Natural Theology and the Revelation of *Little Dorrit*

Mark Knight

For some time now, I have been fascinated by the role of the watch in *Little Dorrit* (1855-57).[1] As you may recall, the timepiece is in the possession of Mrs. Clennam, and marked with the initials D. N. F. Towards the end of a fiendishly complex plot, which I cannot summarize adequately here, we discover that the watch was her late husband's. He gave it to her in the hope that the initials, which are said to stand for "Do Not Forget," might recall a duty-of-care to a child, not hers, conceived out of wedlock and sent away at birth. During the climactic scene of the narrative, just before we discover who that child is, Mrs. Clennam tells us about her reading of those letters:

> She laid her wrathful hand upon the watch on the table.
> "No! 'Do not forget.' The initials of those words are within here now, and were within here then. I was appointed to find the old letter that referred to them, and that told me what they meant, and whose work they were, and why they were worked, lying with this watch in his secret draw. But for that appointment, there would have been no discovery. 'Do not forget.' It spoke to me like a voice from an angry cloud. Do not forget the deadly sin, do not forget the appointed discovery, do not forget the appointed suffering. I did not forget." (Dickens 808)

Mrs. Clennam's angry self-justification continues on for several pages. She does acknowledge that her interpretation of the initials differs from her late husband's, but her reading remains unchanged and she seeks refuge in ever-more-forceful repetition: "He died, and sent this watch back to me, with its Do not forget. I do NOT forget, though I do not read it as he did. I read in it, that I was appointed to do these things" (Dickens 810).

For those of us who enjoy diagnosing the characters we read, Mrs. Clennam's repetition seems to invite some form of symptomatic reading. However, it can be equally revealing to focus our attention on the object that she is talking about. Mrs. Clennam insists that the initials and her reading of them are inseparable from the watch, a permanent record of its meaning, but closer analysis suggests that the initials are actually recorded on an "old silk watch-paper worked in beads," which, explains Arthur Clennam, "you found (no doubt) in its place between the cases" (Dickens 50). It is not entirely clear whether the initials are embroidered on the silk lining enclosed between the cases of the watch or engraved on the watch itself, but the former seems far more likely given the later comments offered by Mr. Blandois. Noticing the "gentleman's watch with two cases in the old fashion," and the "silk watch-lining" (Dickens 377) within, Mr. Blandois remarks how the lining is "not as old as the watch," and proceeds to link its "cyphers" with the initials "D. N. F." (Dickens 378). In highlighting the material details of the watch and its initials, I am not making an argument for surface reading over symptomatic reading: the cases and lining are layers rather than a single surface, and we should remember, too, how the watch is set on a table with other items, including a candle, in an altar-like setting that is charged with religious symbolism. Instead, I am interested in taking the particularities of the watch as the prompt for a set of reflections on our interpretative practice. When Mr. Blandois suggests that the three initials might mean "almost anything" (Dickens 378), any interest in their interpretative potential is undermined by his ironic tone. My own reading of the watch is also circumscribed, but in a very different way. As I proceed to

consider the meaning of the watch in terms of theological revelation, I will draw on the insights of postcriticism to enact a method of interpretation that attends to religion whilst acknowledging the capacity of my readers to read differently.

Because Christianity plays such a prominent role in Mrs. Clennam's characterization, her interpretation of the watch prompts me to think about the type of reading we expect from people who are obviously influenced by their theological commitments. Similar questions have long occupied those who specialize in theology and religious studies, and, more recently, they can also be found in the many books and journals that focus on the subsection of literature and religion. I note this history, albeit in passing, because it reminds us that there is a longer history to the current interest in postcriticism and its significance for our talk of religion. Religious practice covers more ground, for sure, but it is profoundly interested in the methodology of reading, and, as others have shown, it has exerted a key influence on the development of hermeneutics and our practice as literary critics. In some ways, then, we are returning to old ground in this special issue, a quality that confirms the legitimacy and importance of the questions being explored rather than detracting from them. I am grateful to Rita Felski for the way in which her important monograph, *The Limits of Critique* (2015), opens new space in which to examine the potential contribution of Christian theology to our reading of literature, particularly given the extent to which our histories of the development of literary studies as a professional discipline have "long been underwritten by a narrative of secularization" (Kaufmann 607). Felski does not address the theological possibilities of her work, either in *The Limits of Critique* or in her

subsequent reflections on that book, but I am not alone in thinking that her writing offers a rich seam of religious thought. The contributors to the 2018 *Religion and Literature* forum on Felski's work have done much to show us the value of mining this seam, and I continue that work here. Although I remain cautious about claiming that Felski's work is more theological than she thinks it is, I do see strong affinities between postcriticism and older discussions about theological revelation, not least in their shared willingness to treat our understanding of texts as more than a problem that needs to be solved.[2]

