means unique to Dickens. It is much denounced in the Victorian period, a dynamic era that emphasizes earnestness and diligence more than ever. It is in this spirit that Thomas Carlyle makes his stentorian statement that “there is a perennial nobleness, and even sacredness, in work” (*Past and Present*). Similarly preoccupied with the lack of will but much later, Matthew Arnold sees the Hellenic “genius” – “the love and pursuit of perfection” –as the

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antidote to the social and mental lethargy of the English society (*Culture and Anarchy*, 109-110). Ralph Waldo Emerson thinks the best way to counterbalance “inertia” is to fight “conformity,” as he says, “with consistency a great soul has nothing to do....To be great is to be misunderstood.” Perhaps the most succinct and the most visual expression of this sentiment is the Pre-Raphaelite painting “Work”(1852-63) by Ford Madox Brown, a visual art work inspired by Carlyle’s notion of work and even including Carlyle as a figure. In this painting many kinds of laborers are celebrated, such as navies, haymakers, sellers, and policemen.

The kind of “work” depicted in the painting is not simply manual, but also of religious significance, as we are told that Brown’s painting “engages with mid-Victorian intellectual debates about the meaning and value of labour, in which religion played a central role” (*Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Art and Design*, 130). Of course Eugene Wrayburn and his fellow sufferers from *akrasia* (Steerforth, Richard Carstone) are not to be found anywhere in Brown’s painting. Their idleness would prevent them from participating in the secular salvation, a vision conveyed in Brown’s work. The reason for Eugene’s absence in this painting, therefore, is not that he refuses to labor (for he *does* do some work in a sense), but that his idleness implies the spiritual void in his inner world. All the characters in Eugene’s company, therefore, needs to find meaningful work in order to anchor their energy.

Yet in Eugene’s case there is another dimension to his lethargy: he is also of a cynical mindset. “ ‘In susceptibility to boredom’, he tells Mortimer, he is “the most consistent of mankind” (150). His cynicism is existential in the sense that the world for him exhibits neither meaning nor order, but simply absurdities. When questioned by Mortimer why he is

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so “ridiculous,” Eugene answers, “I am in a ridiculous humour . . . . I am a ridiculous fellow. Everything is ridiculous” (167). This existential despair over the lack of purpose is set in sharp contrast to the steadfastness of Lizzie Hexam, a girl about whom the above conversation is concerned. A key word in Eugene’s vocabulary that can easily escape our attention is “design.” Asked by Mortimer whether he has any “design,” which, in the immediate context, means any “plan” about Lizzie Hexam, Eugene gives a negative answer. But Eugene doesn’t stop here; he continues to play with this word by taking it out of the context, as he says, “I don’t design anything. I have no design whatever. I am incapable of designs. If I conceived a design, I should speedily abandon it, exhausted by the operation” (292).

Here we are given not only a mundane answer to Mortimer’s query about Eugene’s plans, but also a glimpse of Eugene’s epistemological framework; from these words we might conjecture that Eugene inhabits a world in which everything depends on mere chance, a world without any preordained order. Could this philosophical background be the real source of Eugene’s idleness? One of the definitions of the word “design” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the “fulfillment of a prearranged plan; adaptation of means to an end. Chiefly in theological contexts, with reference to the belief that the universe manifests divine forethought and testifies to an intelligent creator, usually identified as God” (*OED*, entry “design”). As Sally Ledger trenchantly observes, behind Eugene’s seemingly casual talk, there is the authorial “fear” that “not only there is no design in the desultory desires of a languid son of a landed gentry or in the irrational amoral world of London’s powerful money markets but, more generally, and much more troublingly, that there is no ethical design in the

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wider post-Darwinian world” (Ledger 376). The absence of “design” for Eugene, then, signals a way of perceiving the world in this novel. Whether there is a competing perception at work in the novel I will proceed to answer in this chapter.

The world in Eugene’s eyes, I argue, is a Darwinian universe where there is no trace of any sense of order, either preordained or artificial. We know from biographies that Dickens had long been exposed to, and interested in, the scientific development of his time, and Michael Slater even specifies that Dickens was much keen on reading Robert Chambers’s *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), which was published fifteen years before *The Origin of Species*. In a review Dickens wrote for *Examiner*, Slater tells us, Dickens “may have espoused Chambers’s ‘Theory of Development,’ a notable forerunner of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*” and Slater notes that Chambers’s theory is “a good deal less alarming to Christian susceptibilities” (277). The difference between Chambers and Darwin, however, is immense. If we actually examine Chambers’s arguments, we find that he is espousing a natural theology, an “argument from design,” a kind of reasoning that tries to reconcile the contradiction between science and faith. This reasoning, however, is precisely what Darwin tries to refute, despite his own apology in the end of *Origin*, that “*probably* all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form, into which life was first breathed by the Creator” (*Origin*, 391).

Chambers endeavors to solve the conflict between natural selection on the one hand, which he demonstrates in great details in all kinds of life forms, and religious belief on the other hand that the world is created by God. His book surely anticipated Darwin’s thoughts in some ways. For instance, like Darwin, he places human beings not as the center, but as a



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member in a democratic ecosystem. The difference between man and lower animals, according to Chambers, lies only in degrees. “Instinct,” in both Chambers and Darwin, is the fundamental cause of human behaviors, a utilitarian view not unlike Bentham’s. “All faculties,” says Chambers, “are instinctive, that is, dependent on internal and inherent impulses” (358). In light of this argument, the notion of “free will” is demystified and reduced to “nothing more than a vicissitude in the supremacy of the faculties over each other” (362). In other words, it is simply because our human instincts are many and different instincts dominate our actions in different times that we have a delusion of being somewhat “free.” Besides these points of similarity, Chambers’s view is far more conservative than Darwin’s. His emphasis on the notion of “law” marks the point of departure from the Darwinian theory. In Chambers’s view, although living creatures exhibit an infinite number of variations, there is an underlying “invariable order observed in certain series of occurrences.” This underlying regularity under the irregular surface further proves the existence of a supernatural Being, “for whose modes of action, nature and natural law are but representative terms” (25-28). Sin, a prominent idea in traditional theology, is explained away in the logic of Natural Theology. “Evil” is but an exception to the generally benevolent scheme of things. “The criminal type of brain,” suggests Chambers, is not “the result of the first or general intention of those laws, but as an exception from their ordinary and proper action” (368).

Colin Jager traces the development of “the argument from design” in his study *The Book of God* and claims that it is a product of the Enlightenment project that tries to save religion, which had already been reduced to “sophistry and illusion” by David Hume, from being

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“committed to flames.” However, for many people this way of thinking is doomed to fail because of its empirical root. William Blake, for example, considers deism a consequence of the “deadening, reiterative, and spirit-destroying intellectual hubris of an entire century” (Jager 47). For Blake the argument from design is an anti-Romantic enterprise, depriving religion of the sense of mystery and therefore its need for revelation. In a word, the fault of natural theology lies in its being too “natural.” However, several decades later in Chambers’s book, we find that the emphasis of natural theology has shifted from its attention to Nature to its willingness to retain God. All the minutiae we scientifically observe in nature are under the control of a Deity, a reassuring idea that “we may, by rightly directed thought, come into communion with [Him], and feel that, even when his penal ordinances are forced upon us, his hand and arm are closely about us” (Chambers 406). Chambers seems to be making some desperate efforts to bring back religion in the face of the ruthless Darwinian picture of the world.

Darwin’s notion of the world hinges upon the idea of “natural selection.” Almost all analyses of the natural world in his works, especially in *The Species of Origin*, endeavors to de-emphasize the role of human intervention. Even the very notion of “species”, contends Darwin, is a human invention which signifies little, if any, inherent necessity to distinguish one species from another. A new species emerges when a large enough number of variations in the same direction have accumulated. A single species may exhibit numberless variations but most of them are random, without a law to govern these variations. The agency by which variations take place is “natural selection,” and what determines which particular variation should be kept, is the struggle for existence. Compared with the “silently and insensibly

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working” power of nature, man’s domestication seems powerless. As Darwin exclaims, “how fleeting are the wishes and efforts of man! how short his time! And consequently how poor will his products be, compared with these accumulated by Nature during whole geological periods” (*Origin*, 70). The only way to ensure success in domestication, therefore, is to keep a large number of individuals, because “variations manifestly useful or pleasing to man appear only *occasionally*” (35). Darwin gives us an illustration to explain the unintelligibility of nature. In Domestication, a particular variation – the end result of our work which we find desirable – is often not at all what we originally intended to keep (71). In other words, even in domesticated animals / plants we depend to a large degree on natural selection. By the same token, the extinction of species is also governed by natural selection only, because “no fixed laws seem to determine the length of time during which any single species or any single genus endures” (256). Darwin’s is a bleak, pessimistic, almost post-modern view of the world, as is astutely summarized by Howard Fulweiler:

For Darwin, of course, there was no intelligent master plan for the natural world, but only a blind struggle for existence. Evolution itself had no goal; it was the result of chance variations coupled with wholesale extinction.... The Darwinian account is an intricate pattern of mutual relationships conducted in a chaotic environment by individuals seeking their own advantage and acting without either a superintending intelligence or a common end (Fulweiler 51).

