SERMON `DAVID COPPERFIELD AND RELIGION'

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By the time he came to write David Copperfield, Dickens was increasingly concerned to call upon his audience to respond to the sufferings of the poor, in' terms of the gospel demand for charity and forgiveness. His religion was always oriented towards society and social action. By the time he was approaching the age of forty he seems to have desired most strongly the re-enactment of what had become for him the " crowning miracle" of the New Testament: the bringing of the gospel to the poor.

He saw the gap between the material conditions of the poor and the spiritual message offered to them. He had already remarked the "monstrous task" of attempting to impress the children of the poor "even with the idea of God, when their own condition is so desolate". In a public speech in 1851 he stressed his conviction that "even Education and Religion can do nothing where they are 'most needed, until the way is paved for their ministrations by Cleanliness and Decency."

If David's early life seems representative, it is much more the case with the depiction of the negative, destructive influence upon him of the Murdstones and their rel$_i$gion. Part of David's fear of his step-father is based on jealousy. More important, his fear is also his response to the Murdstones unrelenting
will to dominate and exploit. That will is made worse by being embodied in a religion - which is shown as extreme, even blasphemous. Their creed is revealed as a function of their personality.

> The gloomy taint that was in the Murdstone blood, darkened the Murdstone religion, which was austere and wrathful ... a vent for their bad humours and arrogance.

Their rigid, cold insistence upon "firmness" towards poor David helps destroy his mother.

By implication, it helps to make him sensitive and vulnerable. Their "theology" is based on an assumption which Dickens always opposed: the assumption that "all children are a swarm of little vipers."

The Murdstones bring a rude incursion of Calvinist fervour into the sleepy Anglican church - picking out the darker phrases of the traditional prayers, such as "miserable sinners", with "cruel relish".

Dickens wants us to take the Murdstones seriously, although he refrains from making a direct, explicit attack upon the evangelical religion which was popular at the time. He may have realised that such a direct attack would antagonise readers. More than one critic had objected to his "antipathy to Puritanism", an antipathy which was seen as the product of his Unitarian affiliation.

At the same time, there is a clear continuity between the grim religion of the Murdstones, the brutal kind of education they prefer, and the ruthless business ethos embodied in the firm of Murdstone and Grinby, where David is sent to be "a little labouring hind".

When the mature David treads "this old ground" again, he seems to "see and pity" himself. To see - and thus to pity - is a central motive of this phase of Dickens's art. The whole movement of this book is away from the selfish, self-regarding life, towards compassion and service to others. Dickens believed that the spirit of egoistical self-denial which helped to produce the bullying hypocrisy of the Murdstones was all too liable to deflect Christian impulses.

The Christian Socialist Movement was an organised attempt to popularise a Christian doctrine of social concern, based partly on the fear of a godless, Continental socialism entering Britain in the wake of the 1848 revolutions; and also based on the conviction that selfish competition and class division could be replaced by Christian love and charity. Dickens shared this conviction, although in other respects he diverged from the Christian Socialists.

He preferred, for example, to work as an individual rather than as part of an organised movement. But he encouraged Miss Burdett Coutts in her "Westminster" project to provide religious, educational and sanitary facilities for the poor. There was, he said, "no better way of doing good, or of preparing the great mass of mankind to think of the great doctrines of our Saviour."

He had a strong sense of a social gospel expressed as a continuing and deep conviction of our collective responsibility for the poor and dispossessed. He had this potent idea long before it became respectable in orthodox religious circles, and he seems. to have moved from a sense of individual sin to a sense of collective social sin.

In David Copperfield Dickens makes plain the personal basis of his struggle against social injustice. He contemplates, in fictional form, the painful rejection and isolation which he experienced as a child. Part of his reason for doing this was his belief that it was the beneficent design of Heaven that the softening memory of sorrow, wrong or trouble should lodge in one's mind, there to exercise a redeeming influence upon the understanding, and one's actions. He claimed that to deny the pain of the past is to deny the heavenly attributes of forgiveness to oneself, and hence the source of one's compassion for others.

For some time, his return to his own past in some of his writings had led to an intensification of his concern for the sufferings of the poor and outcast: a concern expressed in letters and articles on education, crime and other social issues - including a bitter attack on the proprietor of the infamous Tooting "baby-farm" - and expressed in March 1850 by his founding of Household Words partly in order to continue troubling the consciences of his readers.

David Copperfield is a Romantic novel insofar as it reveals a fruitless yearning for individual self-
• fulfilment, in the form of David's recurrent sense of an "old unhappy loss or want of something".

This theme is first mentioned when his great-aunt Betsey Trotwood hints that Dora may not offer all that

he rapturously expects; and it is repeated as a refrain thereafter.

- It is a kind of desire for meaning and security which can never be satisfied; it is a desire that has religious overtones.

Remember: Dickens's marriage had its difficulties. He

had a persistent tendency in his writing to idealise

young, unattainable women. So, it is Agnes Wickfield - the love he has blindly ignored since the days of his youth - who offers David the ultimate happiness:

> Clasped in my embrace, I held the source of every worthy aspiration I had ever had; the centre of

> myself, the circle of my life, my own, my wife; my love of whom was founded on a rock.