"Mysteries are gestured toward" in *Little Dorrit*, as Jacob Jewusiak observes, "but the stakes of that mystery are left blank" (Jewusiak 279). With this in mind, let me go back to Mrs. Clennam's watch and reflect briefly on the way in which I talk about this scene in the classroom. On those occasions in which I have taught the novel, I have often suggested that Mrs. Clennam's closed and dogmatic reading—in which she looks at the world and sees only a need for judgment and justification of her role as the "instrument of severity against sin" (Dickens 825)—is not the only hermeneutic available to those who identify as religious. Reacting against the ease with which many in literary studies align the closed reading exemplified by Mrs. Clennam with the dangers of contemporary fundamentalism, I have sought to remind students that not everyone who identifies as Christian reads in the same way as Mrs. Clennam. More recently, though, I have started to wonder whether my approach may constitute a benign version of the very problem that I am trying to describe. One immediate concern is that my reaction against the limited reading of religion that I perceive in literary

studies may be accused of following Mrs. Clennam in arguing "with some invisible opponent" (Dickens 379), for I am thinking about ephemeral conversations with scholars who work on the Victorian period more generally, not the work of those who have written specifically about Dickens and religion.[3] But the greater worry is this: Mrs. Clennam looks at three initials and sees an unquestionable religious message; I look at the same limited amount of material and see something more generous but no less dogmatic. In making this confession, I am not suggesting that I have lost confidence in the historic plurality of religious reading, nor the importance of pointing this out when others can see only the closed reading of the more extreme instances of fundamentalism. But I have started to revisit my insistence on this particular line of interpretation when teaching *Little Dorrit*, particularly as my audience frequently starts elsewhere. I read Mrs. Clennam's interpretation and want to separate her dogmatism from other examples of religious hermeneutics; my students look at her characterization and do not register any religious dimension at all. Indeed, for many of those I teach, their lack of attention to Mrs. Clennam's contorted Calvinism and the tradition from which it emerges is part of a broader inability to register the theological language that pervades the whole of Dickens's novel.

Part of the prompt for this essay, then, is pedagogical. It feels perverse to put so much energy into insisting that a character is Christian only to then insist that she is not as Christian as we think. And I am struck by a similar burden here in writing to peers who may also gloss over the theological elements within Dickens's novel that strike me as so important. It seems wrong to begin by blaming those to whom I am writing for not

reading in the same way as me, and I have no wish to be party to a model of interpretation that cannot comprehend why others look at the same evidence and draw different conclusions. In speaking with those who share my enthusiasm for the postcritical, my sense is that many of us are motivated by negative experiences in our discipline, where the language of critique feels like it has been weaponized and used to dismiss the views of those who think differently. Disagreeing with others, testing their arguments, being willing to change our minds; these are an important part of our interpretative practice. But when our use of critique starts to feel like an assault on another point of view and an excuse to immunize ourselves from the same level of scrutiny that we direct elsewhere, the intellectual and communicative value of our work dissipates. In those moments, we can become uncomfortably close to the characters in *Little Dorrit*, most obviously Mrs. Clennam and Mr. Blandois, who use the methods of critique to trade accusations about each other's hermeneutical failures but show little interest in trying to engage one another in any sort of genuine dialogue. There is something disturbingly familiar about Mr. Flintwinch's assessment of the exchange when he addresses Mrs. Clennam:

> "you had better leave Mr Rigaud, Mr Blandois, Mr Beelzebub, to tell it in his own way. What does it signify when he knows all about it?"
> "He does not know all about it."
> "He knows all he cares about it," Mr Flintwinch testily urged.
> "He does not know *me*."
> "What do you suppose he cares for you, you conceited woman?" said Mr Flintwinch. (Dickens 807)

In my desire to avoid repeating their error, and aware, more generally, of our multiple interpretative starting points as readers, I am left reflecting on the purpose of drawing

attention to the religious mechanisms at work in the Victorian novel. What might I say about the novel's capacity to offer some sort of theological revelation, and how might I do so in a way that resists the coercion that always threatens all of our interpretative work?