In *Our Mutual Friend*, or at least in the world of Eugene Wrayburn, however, even the lingering sense of solace we find in Chambers’s work is denied, the novel being, according to Sally Ledger, impacted by the “implied rejection of Providentialism and of natural theology”

in Darwin's *Origins* (Ledger 364). By disallowing the existence of "design" and regarding the entire arrangement of things in the universe random and even "ridiculous," Eugene is already voicing Darwin's idea of the animate world. Besides Sally Ledger's most recent study on the Darwinian influences found in the novel, several other important studies have been done on the relationship between Dickens and Darwin<sup>57</sup>. Gillian Beer, for example, notes that "the organization of the *Origins of Species* seems to owe a good deal of one of Darwin's most frequently read authors, Charles Dickens."<sup>58</sup> George Levine, in his essay "Dickens and Darwin," traces how Dickens became interested in science and to what scientific ideas he was exposed. Many Darwinian notions of the world, such as variability, chance, and the attention to the ordinary, are also addressed by Dickens, Levine tells us, as in the case of the idea of "essence," which is challenged by both Darwin and Dickens. Their works often touch on the same topic, but they would use it for different purposes. Take the idea of "chance" for example. In Dickens, says Levine, "while Darwinian chance threatens almost instinctively to overwhelm order, chance largely derives from another tradition .... Dickens tries to tie event to meaning in a way that removes from chance its edge of inhumanity" (Levine 142).

My study depends largely on the shrewd observations made by these critics, but they seem to have left untouched one crucial aspect in the Dickens-Darwin connection, which is precisely my focus here, that this Darwinian world allows virtually no possibility for free choice. The power of choice is rendered useless in the natural world, because nature has no

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<sup>57</sup> Two insightful studies are the most relevant to the discussion of *Our Mutual Friend*. One is by Howard Fulweiler, "'A Dismal Swamp': Darwin, Design, and Evolution in *Our Mutual Friend* (1994); the other is by Sally Ledger, "Dickens, Natural History, and *Our Mutual Friend*" (2011). However, they didn't pursue the implications of the Darwinian resonances in Dickens's work.

<sup>58</sup> This observation made by Gillian Beer is quoted almost by every critic who deals with Darwin and Dickens: George Levine, Howard Fulweiler, and Sally Ledger.

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regard for human needs. In fact, even in the 1840s, long before the *Origins*, Chambers has remarked that “natural laws” and the “laws of the operation of inanimate laws” – namely, moral laws – are quite “independent of each other” (Chambers 388). Likewise, whenever Darwin talks about “choice”, even in his late work *The Descent of Man* (1871) in which he has qualified some of his thoughts concerning the inhuman principles in nature, he almost invariably means “natural selection”, a choice brought about in accordance with the general principle of nature. Moral qualities, such as sympathy, love, and duty, are cultivated by social instincts, which are ultimately determined by our animal instincts. Darwin thus concludes, “the first foundation or origin of the moral sense lies in the social instincts, including sympathy, and these instincts no doubt were primarily gained, in the case of the lower animals, through natural selection” (Appleman 248). Such a picture of life would dishearten Dickens – even the late Dickens whose view of life has become dark – who sets great store by the power of personal choice. As Fulweiler rightly claims, Dickens and Darwin have fundamental differences; he says, “although Dickens's vision of human society in *Our Mutual Friend* is analogous to Darwin's vision of the natural world in *The Origin of Species*, the purpose of the former is quite different from that of the latter: it is to demonstrate how human values should be made to triumph over the ‘dismal swamp’” (Fulweiler 54). In what sense, then, is the novel a Darwinian fiction, and in what sense is it not? This is the question I will proceed to answer.

### **Instinct and the Non-choice**

The main plot of *Our Mutual Friend* deserves a quick summary. The story begins with the discovery of a dead body (which is misidentified as John Harmon's) in the River Thames

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by a scavenger Jesse “Gaffer” Hexam, thus bringing into contact two otherwise unrelated social classes. The corpse is assumed to be related to a murder, which attracts the attention of the police officer, Mr. Inspector, and two lawyers, Lightwood Mortimer and Eugene Wrayburn. Wrayburn, then, notices the daughter of Gaffer, Lizzie Hexam, and their communication annoys Lizzie’s younger brother Charley and arouses the jealousy of Charley’s headmaster Bradley Headstone. The supposed death of Harmon ruins the prospect of the daughter of a clerk Miss Bella Wilfer, to compensate which the Boffins invite Bella to live with them. The dust mound, the main property of Harmon’s inheritance, also becomes the target of Silas Wegg, who approaches Mr. Boffin with a plan to blackmail him and thereby to possess part of the dust mound.

The world in *Our Mutual Friend*, as shown above, is in fact a microcosmic ecosystem. The structure of its organization and interrelationship among its constituents are analogous to the world described by Darwin. The inhabitants in both worlds present a similar degree of co-dependency<sup>59</sup>. The novel, J. Hillis Miller says, “is not really a collection of impenetrable milieus with characters buried unattainably at their centers. Each character lives in intimate contact with all of the other characters,” and that “characters from all levels constantly meet and interact with one another” (Miller 286-7). Specifically, the fictional landscape sketched in this novel by Dickens is of three dimensions, with its people and incidents linked horizontally by the river, and vertically, as it were, by “dust,” symbolized by the central image of the dust mound. The mound spurs at least two people on to climb up the social

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<sup>59</sup> Compare with the description of the society in *Bleak House*: “What connexion can there be between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world who from opposite sides of great gulfs have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!” (256).

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ladder: a middle-class young lady Bella Wilfer, whose credo in life is “I love money, and want money – want it dreadfully,” (45) and a ballad-seller Silas Wegg. Most significantly, the mound causes the social mobility of the Boffins, whose newly acquired status, “the Golden Dustman,” engenders new relations on diverse social levels. Those who come to solicit Boffin’s support at his “eminently aristocratic door” include the nouveau-riches Veneerings, Lord Snigsworth’s distant relative Mr. Twemlow, and even fishmongers, butchers, and beggars, as we are told, “tradesmen’s books hunger, and tradesmen’s mouths water, for the gold dust of the Golden Dustman” (208-10). Dickens here seems to be providing an illustration for Carlyle’s statement that cash-payment has become the only nexus in modern society: “all human dues and reciprocities have been fully changed into one great due of *cash payment*; and man’s duty to man reduces itself to handing him certain metal coins....and man’s duty to God becomes a cant, a doubt, a dim inanity” (*Past and Present* 72).

The “dust” is further ecologically connected with the “river.” When Eugene and Mortimer are on their way to inquire into the discovered body, the wheels of their carriage “rolled on, and rolled down...by where accumulated scum of humanity seemed to be washed from higher grounds, like so much moral sewage, and to be pausing until its own weight forced it over the bank and sunk it in the river” (30). The human waste, either as the dead body or garbage, is discharged into the river. It is the river and what is found in it that support the Hexam and the Riderhood family, who “got [their] living to haul out of the river every day of [their] life” (32). The river devours the lives of Jess Hexam, Rogue Riderhood, and Bradley Headstone; it bears witness to the conversation between Charley and Lizzie in which Charley expounds his philosophy of survival – when they “were at Millbank, and the river

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rolled on their left” (227). The river also overhears Bella Wilfer’s confession to her father that she is “the most mercenary little wretch that ever lived in the world” (316). John Harmon is supposed to die in the river, while Julius Handford and John Rokesmith are born from it; Eugene Wrayburn dies to his old self in the river and therein is born to a new life. The old Betty Higden, perhaps Dickens’s most virulent piece of attack on the fossilized institution of Christianity, embraces her death along the river. We are told that she “had taken the upward course of the river Thames as her general track; it was the track in which her last home lay, and of which she had last had local love and knowledge” (496). To sum up, if Sally Ledger is right when she claims that “in a post-Darwinian world, the boundary between life and death became arguably more significant” (375), then, the “dust” is the intermediate state through which life and death are transfigured into each other, and the river is the often the locus of this transfiguration. Further, this transfigurational quality of the river enables Dickens to participate in the larger sanitary project in his time: because of its “inherently fluid state,” says Michelle Allen, the river “affords both an image and a means of mobility.” Characters, therefore, are “seemingly free to move up and down the Thames according to their needs; while the river might be a source of pollution, it may also be a means to escape pollution” (Allen 91). For Betty Higden, for example, the river stands for the eternal, just like the sea in *Dombey and Son*. In the last stage of her journey she hears the river beckoning to her, and the river Thames is “dimpled like a young child, playfully gliding away among the trees, unpolluted by the defilements that lie in wait for it on its course...whispering to many like herself, ‘Come to me, come to me’” (497).