- The critic Hillis Miller suggested that this was

> a late example of that transposition of religious language into the realm of romantic love which

> began with the poets of courtly love. ... David has that relation to Agnes which a devout Christian has to God, the creator of his selfhood, without whom

> he would be nothing.

But this is a forced interpretation. It maybe true that Agnes' s exalted self-sacrifice sanctifies her love for David,; but she is not the "creator of his selfhood".

- Rather, the importance of her role is as the semi-divine mediator of wisdom or "truth" for the chronically insecure young hero who gropes blindly for the love and companionship which were denied him as a child.

When David collapses at Dora's death, Agnes points upwards to heaven for consolation. It is this image of

her which remains with him, a source of faith and hope.

This image of a figure pointing upward to heaven derives from a familiar Christian iconographic tradition. Dickens seems to acknowledge this by showing David consciously creating his vision of Agnes in terms of a memory of a stained glass window in church. David has a tendency to re-create the objects of his love in simplified, visual terms. When he first meets Emily,

> 'my fancy raised up something round that blue-eyed mite of a child, which etherealised and made a very angel of her.

' Later, Dora is more of an idea, a bright and distant image, than a real - and flawed - young woman.

Although he has to learn to reject these false images of women, he then goes on to etherealise Agnes. Her name is suggestive of the lamb of God; it indicates that she is, miraculously, able to fulfil his requirements in a way not possible for Emily or Dora. Dickens wants to show the survival of the childish imaginative faculty which persists as an essential part of the adult's ability to imagine transcendence.

Agnes Wickfield provides the selfless exemplar of Dickens's ideal in the domestic world which is the main focus of the narrative. It is Mr Peggotty who shows how the ideal can be expressed in the larger world into which Emily's "fall" takes him. It is Mr Peggotty who is at the core of the religious dimension of the book. It has been suggested that he is transformed from an angry, vengeful father into some kind of prophet of mercy; and that his transformation constitutes the event with the richest religious significance in the novel.

That, however, is an over-simplification based on a wrong premise. True: there are several Old Testament associations with Mr Peggotty: his name, Daniel; his nephew Ham's name; his home in a kind of ark, with its pictures of "Abraham in red going to sacrifice Isaac in blue, and Daniel in yellow cast into a den of green lions".

But, he is no vengeful father figure to begin with. Rather, ht has already fulfilled the requirements of merciful fatherhood. He has brought into his ark the
. orphaned and neglected, the outcast and dispossessed. He has given them a home, and made Emily, Ham and Mrs Gummidge his family.

There is, admittedly, a moment when Mr Peggotty is tempted by a sense of Old Testament wrath, tempted by a desire to punish the wicked. But it is at this moment that the underlying theme makes itself most strongly felt: :- the theme of forgiveness and charity towards the sinful and outcast.

The moment occurs at the structural centre of the novel- at the end of the tenth number, as Emily's elopement with Steerforth comes to light: At first, Mr
. Peggotty tries to rush out in wild pursuit of his niece; he is prepared even to drown her seducer.

Ham interposes himself - blocks the way to the door.
But Ham does not have any skill with words. It is the "lone lorn" Mrs Gummidge - until now always isolated in her self-pity - who articulates the theme of forgiveness and charity in a quite unexpected outburst:

> "No, no, Danl not as you are now. Seek her in a little while, my lone lorn Dan'l, and that'll be
> .but right! but not as you are now. Sit ye down, and give me your forgiveness for having ever been a worrit to you, Dan'l - what have <u>my</u> contrairies ever been to this! - and let us speak a word about
> them times when she was first an orphan, and when Ham was too, and when I was a poor widder woman, and you took inc in. It'll soften your poor heart, Dan'l," laying her head upon his shoulder, "and you'll bear your sorrow better; for you know the promise, Dan'l, "As you have done it unto one of the least of these, you have done it unto me"; and that can never fail under this roof, that's been our shelter for so many, many year!"

It is left to Providence to punish Steerforth, although tragically Ham is also drowned in the novel's great set-piece storm.

The implication is clear: "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord."

Mrs Gummidge's appeal is to both memory and the New Testament, as she reminds Mr Peggotty of his past mercies to the outcasts and adds the sanction of Jesus in the words of Matthew, and the promise that those who will inherit the kingdom of God will be those who took in the stranger and fed and clothed him.'

The novel reveals a kind of taking stock on Dickens's part: a search for the roots of compassion in personal memory. It also shows a favoured aspect of the social gospel in the study of the forgiveness and redemption of "fallen" women.

Mr Peggotty and David follow the prostitute Martha down to the river where she contemplates suicide. David says to her:

> In the name of the great Judge, before whom you and all of us must stand at his dread time, dismiss that terrible idea! We can all do some good, if we will.

Martha corroborates this hopeful exhortation - we can all do some good, if we will -- by saving Emily from despair and suicide in her turn. She helps to re-unite Emily and Mr Peggotty.

Finally, evil is represented in this novel essentially as the. kind of turning inward, to feed on one's own heart, which is seen in the religion of the Murdstones. Goodness, on the other hand, involves admitting - as David comes to admit - the kind of human interest which reflects cur natural, God-given inclination to help others; to take in the strangers, and to feed and clothe them.

Amen.