Mrs. Clennam is far from being the only person to look at a watch and make a questionable claim about its theological significance. Perhaps the most famous example here is William Paley, who, as Amy King observes, presents "a late articulation in a long trajectory of the design argument over its two centuries of prominence" (King 5). Paley thought that the book of the world provided clear and unquestionable evidence of God's design, and reasoned that an individual coming across a watch would reach an "inference" that was "*inevitable*; that the watch must have a maker … who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use" (Paley 8; my emphasis). Several of Paley's Christian contemporaries were unconvinced that the presence of God was so legible in the natural world, and since Darwin, of course, the number of scholars in the Academy who continue to place any confidence in the sort of natural theology favored by Paley is very limited indeed. Yet Paley still casts a long shadow over the way that many of us in literary studies think about the theological operations of evidence, and his reading merits further attention.

Problematically, Paley imagines that one can establish a clear causal relationship from the natural world back to God. For the Scottish theologian James McCosh, a person reading the world in this way "sets out in search of facts; he arranges and co-

ordinates them, and rising from the phenomena which presents themselves to their cause, he discovers, by the ordinary laws of evidence, a cause of all subordinate causes" (qtd. in Bebbington 359). But the problem for McCosh and for Paley is that most people do not see the inevitability of such analogies. Colin Jager explains how Paley's argument unfolds "as if the largely inductive procedures of the argument from design were methodologically neutral, but this was hardly the case" (Jager 102). And as Jager goes on to posit, there is, in both Paley's extensive "listing" of the properties of the watch and his "persistent use of mechanical language," the unacknowledged suggestion that a book which "purports to be a demonstration of God's existence" is "simply a register of the surfeit of its own subject matter" (Jager 106, 107, 109). To return the discussion to the present: while I happen to believe in God and see in the "book of the world" material that I want to understand theologically, I do not think we can look at nature and claim that it offers proof for, or even probabilistic evidence of, the existence of God. For me, at least, to insist otherwise, as Paley did, brings with it too many theological problems. These include the way in which the alleged inevitability of Paley's argumentation is at odds with what I take to be a Christian conception of creation, in which God grants others the freedom to be rather than making everyone and everything the mechanical apparatus of his divine will.

I offer some of my own objections to Paley simply to make it clear that Christian believers are not destined to agree with what he has to say.[4] Others, who do not believe in God or remain agnostic on the topic, have their own reasons for objecting to Paley's line of argument. The declining appeal of Paley's vision of natural theology in the

nineteenth century coincided with the rise of modern secularity, and those interested in better understanding this relationship would do well to read the work of Jager and King. Rightly, Jager pushes us to think about secularity in terms of religion's differentiation rather than its decline, and King registers a further consequence of that differentiation when she points out that while the nineteenth century lost faith in Paley's argument, the legacy of natural theology lived on in new forms. One of these forms, as King explains, was literary realism, with the theological interest in nature's complexity feeding the realist novel's concern with the detail of everyday life. This is not to say that all realist novels are underwritten by theological intent, any more than the equally unlikely (though critically persistent) suggestion that they are all motivated by a secularity that leaves the Christian religion behind. The point, rather, is that theology seems to have played a formative role in the development of the realist novel. One reason it was able to do so, with such wonderfully diverse results, was that Paley's understanding of natural theology was not the only way of conceiving how the world might be said to reveal God. Other writers were far less concerned with proof and its inevitability. Their notion that the world might reveal God in some other way were fresh approaches to a much older tradition of natural theology, in which revelation was concerned with exploring the capacity of language to make provisional analogical connections between God and the world with which we are familiar. Although this older tradition might be said to have reached its most developed formulation in the work of Thomas Aquinas, there were earlier biblical precedents, as Matthew Potts highlights: "Whether or not God needs any witness, God does in fact consent to be

witnessed, to be revealed and rendered in signs; to be given over to others, to be stood apart from and told no, and that God does so in the life of the man Jesus" (Potts 156).