It is my contention that the world described in this novel, defined by dust and river,



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resembles the Darwinian world. When Darwin denies the existence of all “laws” in nature, as I have shown before, the only principle he acknowledges to be operative is the “struggle for existence.” If the world is a stage, the only spectacle to be seen is the “battle of life,” simply because there are always more individuals to be produced than the world can possibly sustain. “When we behold the face of nature bright with gladness,” Darwin reminds us, “we forget that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey” (*Origin* 53). This is exactly what gets specifically stressed in *Our Mutual Friend* – the novel is full of predators and preys living in various ecological niches. We hear echoes of Darwin when, for example, Jesse Hexam is described to bear “a certain likeness to a roused bird of prey” and is subsequently often referred to by this simile. Miss Pleasant Riderhood – the daughter of Rogue – earns her living by running a pawnshop and she is said to view all her customers, especially the sailors, as her “prey.” We are told that she is not as “evil” as her father, but she certainly inherits from her father – another bird of prey – the view of life in which everything is judged only by its material value. A “wedding” for her, therefore, is only “two people taking a regular license to quarrel and fight”; a funeral, then, signifies nothing but “an unremunerative ceremony in the nature of a black masquerade, conferring a temporary gentility on the performers, at an immense expense” (345). Recognizing that his name is being turned into many monetary advantages, John Harmon decides to keep hiding his identity, until “the great swarm of swindlers under many names shall have found newer *prey*” (367 emphasis mine).

About the importance of the image “prey” Howard Fulweiler is certainly correct when

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he says that “the intricate interrelations of human predators form the continuing substance of Dickens's novel. The anatomy of human society as a whole reveals a hidden battlefield” (Fulweiler 57). The power of this “prey” image further lies in the fact that in the food chain, every living creature is both a predator and a prey simultaneously— a principle Mr. Boffin pretends to abide by when he tells Bella Wilfer that “we must scrunch or be scrunched” (470). The central word “mutual” in the title of this novel may signal the relationship between “friends,” but also between “foes.” This mutuality is observed in natural world, as recorded in Darwin’s documents, in which he quotes H. Newman’s finding that the red clover is only visited by a particular “humble-bee,” whose number is determined by the number of field-mice, “which destroy their combs and nests.” Furthermore, the number of field-mice “is largely dependent...on the number of cats” (*Origin* 62). Thus Darwin establishes the interdependency between species. In the human world imagined by Dickens, “Gaffer” the scavenger is intent upon finding his prey in the river, whilst he himself becomes the prey to another scavenger Rogue Riderhood, a set of associations that can serve as a footnote to Darwin’s idea that competition is the most severe among species of the same genus (*Origin* 64). The Lammles scheme to coax Georgiana Podsnap into their marriage plan with Fledgeby, but Georgiana – the prey – escapes, once the two predators, the Lammles and Fledgeby, start to fight with each other.

No fixed laws of variation can be detected in the natural world – “not in one case out of a hundred can we pretend to assign any reason why this or that part differs, more or less, from the same part in the parents,” says Darwin. But there is one law concerning the preservation or extinction of variations and that law is the survival of the fittest, as Darwin summarizes the

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“laws of variation”: “it is the steady accumulation, through natural selection, of such differences, when beneficial to the individual, that gives rise to all the more important modifications of structure” (*Origin* 137-9). One of the consequences of this law, if applied to the human world, is the confusion of what it is and what it seems, of appearance and reality – a sentiment anticipated, for a famous example, by Shakespeare when he has Hamlet say “Nay...I know not ‘seems’” (*Hamlet* 1.2.77). As animals need to put on false colors or to metamorphose in order to survive, so human beings also need to establish false identities for the same purpose, hence deception, or “mimicry,” or “camouflage,” a dark side of Darwinian evolution. As Staffan Müller-Wille points out, “one of the consequences of Darwin’s diagnosis that capricious forces reside at the very heart of living nature is that nothing is what it seems ... The monstrous may become natural and the natural monstrous; the accidental may become essential, and the essential accidental” (Müller-Wille 188-9).

Many characters camouflage themselves in *Our Mutual Friend*, a reason why I argue that it is partly a Darwinian novel. It is a trope in the novel that involves many characters, among which the most prominent one is John Harmon, to whom I will return momentarily. For now I will focus on those characters who put on a false, deceptive appearance in order to achieve their ends. Bradley Headstone, for example, copies Rogue Riderhood’s clothing before he sets out to murder his rival Eugene Wrayburn in order later to inculpate Riderhood. He had, the narrator tells us, “taken careful note of the honest man’s dress in the course of that night-walk they had had together. He must have committed it to memory, and slowly got it by heart. It was exactly reproduced in the dress he now wore.” (619) It is to test whether the camouflage is put on “by accident” that Riderhood deliberately wears a red neckerchief –

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another piece of camouflage – by which his suspicion is later confirmed (622-28). The Veneerings, as their name indicates,<sup>60</sup> endeavor to establish themselves in society by putting on the appearance of being rich and important. They treat people as if they were furniture, as, for example, in the case of Twemlow, who is “an innocent piece of dinner-furniture that went upon easy castors and was kept over a livery stable-yard in Duke Street, Saint James’s, when not in use” (17). The only reason that Twemlow is invited to their social gatherings, we are told, is that he has an aristocratic distant relative. The Veneerings’s guests are described in terms of their ornamental value: they are “leaves” of the dining table, and, like furniture, they are all “reflected” in “the great looking-glass above the sideboard” (18-20). Since the mirror itself is but a piece of glass on the *surface* in which the image is only an illusion, then the guests, because they are “reflected in their mirror,” have no interiority but are only projections of the Veneerings’s social ambitions. Another case of camouflage is Fascination Fledgeby, who assumes the appearance of a decent, honest fellow but in fact does the money-lending business in the name of Riah. By presenting characters in disguise, Dickens is developing his own “clothes philosophy” which he originally borrowed from Carlyle. While clothes for Carlyle could symbolize media in which the supernatural is embodied (hence his statement that “the first spiritual want of a barbarous man is Decoration”), for Dickens clothes can also be a tool for manipulation.<sup>61</sup>

Although the novel is set in the urban context and large space is devoted to the description of “society,” the characters act pretty much in the same way as the creatures in

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<sup>60</sup> The word “veneering” is defined in OED as “The process of applying thin flat plates or slips of fine wood (or other suitable material, as ivory) to cabinet-work or similar articles in order to produce a more elegant or polished surface than that of the underlying material; also, the result obtained by this process.”

<sup>61</sup> See also my analysis of James Steerforth as a dandy in chapter II.

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natural state: they act by instinct, not reason. In forcing Lizzie to accept his marriage proposal, Bradley Headstone confesses that he “can’t help it,” and calls Lizzie “the ruin of [him].” The motivation behind his proposal, then, is not genuine love for Lizzie, as he says, “It would not have been voluntary on my part, any more than it is voluntary in me to be here now. You draw me to you” (389). Headstone is under the spell of his animal instincts. His actions are described in Darwinian vocabulary: when he goes to murder Wrayburn, he is a “passion-wasted nightbird with respectable feathers,” or “a scholastic huntsman clad for the field” (543). The emphasis on Bradley’s wild animal nature perhaps explains why many critics discuss this character from the point of view of psychology, a subject that strives to reveal the inner world by empirical method. Joel Brattin, for example, by analyzing the passages concerning Headstone in Dickens’s manuscript, comes to see how Dickens depicts him as a “constrained,” “repressed” figure. He arrives at the conclusion that by “working and reworking Headstone’s language, gesture, and ‘state of mind,’” Dickens “shapes both Bradley’s villainy and his humanity, and results in a convincing and frightening portrayal of Bradley’s inner life” (164).<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Eugene Wrayburn, the man who has lost all will power as I have shown, also complains to Lizzie that he “cannot help being unhappy” and suggests that it is she who keeps him this way: “‘I don’t complain that you design to keep me here. But you do it, you do it’” (674-5). In the rivalry between Headstone and Wrayburn, Dickens describes two people who yield completely to their instincts,<sup>63</sup> and thereby shows

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<sup>62</sup> A more typical example is found in Anne Ryan’s dissertation (2011). Though not her focus, Ryan mentions *Our Mutual Friend* in passing. By analyzing Eugene Wrayburn and Bradley Headstone, she suggests that Dickens is responding to the psychological study of Alexander Bain and thereby participating in a dialogue about the connection between psychological and physical attributes. Both Bain and Dickens, she says, participate in “a wider cultural conversation about the relationships between energy, passion, willpower, self-knowledge, and self-control” (Ryan 35).

<sup>63</sup> It is for this reason that I cannot agree with the interpretation that sees the rivalry between Headstone and Wrayburn as an act of sexual selection, as argued by some critics (Fulweiler 71; Ledger 369). This reading over-simplifies the connection between Darwin and Dickens.

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the inadequacy of Darwinian principles in the human world. Headstone later dies in the struggle with another “bird of prey,” and Wrayburn learns to make meaningful choice only after he is rescued by Lizzie Hexam. In this novel, Dickens shows that it is of religious significance to exert one’s will power by making choices in the Darwinian world. In the following space I will concentrate on the meaning of choice, illustrated mainly by two characters: Lizzie Hexam and John Harmon.

### **Bunyan, Kierkegaard, and Choice as Religion**

If Darwinian principles alone reign in the world of *Our Mutual Friend*, then there is surely no place for religion in it, because the only possible moral theme in this world would be “competition,” set in an “environment in which voracious predators struggle against one another” (Fulweiler 61). No wonder Eugene Wrayburn – not an exception but a normal survivor in this world – is despondent about “design,” because laws are no longer dictated by God but by people of wealth. Mr. Podsnap, for example, believes the world is under his control and feels required “to take Providence under his protection” and “what Providence meant, was inevitably what Mr. Podsnap meant” (132). Dickens invokes a series of Biblical allusions to demonstrate how the world is emptied of eternal value. About the “mysterious paper currency,” Dickens asks “whence can it come, whither can it go?” (147) – a metaphor Jesus uses to describe the invisible truth (John 3.8). The hard, but honest labor which God inflicts on Adam as a punishment is turned into fishing for the dead corpse, when Rogue Riderhood says to Lightwood: “I am a man as gets my living, and as seeks to get my living, by the sweat of my brow” (151). The “prodigal son” who comes back a repentant and reformed man in the Bible (Luke 15.11-32) becomes Jenny Wren’s derelict grandparent, who

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is supported by Jenny and drinks away all the money she earns. The world is turned upside down when a father becomes a “prodigal old son”, as Dickens says about Jenny Wren who is “dragged down by hands that should have raised her up” and is “misdirected when losing her way on the eternal road, and asking guidance” (243).

Yet more than one critic has commented on the religious theme of this novel, from diverse points of view such as the idea of resurrection, the relation between humanity and materials, the idea of love, and the role of the faithful servants (Sanders 165-197; Worthington 61-73; Lewis 215-245; Bonaparte, chapter 4 in *Poesis*). Starting with these shrewd observations, my study, however, takes a further step in trying to examine the role of religion in a Darwinian universe. Why would Dickens depict such a world of prey and predation? What is the implication of being governed by instinct, and the consequent loss of will power? We see that the novel, in a sense, is of zoological nature, presenting us a wide array of animals, both alive and dead – “birds of prey,” “wolf,” “vulture,” and “rat,” etc. Human beings are sometimes only reflections in the mirror, as in the Veneerings’s house; sometimes they are afloat in the river, like the supposed corpse of John Harmon, or they are, like the bodies of Headstone and Riderhood, “lying under the ooze and scum behind one of the rotting gates” (781); sometimes, when they are dead, they are locked in bottles – “human wariou”: “Skull...Preserved Indian baby...Articulated English baby...” (87-88). Mr. Venus the taxidermist calls his collection a “general panoramic view,” but it is also the view under the eye of the narrator. If the novel has religious significance as the other critics argued, the first question to be answered, then, is “how to become human” in this inhuman world, i.e., how to restore our lost identity. I argue that to be human in this novel is to transcend the

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“struggle for existence,” to be somehow free from Darwinian principles, and to exert our volition by making choices. In making such a choice, human beings are often caught in a dilemma: they can be forgotten, misunderstood, or ridiculed by the world, but they can be rewarded with salvation.

The idea that a lonely and thorny path leads to virtue is not a modern idea. It is most famously illustrated, for example, by Bunyan in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. After *Christian* meets *Formalist* and *Hypocrisy* on his journey, they come to the foot of a mountain, “steep and high.” When *Christian* sees a road called “Difficulty,” he resolves to take the road, while the other two companions choose two other ways, “supposing also that these two ways might meet again,” but little do they know that the easier ways lead to Destruction. The narrator thus comments: “the one took the way which is called *Danger*, which led him into a great Wood; and the other took directly up the way to *Destruction*, which led him into a wide field full of dark Mountains, where he stumbled and fell, and rose no more” (*Pilgrim*, 35). But *Christian* may make mistakes as well. Upon the choice between a rough way from a River and a much easier way along the *By-Path-Meadow*, *Christian* and followers instinctively choose the latter one, and find “it very easie for their feet.” Consequently, the easy path later leads them to the grounds of Giant Despair, the Doubting Castle, and finally to their own imprisonment (91-93). The second episode captures the human dilemma between *Christian* virtues and carnal desires, as, in another episode, *Christian* tells *Prudence* that about those “carnal cogitations,” “I would chuse never to think of those things more; but when I would be doing of that which is best, that which is worst is with me” (41).

The influence of Bunyan's influence on Dickens has been argued, most notably by



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Emma Mason, but she mainly focuses on the most overt connection between the two writers, that *Christian's* journey in Bunyan is later reenacted in the stories of Little Nell in *Our Curiosity Shop* and Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol* (Mason 157-9). What Mason neglects is the intensity of the psychodrama portrayed by Bunyan. For example, in the episode I quoted above, when *Christian* tells *Prudence* that there are moments when he realizes his inability to overcome his worldly desires, and these moments are for him "Golden hours" (*Pilgrim*, 41). They are precious because in those very moments he recognizes the limitations of a human being. To be religious, to be a Christian, then, is to confront these limitations and then choose the humanly impossible.

Yet for Dickens, Bunyan lives in too remote an era. In his spiritual journey *Christian* still has a guide *Evangelical*, a Bible in his hand (whose authority has not been so vehemently challenged as in Dickens's time), and several companions, first *Faithful*, and later *Hopeful*. In other words, the making of a choice for Bunyan is still in a theological frame of reference. He and his characters' situation are not existential, but providential. But this is not the case we find in *Our Mutual Friend*, a fictional Darwinian ecosystem where chance occurrences take the place of casual linkages. People are interrelated in a network, as in the society of Veneerings, and in the Podsnap – Lammles – Fledgeby triangle, but the co-dependency functions only on the surface. If we peer into the interiority of characters we find them lonelier than ever. This, I argue, is the situation in which Lizzie Hexam and John Harmon find themselves. For this purpose I will provide a scenario more akin to Dickens's than Bunyan's, namely Kierkegaard's Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*.

For Kierkegaard, Abraham represents the highest possibility of human existence: he is a

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“knight of faith.” His faith is demonstrated – not analyzed, for Kierkegaard thinks faith cannot be understood – in the sacrifice of Isaac at the command of God. Kierkegaard thus dramatizes the biblical story:

“Silently he arranged the firewood, bound Isaac; silently he drew the knife. Then he saw the ram that God had appointed. He sacrificed that and returned home...From that day on, Abraham become old, he could not forget that God had demanded this of him. Isaac throve as before; but Abraham’s eye was darkened, he saw joy no more” (46).

What is so special in this act, says Kierkegaard, is the fact that God asks Abraham to do the impossible, for we know that Isaac is born when Abraham is a hundred years old: “And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac” (Genesis 21.5). Furthermore, the birth of Isaac is part of the covenant that God makes with Abraham, when God says to him: “My covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be the father of a multitude of nations” (Genesis 17.4). To be asked to sacrifice Isaac, therefore, is an absurd command, but Abraham’s faith hinges upon the courage to accept the absurd, as Kierkegaard suggests: “All along he had faith, he believed that God would not demand Isaac of him, while still he was willing to offer him if that was indeed what was demanded” (65).