I realize that there is a major difference between Aquinas's efforts to talk about a God who transcends our reason and knowledge, and my own efforts to talk about the more empirically verifiable presence of religious belief and practice in nineteenth-century life. Yet Aquinas's awareness that all theological talk requires an imaginative use of analogical language is worth heeding. In part, this is because the metaphysical distance between creator and creation makes it futile to look to the latter for proof of the former, but it is also because the theologian's dependence on analogy is replicated in other disciplinary uses of language. Even in science, there is always some distance between the conceptual language employed and the world that is read, with the metaphorical dimension of that language becoming more pronounced when scientists seek to explain the importance of their work (the wonder of the universe, the preciousness of our environment, and so on). But the reliance on metaphorical language is especially acute in the reading of fiction, a form whose very name reminds us that analogical leaps are needed to connect novels with our own experience of reality. Critics of the novel and theologians alike may hold different beliefs about the ultimate existence of their subject matter, but they employ similar techniques as they read. In both cases, these techniques shift the emphasis from reading as proof to reading as a practice that tries to register the limits of our interpretation. Writing about our reading entails conjectural patterns of thought that someone else might choose to believe, not philosophical claims that they have to believe. There is, of course, some level of

imperative to our conjectures, a reason why we write and hope that others may read. But our thought remains inherently speculative. Aware of this, Gianni Vattimo looks to "weak thought" as the consequence of having "to rethink the question of the meaning of being" (Vattimo 51).[5] I am not sure how far I want to follow Vattimo in conceiving of weak thought primarily as a specific response to Martin Heidegger's ontology, but I do appreciate the way in which Vattimo's formulation pushes us to hold beliefs more lightly.

Holding beliefs lightly does not stop us from committing to them. It would be a mistake to think that the only alternative to Paley's "strong" proofs or Mrs. Clennam's "strong" reading is the vaguer and less doctrinally specific language that John McClure's explores in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007). McClure argues that postsecularity involves a "rearticulation of a dramatically 'weakened' religiosity with secular, progressive values and projects" (McClure 3). For the most part, he treats postsecularity as a historical phenomenon rather than a theoretical tool, but in his introduction McClure does look to Vattimo explicitly, seeing, in the latter's exploratory comments on "weak religion," a means of summoning humans back "to their historicity, their finitude, and their fallibility" (McClure 13). Because I recognize this vocabulary ("historicity," "finitude, "fallibility") of so-called weak religion in the work of many "orthodox" theologians from the Christian tradition, I do not think that postsecularism has to entail a departure from the structured bodies of knowledge that we find in the history of the Church, nor do I think that it has to be equated with spiritual vagueness.[6] G. K. Chesterton puts it nicely in his book on

Dickens when he observes: "Much of our modern difficulty in religion and other things arises merely from this; that we confuse the word 'indefinable' with the word 'vague'" (Chesterton 9). As Chesterton recognizes, it is possible to be doctrinally specific yet continue to think weakly.

The capacity of the term postsecular to sustain thinking that is clear *and* weak is also true of the term postcritical. Anyone who has spent time with Felski will attest to her willingness to argue her point while still putting her ideas into dialogue with others. I use the term dialogue deliberately here, in admiration of Felski's work, but I am not sure that all of our critical activity deserves that description. In a broadside against Felski and her postcritical "allies," Bruce Robbins seems less concerned with a dialogic tone and sets out instead to find fault—"I myself," he writes, "have a fondness for faultfinding" (Robbins 376n1, 371). As he does so, Robbins hones in on the efforts of postcriticism to introduce a greater level of humility to our critical activity. Robbins is particularly dismissive of Bruno Latour, "the thinker most pertinent to this conversation and the most pernicious influence on it," and sees, in Latour's call for modesty, a falsity that is also "fundamentally unreasonable" in the face of the problems of our time. Robbins's worries about the dangers of critical modesty lead him to articulate another danger—in the next paragraph—that "religion escapes scrutiny" (Robbins 374). While I appreciate Robbins's articulate commitment to a scrutiny that can sometimes be disconcerting, I do not share his fear that "unscrutinized belief, is of course where the collapse of critical distance leads," for there are countless examples of those in religious traditions scrutinizing their beliefs from within and modifying or developing them in