Kierkegaard further makes a distinction between the “knight of faith” and the “tragic hero.” The tragic hero, when sacrificing himself, strives to be understood by the world. He has the ethical standard to lean on, as in the case of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia. It is different, says Kierkegaard, in Abraham’s case, for whom “it is not to save a nation, not to uphold the idea of the State...not to appease angry gods. If there was any question of the

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deity's being angry, it could only have been Abraham he was angry with, and Abraham's whole action stands in no relation to the universal, it is a purely private undertaking" (88). Abraham's faith, then, is demonstrated in his "choice" to sacrifice Isaac. It is also a choice, says Kierkegaard, of the religious over the ethical, because "the ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac; but in this contradiction lies the very anguish that can indeed make one sleepless; and yet without that anguish Abraham is not the one he is" (60).

What interests me here is the word *anguish* (in this particular translation from Danish), because it captures the lonely moment when Abraham is caught between the call of the world and the call of God. "The outside world is subject to the law of indifference," says Kierkegaard, whereas eternal law prevails in the "world of spirit": "here it does not rain on the just and the unjust alike, here the sun does not shine on both good and evil, here only one who works gets bread, and only one who knows anguish finds rest, only one who descends to the underworld saves the loved one, only one who draws the knife gets Isaac" (*Fear and Trembling* 57). And isn't this precisely the moment when Lizzie Hexam decides to stay with her father and guard his reputation? Like Abraham, she is caught between the opinion of the world and her faith in his innocence: Miss Abbey, for example, who runs the Six Jolly Fellowship-Porters, not only forbids Gaffer and Riderhood to come to her bar any more, but also alarms Lizzie about her father's tainted name and urges her to "get clear of" his father. The reason behind this admonition, as we know, is *not* that Ms. Abbey is personally antagonistic to Gaffer: she only represents the general view on this issue. In "excommunicating" both Gaffer and Riderhood, she is merely trying to guard the moral order

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in her establishment. The “Six-Jolly Fellowship-Porters,” says the narrator, serves as a kind of “haven,” which “was “divided from the rough world by a glass partition and half-door, with a leaden sill upon it for the convenience of resting your liquor” (68). In making the choice to stay true to her father, Lizzie demonstrates a “leap of faith,” she believes at all costs. She thus tells Miss Abbey: “the harder father is borne upon, the more he needs me to lean on.”

Lizzie is also misunderstood by her brother Charley, a realist, whose “worse nature,” says the narrator, is “to be wholly selfish” (217). Unlike Lizzie who exercises freedom in making choices, Charley Hexam follows his instinct. He acts by no other motivation than the instinct to survive. He follows his instinct to leave his father and later asks Lizzie to do the same, as he says to Lizzie: “ ‘I want to carry you up with me. That’s what I want to do, and mean to do .... Don’t pull me back, and hold me down” (228). In order to ensure his future he coerces his sister to marry Bradley Headstone, and he confesses that his endeavors are “to cancel the past and raise myself in the world” (393). Finally, he has to leave Headstone as well when he knows the latter is suspected of murder. His charging Bradley with being selfish belies his own selfishness, as when he asks his former benefactor: “how do you know that, pursuing the ends of your own violent temper, you have not laid me open to suspicion? Is that your gratitude to me, Mr. Headstone?” (693).

It should be noted that in making the choice, Lizzie not only has to conquer the world; she also has to conquer herself. Like Abraham, Lizzie’s choice is accompanied by anguish. This “anguish” is a struggle with herself, which manifests, among other things, in her intricate relationship with the river Thames, a river along which she lives and upon which she

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earns her livelihood. The river is, for the Hexams, a “best friend,” because, says Gaffer, “the very fire that warmed them, the “very basket” in which Lizzie has slept, and the “very rockers” from which a cradle is made, all come from the river (15). But it is not her inclination to be part of the ecosystem along the river: she confesses to her father that she doesn’t like “the sight of the very river” (15), and to Charley, that for herself she “could not be too far from that river” (228). Ironically, it is not the river that nourishes her family, but the things afloat on the river, the things associated with death, that support them. The Darwinian world functions by the principle of struggle for existence, but Lizzie only sees extinction in this world – the extinction of love, and the extinction of hope. The river in fact represents “death” for her: “as the great black river with its dreary shores was soon lost to her view in the gloom, so, she stood on the river’s brink unable to see into the vast blank misery of a life suspected, and fallen away from by good and bad, but knowing that it lay there dim before her, stretching away to the great ocean, Death” (77).

Lizzie and Charley make different choices because Charley is a Darwinian character, driven by “happiness” in its materialistic sense, which, says Darwin, “is an essential part of the general good,” and “the greatest-happiness principle indirectly serves as a nearly safe standard of right and wrong” (*Origin* 248). Lizzie, on the other hand, as Charley calls her, is a “dreamer” (227). They look at the world through different lenses. For example, as Lizzie tells Charley that she can see “pictures” emerging from the fire in their home, Charley interrupts her and says the “fire” is simply “gas,” which is “coming out of a bit of a forest that’s been under the mud that was under the water in the days of Noah’s Ark” (37). Spatially, “fire” means home to Lizzie; temporally, it represents the past. Through the fire, she can identify

herself in both the spatial and the temporal scheme of the world. Charley, however, can only relate to the present, to the immediate loss or gain. For Charley, “fire” becomes “the hollow down by the flare,” which is useless when he is “looking into the real world” (227).

“Fire” is a central image with which Lizzie is associated. She sits close to the fire when she contemplates Charley’s future (77), and she asks her father to “sit close by the fire” while she prepares his supper (80). Most significantly, when Eugene and Mortimer come to the riverside to observe the scene, Eugene accidentally sees “the lonely girl with the dark hair...by the fire”:

She had no other light than the light of the fire. The unkindled lamp stood on the table. She sat on the ground, looking at the brazier, with her face leaning on her hand. There was a kind of film or flicker on the face, which at first he took to be the fitful firelight; but, on a second look, he saw that she was weeping. A sad and solitary spectacle, as shown him by the rising and the falling of the fire. (165-6)

As Robert Patten argues in his discussion of Dickens and the hearth, the “hearth” mainly represents three things for Dickens: “greenery,” “food and drink,” and “fire,” and he further specifies that “fire” suggests “warmth, love, family circle, healing, energy, dancing, and spiritual values.” Patten also points out that the hearth often serves as the site where the change of heart takes place (Patten 157). Curiously neglected in Patten’s analysis, however, is Lizzie Hexam, a character almost defined by “fire.” In a sense, Lizzie’s role in this novel is analogous to the role of Vesta in Roman mythology<sup>64</sup>. Vesta, according to Morford and Lenardon, is the “goddess of the hearth, the center of family life” (520). In Ovid’s *Fasti* book

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<sup>64</sup> I am grateful for Professor Felicia Bonaparte for the connection between Lizzie and Vesta.

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Six we are given Vesta's origin: "They say that Juno and Ceres were born of Ops by Saturn's seed; the third daughter was Vesta." Further, Ovid tells us that Vesta is associated with the spirit of the earth: "Vesta is the same as the Earth; under both of them is a perpetual fire; the earth and the hearth are symbols of the home," and the association is revealed in the etymology of her name: "The earth stands by its own power; Vesta is so called from standing by power (*vi stando*)"; she is therefore connected with the hearth: "the hearth (*focus*) is so named from the flames, and because it fosters (*fovet*) all things" (*Fasti* 6.283-5). This mythological dimension of Lizzie perhaps explains why she cannot cut herself off from the past so easily as her brother. She represents the spirit of home, as we know when she explains to Charley: "I know that I am in some things a *stay* to father, and that if I was not faithful to him he would – in revenge-like, or in disappointment, or both – go wild and bad" (38).<sup>65</sup> As a "goddess of fire," as it were, Lizzie bespeaks a different conception of the world. If the fire that defines Lizzie is part of nature, it is not the same Darwinian nature to which Riderhood, Headstone, Silas Wegg, or Podsnap belong. Her tolerance and patience, her sense of place, and her association with the past, serve as a counterbalance in the otherwise-Darwinian battlefield for life.

By associating Lizzie Hexam with Vesta, I do not imply that she represents pagan religion. Nor is she a heavily loaded Christian figure. The kind of religion she embodies transcends the limitation of sects, a point she and Riah agrees with, as we know from her conversation with Mrs. Milvey, to whom she explains her understanding of religion<sup>66</sup>. She

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<sup>65</sup> It is revealing to compare the fire in Lizzie's room with the hearth in Arthur Clennam's home in *Little Dorrit*, in which we read: "the dead-cold hearths showed no traces of having ever been warmed, but in heaps of soot that had tumbled down the chimney and eddied about in little dusky whirlwinds when the doors were opened" (*Little Dorrit* 69).

<sup>66</sup> See Chapter I where I have quoted this passage in its entirety. It is very important for understanding Lizzie so I mention it again here.

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says the Jews who help her never asked about her religion, but they asked her “to be industrious and faithful,” and she promised to be so (508). By association with the fire, she symbolizes warmth, intimacy, and tolerance, a transcendental spirit which, in Coleridge’s words, allows us to transcend the “inanimate cold world,” like “a light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud / Enveloping the Earth” (*Dejection: An Ode* IV). In fact, to embody this quality in the imagery of “fire” is not unique to Dickens. George Eliot, for example, allows Silas Marner to find Eppie by the fire and thereby associating her and Marner himself with the “hearth.” The narrator thus describes how he spots Eppie: “turning towards the hearth, where the two logs had fallen apart, and sent forth only a red uncertain glimmer,” Marner “seated himself on his fireside chair...when, to his blurred vision, it seemed as if there were gold on the floor in front of the hearth” (108). The child reawakens the feeling of sympathy which has been unknown to Silas since a long time ago. By invoking the “fire” and thereby Vesta in George Eliot’s “mythic creation,” as Brian Swann and Felicia Bonaparte both argue, she “translates religion into a modern text,” and “embodies religious ideas, customs, practices, and rituals in the ordinary events of domestic, family, life” (Bonaparte 55; Swann 101).

The creation of the character Lizzie Hexam is a parallel project to Eliot’s, although the contexts are different. While Eliot is more concerned about the position of theology in the secular world, Dickens’s emphasis in this novel is the role of religion in Darwinian nature. Robert Patten is right in asserting that the human relationship with Nature in Dickens’s work is “problematic” (154), and Lizzie represents a more “generous” side of nature, whose power lies in “the capacity to provide a model for renewal that men can emulate” (Patten 156). Lizzie is a life-giving character despite her virginity before the marriage with Eugene, just



like the virgin Vesta is a fertility goddess.<sup>67</sup> She is fertile metaphorically. Life – or to be alive – is no longer a biological activity: it is to regain to freedom to choose. This is what she imparts to Eugene, who initially is afflicted with *angst*, a “sickness unto death,” and who, because of his admiration for Lizzie, starts to show an “unprecedented gleam of determination” (527). As argued before, she abhors the river Thames because of its association with death, but it is in the very river that she rescues the dying Eugene Wrayburn, who at this moment is not only mentally but also physically “paralyzed,” thereby reenacting the parable of the “fisher of men” which Jesus tells his disciples (Matthew 4.19)<sup>68</sup>. She thus prays to heaven: “O Blessed Lord God, that through poor me he may be raised from death, and preserved to some one else to whom he may be dear one day, though never dearer than to me!” (684).

This leads us to the idea of resurrection, the central theme of this novel. In *Our Mutual Friend*, as Andrew Sanders argues, “Dickens...maintains his faith in human survival through an exposition of the destinies of those major characters who, with due grace, embody a redemptive process and manage to rise above a general dehumanization (Sanders 174). This statement is only partly true, because there are also plots and characters through which the theme of resurrection is parodied. In fact, Dickens rarely gives us a pattern without also giving us the reverse of the pattern to show its perversion, as, for instance, in setting up the image of “fire”: not only is Lizzie associated with fire, but also is Bradley Headstone. When Riderhood asks him for a high price for concealing his murder, Bradley is repeatedly

<sup>67</sup> Ovid *Fasti* Book 6-283: “Conceive of Vesta as naught but the living flame, and you see that no bodies are born of flame. Rightly, therefore, is she a virgin who neither gives nor takes seeds, and she loves companions in her virginity.”

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 4 in Bonaparte’s *Poesis*, in which she argues, “The symbol for rebirth in the novel is the figure of Jesse Hexam who pulls dead bodies out of the Thames and makes his livelihood by robbing them.”

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mentioned to be staring at the fire: “he put the purse in his pocket, grasped his left wrist with his right hand, and sat rigidly contemplating the fire” (777-8). The “fire” that means love, home, and freedom for Lizzie only reminds him of hatred, loss of home, and his psychological imprisonment. Dickens employs the same device in setting up the resurrection theme. The fact that many characters are given the chance of “rebirth” but only a few are actually reborn highlights the importance of “choice,” as Carolyn Oulton remarks: “It is crucial...that redemption is open to all. Immersion in the water symbolically allows the acceptance or rejection of religious rebirth.... The significance of *OMF* lies primarily in this new liberalism – while corruption will be seen to be largely a social responsibility, redemption is seen in terms of a choice open to all” (Oulton 152). For example, although Rogue Riderhood is rescued from the near-death state, he shows no inclination to reform himself. The idea that “the old evil is drowned out of him,” a hope his daughter Pleasant harbors, soon proves to be a “short-lived delusion,” and “the low, bad, unimpressible face is coming up from the depths of the river” (440-443). A more extensive parody is in the character Mr. Venus, a taxidermist whose main occupation is to collect parts of animal bodies and then piece them together. As he later confesses to Mr. Boffin, his interest is in “the paths of science,” “dropping down upon his fellow-creatures [when] they were deceased, and then only to articulate them to the best of his humble ability” (572). Venus brings dead things back to life, but only in appearance; in contrast to him is Jenny Wren the doll’s dress-maker, who by imagination breathes life into her dolls. In fact, Mr. Venus has a precursor, Mr. Cruncher, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, an “honest tradesman,” whose “ostensible calling” is to dig up the

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newly buried corpses in order to sell them for scientific study (170). Venus, according to Bonaparte, “deals only in mortal remains, the matter that is defined by dust” (*Poesis*, ch.2).

These parodies show Dickens’s ambivalence toward “resurrection.” There is no doubt that Dickens himself believes in resurrection, either literally or metaphorically. It forms the theological core of *The Life of Our Lord*, Dickens’s most intimate discussion of his belief, in which he mentions this idea at least twice, one concerning Lazarus’s coming back to life, the other concerning Jesus’s resurrection (chapter 8; chapter 11). In some of his novels, as I have argued in chapter three, resurrection often takes the form of a character’s “sudden conversion,” (e.g. Martin Chuzzlewit), which, according to Barbara Hardy, “comes as a convenient final reconciliation” (Hardy 50). But in most cases, the theme of rebirth is not only the drive of the plot, but also the central message the text conveys. In *Christmas Carol*, for example, Dickens has the “phantom” to prophecy Scrooge’s future. When Scrooge is shown himself lying on the deathbed, he thinks: “if this man could be raised up now, what would be his foremost thoughts?” Reflecting upon his own death, he ironically says that “avarice, hard dealing, griping cares” – things he treasured most when he was alive, “have brought him to a rich end, truly!” (118) On the other hand, Dickens hardly believes that resurrection happens automatically. A quick footnote to this idea can be found in *Our Mutual Friend*: when Charley brings Bradley to court Lizzie Hexam, they come to a graveyard, where, says the narrator, “conveniently and healthfully elevated above the level of the living, were the dead, and the tombstones; some of the latter droopingly inclined from the perpendicular, as if they were ashamed of the *lies* they told” (387; emphasis mine). We might conjecture that the “lies”

told on the epitaphs is about the immortality of the soul and resurrection<sup>69</sup>. It is not that Dickens denies resurrection; rather, he is reminding the reader that while to be reborn is a privilege reserved for those prepared, to die is our common lot. This is especially true in a novel about “death,” a novel punctuated with “epitaphs.” As Jolene Zigarovich argues, “epitaph” is a symbol both of “articulation and disarticulation,” and in *Our Mutual Friend*, “there are numerous unmarked and erroneously marked graves; and, most importantly, there are pseudo-epitaphs, forms of writing that stand in the place of and mimic the tombstone. Thus symbolic tombstones give us a particular lesson in reading death, resurrection, and inscription: the novel’s central themes” (Zigarovich 164). Therefore, though we cannot specify what kind of “lies” the epitaphs tell, what we do know with some certainty, especially considering the whole range of resurrections including their parodies in this novel, is that in his later works, Dickens no longer allows resurrection to happen on its own. Rather, it presupposes that the subject, in contemplating his / her life and death, becomes dissatisfied with and disappointed by their old self, and it requires the subject to have the courage and resolution to acquire a new self. The most substantive illustration of this kind of resurrection is John Harmon.