consequence (Robbins 374). But my larger disagreement with Robbins's line of thought concerns the implication that our choice is always between a strong aggressive position, evident in his own deliberately strident objections to Felski and Latour, and some sort of vague unexamined mush. Whatever one may think of what Felski and Latour have to say, it is hard to ignore the precision of their writing and the clearly delineated ideas they offer. Something similar might be said about many of those who have contributed to our thinking about postsecularism, whether we are thinking about the theoretical genealogical underpinning offered by a scholar such as Talal Asad, or Lori Branch's more explicit championing of postsecular studies.

Inspired by some of the lines of thought that have emerged from postsecular and postcritical studies, let us return to the conception of natural theology imagined by Aquinas and others, in which our analogical use of language can involve religious talk without in any way necessitating it. With these thoughts in mind, how else might we think about the revelation offered by the watch in Dickens's novel? The way forward that I would like to explore involves shifting the semantic field from sight to time. Watches are objects we look at and watching is often thought about as a visual category. But watches also mark time, and the act of watching involves waiting to *see* what *will occur*. Mrs. Clennam finds this openness to time especially hard—"her being beyond the reach of the seasons, seems but a fit sequence to her being beyond the reach of all changing emotions" (Dickens 50)—but I sympathize with the broader difficulty of understanding how temporality is integral to the work of hermeneutics. My guiding text here is Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960). Gadamer treats

interpretation as a series of events, in which we return to the text repeatedly and read it anew. His insight about the importance of temporality does not give us free rein as we read, for our interpretation is shaped by the text and the tradition at large. *Truth and Method* devotes a great many pages to tracing the tradition that shapes our reading, but in contrast to those critics, Jacques Derrida included, who fear that this attention tends toward a conservative mindset, my own reading of Gadamer is impressed by the fluidity of his concept of tradition and the way in which the temporality of all interpretation allows each reading event to generate new lines of thought. Although many summary accounts of Gadamer's project dwell on his references to a fusion of horizons, these references are far less frequent and important in *Truth and Method*'s than Gadamer's engagement with time. Indeed, the language of fusion is misleading when it is left to stand as a summary of Gadamer's work, for it is only one of the metaphors he uses.

The notion that readings accrue and shift over time is a useful way of recalling the initial publication format of *Little Dorrit*. Published in nineteen monthly parts (the last a double number), it was with a keen awareness of the effect of duration that Dickens felt the need to add an afterword to the final part, pleading with his audience to look at the "weaving … in its completed state, and with the pattern finished" (Dickens 5). Dickens seems to have had mixed feelings about time. On the one hand, as Sue Zemka argues, "time beckons the novelist to feel for yet another human creature who stands in his way"; it is "an inexhaustible polymorphic desire for people met, passed, or encountered in the London streets" (Zemka 110). On the other, the problem

for the controlling author of *Little Dorrit* is that people rarely read as we want them to, and their divergence is only intensified when duration increases. If Dickens felt the need to remind his early readers that the novel was more coherent than they thought, then one can only imagine his likely discomfort at the myriad of readings that have followed in the years since. Hence the fact that my interest in the theological significance of the watch finds itself sitting alongside other readings and having to admit that the revelation I find in Dickens's novel is heavily dependent on the expectations and modes of thought that I bring to the text. There are enough religious cues throughout the novels of the nineteenth century for me to think that I have company when I read the novel in the way that I do, and I am grateful for the experience of Dennis Walder, who has written at length about Dickens and religion but still admits how "the problem of defining how far or how deep Dickens goes in *Little Dorrit*, or in any of his novels, is complicated by his independence of easily identifiable systems of worship, by his intuitive and shifting point of view, and it should be added, by his discretion" (Walder 171).