John Harmon regains the freedom to make choices by abdicating his former self. He thus recalls his return to England: “I came back, shrinking from my father’s money, shrinking from my father’s memory, mistrustful... that I was already growing avaricious, mistrustful that I was slackening in gratitude to the two dear noble honest friends who had made the only sunlight in my childish life or that of my heartbroken sister” (360). He is fleeing the vicious

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<sup>69</sup> David Richter suggests the “lies” could be about the virtues of the entombed dead. An example is the epitaph of Captain Blifil in Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, which says “in expectation of a joyful rising,” which is a lie because it presents the subject as a kind and honorable man, but which he is not.

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cycle of prey and predation – a world, we should remember, that even his father abhors, as we know that John Harmon senior in his will “directs himself to be buried with certain eccentric ceremonies and precautions against his coming to life” (26). However, he falls victim to this world while trying to break loose from it: by exchanging clothes with John Harmon– another instance of employing camouflage – George Radfoot intends to kill him and inherit his fortune in his name. Ironically, the predator soon becomes the prey of someone else: Radfoot, he later learns, “had been murdered by some unknown hands for the money for which he would have murdered [Harmon]” (365).

By escaping death in the river, “with Heaven’s assistance before the fierce set of the water” (363), John Harmon is restored to life, but he soon realizes he is still a “living-dead” man (367), for, if he enters the future with his former identity, he is succumbing to the Darwinian principles that governed his former life, in which money can probably purchase love and corrupt faithful servants. In order to avoid being involved in the old scheme of things, John Harmon decides to die unto himself once again. His cogitation for the course of his future becomes again an “Either/Or” dilemma: “ ‘Should John Harmon come to life?’” He thus forms a resolution: “ ‘when the right time comes, I will ask no more than will replace me in my former path of life, and John Rokesmith shall tread it as contentedly as he may. But John Harmon shall come back no more’” (366-7). In a society in which every member strives to survive – no matter at what cost – John Harmon chooses to remain nonexistent. He is, in a sense, averting the course of nature – nature, of course, in its inhuman, Darwinian sense. By promising to faithfully serve Mr. Boffin whose name “Nicodemus” is associated with

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resurrection in the Bible<sup>70</sup> – himself a faithful servant to the late John Harmon Senior – John Harmon reenacts the biblical parable that the faithful servant gets rewarded. As Linda Lewis points out, John Harmon, under the alias John Rokesmith, “is metamorphosed into the nobleman of Jesus’ parable, returning from a far country and rewarding the servant who has served his interests so admirably” (Lewis 219).

The major component of Harmon’s fortune is the Dust Mound, and his choice not to inherit it brings us finally to this central image. “Dust” or “dirt”<sup>71</sup> can mean the production of the natural world, but it also means the baser nature of human beings, a religious undertone that Dickens cannot have missed. As Andrew Sanders rightly reminds us, “if we give the word ‘dust’ its biblical connotations, we are led back to a fresh understanding of the spiritual decay and corruption which pervade the novel” (Sanders 177). A man defined by “dirt,” therefore, has no other preoccupation than the furtherance of his material gains – he is formed “of the dust of the ground,” but without the “breath of life” being “breathed into his nostrils” (Gen. 2.7), hence we have the Old John Harmon who “lived in a hollow in a hilly country entirely composed of *dust*”; and the greedy Silas Wegg who occupies the “*dusty*” corner of the street; and Mr. Venus – the expert on the human body – whose office is situated in a “narrow and *dirty* street” (24; 52;83). Likewise, when Riah sees Charley Hexam force his sister to accept Bradley Headstone, he rebukes Charley for his selfish motivation and urges Lizzie to “shake the *dust*” from her feet (396), a biblical allusion to Jesus’s admonition that

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<sup>70</sup> John. 3. 5-6

<sup>71</sup> “Dust” has an extended meaning as “ashes” or “refuse from a house,” hence the “dust-mound.” In most cases it is used interchangeably with “dirt”, meaning “Earth or other solid matter in a minute and fine state of subdivision.” See entry “dust”, OED.

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“whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet” (Matthew 10.14).

However pervasively the “dust” penetrates the texture of the novel, it is not a “destabilizing” image, as argued by Leslie Simon, who suggests that “dust” conveys a sense of “psychological fragmentation” and which “works structurally to modern selfhood according to the principles of difference and divergence of the modernizing world” (Simon 224). Dickens does not acquiesce to this pessimistic rendering of the world. “Dust” can convey a sense of total despair *only if* human beings renounce their power of choice, to be totally governed by the animal instincts. While Dickens points out the modern disorder, symbolized, as Simon argues, by “the heterogeneity, fragmentation, and disarray” in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens does not stop there but further suggests what the world ought to be. In an inconspicuous detail, Dickens offers us the solution to the waste, depending on what human beings do to it.

When Fascination Fledgeby asks his manager Riah about Lizzie and Jenny Wren, Riah replies that he meets the girls when they come to buy “ [their] damage and waste for Miss Jenny’s millinery. [Their] *waste* goes into the best of company, sir, on her rosy-cheeked little customers. They wear it in their hair, and on their ball-dresses, and even...are presented at Court with it” (*OMF* 278). Jenny Wren transforms waste into usefulness, which exemplifies how the social structure and human welfare ultimately rely on human, individual responsibility, a point I will elaborate in this study. The “waste” here, set in contrast to the predominating image of the dust mound that only leads to fraud, greed, and destruction, is no longer the passive and hopeless representation of the center-less world; rather, it suggests the

hope and urgency to restore the missing center.

Dickens suggests that human efforts could negate or reverse of the effect of the dust. In other words, the dirt can only defile the appearance if the inner quality remains immaculate, a sentiment perhaps anticipated by Bunyan when he described the *Godly-Man* and his garments:

Those that throw Dirt at him, are such as hate his Well-doing, but as you see the Dirt will not stick upon his Clothes, so it shall be with him that liveth truly Innocently in the World. Whoever they be that would make such men dirty, they labor all in vain; for God, by that a little time is spent, will cause that their Innocence shall break forth as the light, and their Righteousness as the Noon day. (*Pilgrim's Progress*, 239).

That is why the Bower of Harmon, which Mr. Boffin keeps, still retains some cleanliness, for otherwise the dust “would have lain thick on the floors” (180), and why the doll’s dressmaker, Jenny Wren, makes dolls out of the “damage” and “waste” from Fledgeby’s office (Riah explains to Fledgeby that “our waste goes into the best of company”) and treats the dolls as if they were alive. When she arranges them into a “semicircle” and dresses them for “presentation at court, for going to balls, for going out driving, for going out on horseback, for going out walking, for going to get married, for going to help other dolls to get married,” she literally breathes life into the inanimate materials (430). Dickens’s vision of the dirt, therefore, is much akin to the analysis of Tom Crook who argues that the description of dirt betrays a hidden belief in the natural order of things. Dirt, Crook reminds us, is defined by Palmerstone as “matter out of place,” a phrase which “affirmed an ultimately meaningful,



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orderly, and timeless universe in which man might, in the future, achieve harmony with God” (Crook 205).

To conclude this chapter, I suggest that in *Our Mutual Friend*, Dickens is reinforcing his “existential” idea of religion – a kind of faith that he sees crucial in the face of the ever-increasing influence of science. He lived in a time in which science and religion are brought face to face with each other and people either thought them irreconcilable or tried to work out a way to mediate them (Livingston 141-64). Dickens was neither a theologian nor a scientist, but a poet with an instinctive grasp of scientific development. Perhaps the best assessment of Dickens’s relationship with science is given by Toni Cerutti, who thinks Dickens “fell under the spell of the new sciences,” and “like most Victorians, he was both attracted and repelled by them...he feared their disruption of established beliefs and yet could not resist the fascination of temporal variation and transformation” (Cerutti 46). In *Our Mutual Friend* he imagines a world in which these two forces – science and faith – contend; but he also realizes that the issue of science and faith is not an either /or question. He believes that human beings live in the natural world but also have the power to choose independently – they create meaning out of absurdity – just like Kierkegaard’s Abraham or Camus’s Sisyphus.

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Afterword: Toward a More Comprehensive View of Dickens's Religion

Stone Walls do not a prison make,  
Nor iron bars a cage.

Richard Lovelace, "To Althea, from Prison"

There is a bondage which is worse to bear,  
Than his who breathes, by roof, and floor, and wall,  
Pent in, a Tyrant's solitary Thrall.

William Wordsworth, Sonnet

In the foregoing chapters I have attempted to show that Dickens's religion is "existential" in the sense that in his fictional world, characters find their own identities, conquer their weaknesses, and finally achieve freedom only by making choices and by no other means. Yet the word "existential" carries with it a notion that the choice is almost always a personal venture, a lonely confrontation with God (for religious existentialists) or with His absence (for secular existentialists). For Kierkegaard, religion speaks eternal truth, and eternal truth has nothing to do with the "crowd," which, as he says, "in its very concept is the untruth, by reason of the fact that it renders the individual completely impenitent and irresponsible, or at least weakens his sense of responsibility by reducing it to a fraction" (Kaufmann 95). For Camus, Sisyphus's situation belongs to every human being, for we are all "strangers" trying to decipher the meaning of the absurd world. As he says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he is "a stranger to [himself] and to the world, armed solely with a thought that negates itself as soon as it asserts itself" (20). This notion of the "personal choice" is certainly an essential element in Dickens's idea, in the particular sense that for him, religious choices are independent of theological arguments and institutional intervention. Nevertheless, Dickens does not believe

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that characters can fulfill themselves alone. His existential religion is also communal.

To emphasize this communal nature, a non-personal aspect of Dickens's religion, is not to deny Dickens's existential sense of religion, but rather to suggest the complexity and relevance of Dickens's religious thinking: in a sense, his religion points to the modern world. The need for communality is particularly stressed by the twentieth-century existentialists. From the secular perspective, Camus in *The Plague* argues that the pestilence brought the otherwise isolated individuals together, as Father Paneloux says: "we must go straight to the heart of that which is unacceptable, precisely because it is thus that we are constrained to make our choice. The sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger" (*The Plague* 201). The religious existentialist Gabriel Marcel in his essay "Ego and Its Relation to Others" argues that the nature of "self" is social: "I am conjointly responsible for both to myself and to everyone else, and that this conjunction is precisely characteristic of an engagement of the person, that it is the mark proper to the person" (21).

For Dickens, as for Camus and Marcel, the community is a sympathetic extension of the "self." Perhaps the most important concept in western religion and idealism, the "self" acquires a new meaning in the nineteenth-century through Darwin. James Mark Baldwin, in his study *Darwin and the Humanities* (1909), tries to define religion in the light of the Darwinian sense of development. Although his method of enquiry is different from mine,<sup>72</sup> I find his notion of "self" illuminating in the discussion of Dickens's religious imagination. The "personal" God, the God for Kierkegaard, does not exist. Even the idea of the "personal"

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<sup>72</sup>His approach is anthropological – psychological, whereas mine is largely philosophical.

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must be established in the context of human relations. The “development of self-consciousness,” says Baldwin,

is not a private moment, circumscribed the single person’s mind. On the contrary, this development is social to the core. It involves...intercourse with other persons. It is through the imitative and other give-and-take processes proper to all education that the individuals’ thought of himself in personal terms is built up. The consciousness of self is not an intuition...is gradually formed through social experience with other selves. (Baldwin 96)

This is much closer to Dickens’s notion of the “self.” Unlike Kierkegaard who sees the individual as isolated beings, Dickens always places people in a community. His religion demands that individuals make personal choices, but the choices are not to be made in isolation.

Dickens rejects explicitly the notion of “isolation” from the very beginning of his career and elaborates on it at every opportunity. Most often it is embodied in the image of imprisonment, either literal or metaphorical. *Nicholas Nickleby*, for example, with its fairy-tale pattern juxtaposes the “social and happy” Nicklebys with “the rich Nickleby” who is “alone and miserable” (437). Similarly, Paul Dombey Senior is also depicted as a loner, who lives “in solitary bondage to his one idea” (608). His isolation is both the cause and the consequence of his refusal of Florence’s love. The most graphic presentation of this imprisonment is perhaps in the character of Marley’s Ghost in *A Christmas Carol*. Upon Scrooge’s question why Marley is “fettered,” the latter answers: “I wear the chain I forged in life...I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my

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own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to *you*?" (61). The pattern, however, is only too familiar to Scrooge, because in his merciless treatment to his servants and greedy pursuit of money he has enchained himself just like Marley who, ironically, epitomizes spiritual bondage in his very assertion that the chains are worn of his "free will."

The distinction between visible and invisible imprisonment is a crucial theme for Dickens. In *Great Expectation*, the narrator Pip is troubled by the "taint of prison" after a visit to the Newgate, which reminds him of his childhood and his chance encounter with the convict Magwitch. The idea of Estella, however, seems to banish the "taint of prison and crime," when he thinks "with absolute abhorrence of the contrast between the jail and her" (202). A similar moment occurs in his reunion with Magwitch, whose "influences of his solitary hut-life were upon him," and Pip recalls that "in ...a thousand other small nameless instances arising every minute in the day, there was Prison, Felon, Bondsman, plain as plain can be" (252-3). For the young Pip who has not been initiated into the "grammar of choice," men are only imprisoned by the actual brick wall because prisoners are deprived of their ability to "choose." But ironically, it is Estella and Pip himself who are "enchained," the former by Miss Havisham's philosophy of revenge, and the latter by his misguided understanding of social respectability. The consequence is that both make irremediably wrong choices. Just like Dombey who rejects the angel because he is imprisoned by a utilitarian view of life, Estella rejects love because she is taught to be an enemy of light by Miss Havisham – herself a prisoner of her past – to whom she asks: "if you had taught her...that there was such a thing as daylight, but that it was made to be her enemy and destroyer, and she must always turn against it...had wanted her to take naturally to the

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daylight and she could not do it, you would have been disappointed and angry?” (231).

Estella's, then, is a dark, unilluminated world, an image that naturally leads the discussion to the opening scene of *Little Dorrit*, a novel in which various aspects of imprisonment are explored. Having been wronged by her husband, Mrs. Clennam is under a perpetual bondage to her stern Calvinistic principles – the religion of revenge, “praying that her enemies ... might be put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy” (51). The New Testament teaching of “forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” we are told, is transformed into a supplication for God's vengeance: “Smite thou my debtors, Lord, wither them, crush them...this was the impious tower of stone she built up to scale Heaven” (61). Instead of becoming the means of reaching God, the “tower” is a self-made prison whose only inmate is Mrs. Clennam herself. Another character who “builds” a prison for himself is William Dorrit, the “father of Marshalsea” who has self-institutionalized himself after many years of living in the debtor's prison. The Marshalsea prison has deeply ingrained itself into the inner world of Dorrit even after he is set free. At a dinner presided over by Mrs. Merdle, Dorrit suddenly loses his memory and relapses into his former self, the “father” of the prison who welcomes everyone to the Marshalsea (675-8), a scene that anticipates the indelible marks left on the mind of Dr. Manette in *A Tale of Two Cities*. At the slightest provocation, Dr. Manette believes that he is still in the Bastille. As Miss Pross says: “Touch that string, and he immediately changes for the worse...his mind is walking up and down, walking up and down, in his old prison” (102). In fact, the image of “prison” pervades *Little Dorrit*. Dickens shows us people imprisoned within their minds as well as the entire structure of society as a kind of prison. Amy Dorrit

thus reflects that the group of people who courts her family in Italy because of its newly-found wealth is just like “a superior sort of Marshalsea,” because “numbers of people seemed to come abroad, pretty much as people had come into the prison; through debt, through idleness, relationship, curiosity, and general unfitness for getting on at home” (536).

The power that allows one to escape prisons of the mind is, above all, love, which is incarnated in the character Amy Dorrit, whose association with love is suggested by her first name, the Latin root of which is “*amor*.” Although born in the Marshalsea and godfathered by a turnkey, Amy through her self-sacrificial care for her father has “made the iron bars of the inner gateway ‘Home’” (84). Her loving nature also breaks through the prison of Mrs. Clennam, to whom Amy speaks of the need for forgiveness: “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” (826). Dickens also suggests that with imagination people can transcend the prison walls. Arthur Clennam, we are told, is a “dreamer,” and this “dreaming” quality has rescued him from her mother’s “creed too darkly audacious to pursue,” and has taught him “to be merciful, and have hope and charity” (180). The “dreamer” Arthur Clennam also enters the fantasy of another dreamer: Amy Dorrit. The “Story of the Princess,” which she tells Maggy in her own room – a Marshalsea garret – is her effort to transcend the prison (310-3).<sup>73</sup>

*Little Dorrit* nicely summarizes all the major points I have made in this study concerning “choice”: Amy Dorrit – just like Lizzie Hexam – is brought up in the most abominable place but is free to embrace her innate goodness; it is through Amy that Arthur Clennam regains his

<sup>73</sup> The illustration for this scene shows Amy looking out of the window, through which streaks of sunshine come into the dark room of the Marshalsea (*Little Dorrit* 312).

will power; and finally, Amy – the enactment of love – saves Arthur from his mother's Calvinistic view and provides him with a new interpretation of good and evil. *Little Dorrit*, then, provides a confirmation of that "grammar of choice" which, as we have seen, is central to Dickens's existential idea of religion.



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