I am under no illusion that my reading of *Little Dorrit* is inevitable or necessary. There are imaginative leaps that need to be acknowledged as I highlight one small part of a complex text and link it backwards and forwards in time, and I am aware, too, that the attention I am giving to an inscribed watch may be misplaced. In his essay on shifting communication networks in the nineteenth century and the emergence of new attitudes to secrecy, Jesse Rosenthal ponders the same three initials on the watch and suggests that they "might provoke more intratextual semantic discussion than any

other three words in Dickens's corpus: from Rigaud's willful, taunting misreading of them as the initials of an object of affection; to Mrs. Clennam's reading of them as a call to judgment…; to Flintwinch's reminder of their original meaning" (Rosenthal 302). Ultimately, Rosenthal thinks that the watch "carries a certain totemic power of the plot; it is what lets us, and Clennam, know that there is a mystery surrounding *Little Dorrit*" (Rosenthal 302), without necessarily providing any significant intrinsic meaning.

Rosenthal may be right. Even if he is not, my own preference for merely speculating on the meaning of the initials may leave you wondering why I have sought to occupy your time in this essay when you could have been reading something else. It is a fair question, and one that I answer by describing my reading as an invitation, one that arises out of an awareness that many people, Dickens included, have found imaginative resources in the Christian story and wanted to explore these in fiction. Unlike Janet Larson, whose earlier work on Dickens and religion remains important, I do not believe that Dickens is always looking to break apart a stable and fixed Christian story. The reason for my disagreement with Larson is that I do not believe the Christian story to be quite so stable and fixed in the first place. But I share her interest in how Dickens explores the extensive resources of the Christian story, and I think that the appeal of *Little Dorrit*, for at least some of its long history of readers, has something to do with the uses to which the religious tradition is put. Christianity has always been a living tradition, in which its central narrative is remembered, retold and reimagined, and we can see that reworking animating the pages of *Little Dorrit*. At this point I am reminded of another possible meaning of the letters D. N. F., one that would likely have

been heard by at least some of Dickens's early Christian readers. The call to remember; the theological valences of a memory of judgment and/or mercy; and the occasion of a death as the reason for this remembrance. I am thinking here of the Eucharist and the way in which the consummation of the bread and the wine fulfils Christ's call during the Last Supper to eat and drink in remembrance of me.

The allusion to the Eucharist is a further reminder how far Mrs. Clennam has strayed from the theological story that Christ invites his followers to participate in. Although the meaning of the Eucharist is complex and understood variously, what is remembered typically is forgiveness, grace, the unmerited love bestowed on sinners whose brokenness is acknowledged in the bread and the wine, and who are made welcome in spite of what they have done. By contrast, Mrs. Clennam cannot see further than vengeance: her insistence on where the fault truly lies misses the way in which the Christian economy of the Eucharist is infinitely more interested in forgiveness and restoration than it is in determining who has done wrong. The problem is not so much that Mrs. Clennam cannot see grace, but that her own religious version of the story redirects the meaning of the Eucharist. Throughout the novel, she is, as Dennis Walder observes, "the presiding genius of a kind of ungodly church. The atmosphere within is charged with the cruelty and vengeance breathed by the bloodier portions of the Old Testament. Typically, on the Sunday of Arthur's return, she prays that her 'enemies' might be 'put to the edge of the sword, consumed by fire, smitten by plagues and leprosy, that their bones might be ground to dust and that they might be utterly exterminated'" (Walder 187-88). Although Mrs. Clennam's control over the story of

Little Dorrit is limited, she is more successful in leading critics to treat her and her like as exemplars of the wider flaws in the Christian faith. Consider, for instance, Christopher Herbert's recent book *Evangelical Gothic: The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to Dracula* (2019), which sees in the inverted Eucharistic imagery of *Dracula* the epitome of an evangelical desire to consume others. Describing the "vampire's mad craving for blood," Herbert writes that "it suggests that the 'rage' to drink and bathe in the atoning blood of Jesus and the rage to devour souls for the cause of true of religion coincide at some level of this complex of religious feeling, or can readily transpose themselves into each other" (Herbert 221-22).

Herbert is certainly not alone in dwelling on the signs of a Christian tradition that sometimes tries to control and consume others, and the anti-Catholic evangelical tradition he writes about bears significant responsibility for fueling such readings of the Eucharist act in the Victorian period and since. Although nineteenth-century evangelicals took part in their versions of the Eucharist, they associated what they believed to be the idolatrous practice of it with a Roman Catholic Church they considered controlling and dangerous. These accusations about different parts of the church getting it wrong and trying to control the narrative do not give us the whole story, though. Over the years, I have had a small number of negative experiences of the Eucharist in different churches, occasions where I have been left concerned about the dangers to which Herbert and others point. But for the most part, my experiences have been positive. These experiences are still only one part of a much bigger narrative, to which I can only contribute, but having attended a lot of churches over the years and

partaken in numerous Eucharistic services, the idea that Mrs. Clennam presides over or represents the Christian story strikes me as odd. On my reading, the Eucharist is a dialogic space in which Christ hosts a variety of broken voices. Oliver Davies helps explain why many others think about the Eucharist in this way:

> At the centre of the Eucharistic celebration, in the modern Catholic model, is the priest who speaks from within the heart of the community, with the voice of Jesus, for the sake of the community. Eucharistic speech itself is multiple and celebratory, grounded in praise and thanksgiving. Dialogic rhythms (responses, absolution, kyrie), recontextualised with triadic, Trinitarian disruptions (doxologies, petitions), play through the Eucharistic service and are apparent already in the priest's greeting in the name of Father, Son and Spirit, following the Entrance Song, to which the people give the reply Amen. (Davies 128-29)

It is because of this dialogic form that Mrs. Clennam never finally succeeds in obscuring a theological story that is more open and more welcoming than she would like it to be. I appreciate that Dickens puts most of his energy into sustaining that dialogism through the form of the novel rather than via a Eucharistic act. By the time he has finished, Mrs. Clennam's contribution is positioned alongside the voice of others, "each trying to control and tell a story which Dickens himself found elusive and complex" (Tracy 136). But not all of the voices are so controlling. One thinks, for instance of another major representatives of the Christian faith, Amy Dorrit, the "living presence" who, in the final pages, descends incarnationally into the streets to help others (Dickens 789). And in addition to the Christian voices in the novel, there are the voices of those, like me, who read it with theological ideas in mind.

Although the bread and wine exist as no more than a theological hint in a long novel that threatens to overwhelm all threads of meaning through an excess of textual

material, the hint contained in those three initials, with their "Do Not Forget," still invites consideration. The capacity of sacraments to sign so much more than their simplistic economy suggests is itself theologically significant, as Catherine Pickstock reminds us: "They are not just illustrative or metaphorical. They prompt human beings to new thought and provide guidance into deeper modes of meditation because they contain a surplus that thought can never fully anticipate or fathom" (Pickstock 660). On a more mundane level, that surplus is manifest over time, in the way that readers can return to well-known texts and find something new. Let me illustrate the point by returning one last time to the scene in which Mrs. Clennam talks about the watch and uses it to justify her role as the instrument of judgment. Uninterested in the perspective of others, she asks, rhetorically: "Have not mere sinners like myself been commissioned to lay it [sin] low in all time?" She does not wait for answer, but Amy Dorrit spots the problem and repeats, gently, "In all time?" (Dickens 825). Amy's recognition that no-one can claim to speak about Christianity once and for all is, to my ears, a call for a better sense of theological temporality and the need to recognize our finitude as we try and interpret the words that we read. Our readings are partial, temporal glimpses of a much greater set of possibilities, and this is why we can only ever speculate on the theological revelation that may be available to us when reading a novel. On some occasions, that speculation becomes clearer when we turn the critical spotlight of our reading on ourselves rather than on those who do not read as we wish them to. Postcriticism has no desire to disregard the tools of critique. Its concern, rather, is to supplement those tools with other ways of reading, and also to consider how critique

might be applied to our own lives as well as the lives of others. I remain interested in how others read, but rather than judging their readings as a failure, I am trying to learn how to watch for the possibilities they offer and the light they shed on my own understanding. It is a hard lesson, which is why I take those three initials—D. N. F.—as revealing something to me as much as for anyone else.

Works Cited

Bebbington, David. "Theology." *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions Vol III: The Nineteenth Century*, edited Timothy Larsen and Michael Ledger-Lomas, Oxford UP, 2017, pp. 347-68.

Chesterton, G. K. *Charles Dickens*. Methuen, 1906.

Colón, Susan E. *Victorian Parables*. Bloomsbury, 2012.

Davies, Oliver. *The Creativity of God: World, Eucharist, Reason*. Cambridge UP, 2004.

Dickens, Charles. *Little Dorrit*, edited by Stephen Wall and Helen Small, Penguin, 2003.

Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique*. U of Chicago P, 2015.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. 2nd revised edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum, 2004.

Gribble, Jennifer. *Dickens and the Bible: What Providence Meant*. Routledge, 2021.

Herbert, Christopher. *Evangelical Gothic: The English Novel and the Religious War on Virtue from Wesley to Dracula*. U of Virginia P, 2019.

Jager, Colin. *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era*. U of Pennsylvania P, 2007.

Jewusiak, Jacob. "Suspenseful Speculation and the Pleasure of Waiting in *Little Dorrit*." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2016, pp. 279-96.

Kaufmann, Michael W. "The Religious, the Secular, and Literary Studies: Rethinking the Secularization Narrative in Histories of the Profession." *New Literary History,* vol. 38, no. 4, 2007, pp. 607-27.

King, Amy M. *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain*. Cambridge UP, 2019.

Knight, Mark. "Little Dorrit and Providence." *Dickens Studies Annual,* vol. 32, 2002, pp. 179-93.

Larson, Janet L. *Dickens and the Broken Scripture*. U of Georgia P, 1985.

Marcel, Gabriel. *Being and Having*, translated by Katherine Farrer, Dacre Press, 1949.

McClure, John. *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. U of Georgia P, 2007.

Paley, William. *Natural Theology*, edited by Matthew Eddy and David Knight, Oxford UP, 2006.

Pickstock, Catherine. "Sense and Sacrament." *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*, edited by Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering, Oxford UP, 2015, pp. 657-74.

Potts, Matthew L. *Cormac McCarthy and the Signs of Sacrament: Literature, Theology, and the Moral of Stories*. Bloomsbury, 2015.

Robbins, Bruce. "Not So Well Attached." *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2, 2017, pp. 371-376.

Rosenthal, Jesse. "The Untrusted Medium: Open Networks, Secret Writing, and *Little Dorrit*," *Victorian Studies,* vol. 59, no. 2, 2017, pp. 288-313.

Ryan, Robert M. *Charles Darwin and the Church of Wordsworth*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Schramm, Jan-Melissa. *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative.* Cambridge UP, 2012.

Tracy, Robert. "*Little Dorrit*: The Readers Within the Text." *Dickens Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011, pp. 128-43.

Vattimo, Gianni, and Pier Aldo Rovatti, eds. *Weak Thought*, translated by Peter Carravetta, SUNY Press, 1983.

Walder, Dennis. *Dickens and Religion*. George, Allen and Unwin, 1981.

Zemka, Sue. *Time and the Moment in Victorian Literature and Society*. Cambridge UP, 2012.

Notes

1. The fascination is part of my long-standing interest in *Little Dorrit*. For a much earlier response to Dickens's text, see "*Little Dorrit* and Providence" (2002).

2. As Gabriel Marcel writes in *Being and Having*: "A problem is something which I meet, which I find complete before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. … A genuine problem is subject to an appropriate technique by the exercise of which it is defined: whereas a mystery, by definition, transcends into every conceivable technique" (Marcel 177). His distinction takes on additional significance given the way in which Felski explores the links between critique and detection

3. For a selection of relatively recent scholarship on Dickens and religion, all of it concerned with much more than the representation of particular characters, see Colón, *Victorian Parables*, chapter 5; Gribble, *Dickens and the Bible: What Providence Meant*; and Schramm, *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative*, chapters 3 and 4.

4. Robert M. Ryan explores William Wordsworth as an important alternative to the understanding of natural theology articulated by Paley: "It was precisely Wordsworth's difference from Paley that allowed him to emerge as the primary apologist and source of inspiration for natural theology when the older teleological approaches were discredited by Darwin" (Ryan 62).

5. My reading of Vattimo is indebted to Emma Mason's recent work in this area.

6. In the epilogue to his book, McClure does offer brief acknowledgement of "the power of an established faith to sponsor acts of extraordinary generosity in believers and to help those who dwell in their proximity to serve others, fight the battle against war, and retain some balance" (McClure 196).