VIII.

THE PURITAN TRADITION
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The doctrine of the corruption of man's nature, disparagement of the works of imagination, the conception of God as the God of righteousness rather than the God of love, tended to a repressive system of early upbringing. This seems to have been the case particularly with some non-conformist sects. The children of high and low degree of the Church of England or dissenters, baptised in infancy or not, joined together, as Dr. Watts hoped, in his "Divine Songs". A favourite piece for recitation by young Dickens was one of Dr. Watt's songs. "Divine and Moral Songs" are listed in the publications of the Religious Tract Society. The temper inspiring these songs and sought to be inculcated is indicated by Dr. Watt's "Discourse on the Education of Children and Youth". "They may be taught, that their very natures are very sinful, that it is the Holy Spirit of God who must cure the evil temper of their own spirits and make them holy and fit to dwell with God in heaven."

This article, the Doctor says, is mentioned in the first place, not only because it is a matter of the highest importance, and of most universal concern to all, but because it may be taught in these early years of life. Typical of this attitude may be quoted the following:

'Tis dang'rous to provoke a God!
His pow'r and vengeance none can tell:
One stroke of his almighty rod
Shall send young sinners quick to hell (Song 15. Danger of Delay)

1. Forster, J.: op.cit., p.81
How the evangelical creed could easily ally itself with imperialism is here foreshadowed:

'Lords, I ascribe it to thy grace,
And not to chance as others do,
That I was born of Christian race,
And not a heathen or a Jew.  
(Song. G. Praise for the Gospel)

The children of his century, we are told, regarded Wesley with affection and reverence and readily responded to his presence and preaching. We may quote from Southey's "Life of Wesley", his notions concerning children. "Break their will betimes," he says, "begin this work before they can run alone, before they can speak plain, perhaps before they can speak at all. Whatever pains it costs, break the will if you would not damn the child. Let a child from a year old be taught to fear the rod and cry softly." He exhorts parents never to commend their children for anything; and says "that in particular they should labour to convince them of atheism, and show them that they do not know God, love him, delight in him and enjoy him; any more than do the beasts that perish."

In the writings of Dickens we see the working out of these ideas in their full rigour. Dickens's early experience of church-going at Chatham determined in a very marked way his attitude to religion. Next door to his home in St. Mary's Terrace was a sort of little Bethel. His mother, like Mr. Weller

may have fallen under the influence of these people. What he suffered from these divines we learn from his paper on "City of London Churches" in "The Uncommercial Traveller":

"Time was when I was carried off to platform assemblages at which no human child, whether of wrath or grace, could keep its eyes open, and when I felt the fatal sleep stealing over me, and when I gradually heard the orator in possession, spinning and humming like a great top, until he rolled, collapsed, and tumbled over, and I discovered to my burning shame and fear that as to that last stage it was not he, but I. I have sat under Boanerges when he has specifically addressed to us - us, the infants - and at this present writing... I behold his big round face and lock up the inside of his outstretched coat sleeve as if it were a telescope with the stopper on, and I hate him with an unwholesome hatred for two hours."

Not finding his mother at home, Kit takes his way to a dissenting chapel frequented by her:

"The baby in her arms was as fast asleep as she; and little Jacob, whose youth prevented him from recognising in this prolonged spiritual nourishment anything half as interesting as oysters, was alternately very fast asleep and very wide awake, as his inclination to slumber, or his terror of being personally alluded to in the discourse gained the mastery over him."

Mr. and Miss Murdstone, professing to be religious have between them nearly reduced the little David to a state of dullness and sullen desperation. Recalling one of his childhood Sundays in the church David writes: "I listen to Miss Murdstone’s mumbling the responses and emphasising all the dreaded words with a cruel relish -- Again if I move a finger or

relax a muscle of my face, Miss Murdstone pokes me with her prayer book and makes my sides ache."

The meekest of little men, Mr. Chillip quotes Mrs. Chillip, saying that what such people miscall their religion is a vent for their bad humours and arrogance. "And do you know I must say, Sir," he remarks to David, "that I don't find authority for Mr. and Miss Murdstone in the New Testament." Even before the Murdstones cast their baleful shadow on David's early childhood, his religious training has not proved a source of happiness to him. One Sunday night his mother reads him and Peggotty how Lazarus was raised up from the dead. He is so frightened that they are afterwards obliged to take him out of bed and show him the quiet churchyard out of the bedroom window, with the dead all lying in their graves at rest, below the solemn moon.

On Esther Summerson the puritanic code presses with more than its usual severity. "Submission, self-denial, diligent work, are the preparations for a life begun with such a shadow on it. You are different from other children, Esther, because you were not born, like them, in common sinfulness and wrath. You are set apart." So the pious and strict godmother pronounces her judgment. Under a crushing sense of guilt, constraint, and isolation Esther has no one to open her heart to but her "faithful Dolly".

1. David Copperfield, Ch.LIX 2. Id., Ch.III 3. Bleak House, Chap.III
Caddy, tortured by her pious and philanthropic Mother, Mrs. Jellyby, is rendered stubborn, rebellious and despairing: "I wish I was dead! I wish all were dead!"

Arther Clenhara describes his parents as professors of a stern religion. His childhood is recalled in these terms:

"Austere faces, inexorable discipline, penance in this world and terror in the next, nothing graceful or gentle anywhere, and the void in my cowed heart everywhere."  

A Sunday evening in London reminds him of the dreary Sunday of his childhood, when he sat with his hands before him, scared out of his senses by a horrible tract which commenced business with the poor child by asking him in its title why he was going to perdition? Thus he grows up with no more real knowledge of the beneficent history of the New Testament than if he had been bred among idolaters. Mrs. Clenham who regards herself elected to reclaim "the otherwise predestined and lost boy" had herself been brought up strictly and straitly. "The corruption of our hearts, the evil of our ways, the curse that is upon us, the terrors that surround us - these were the themes of my childhood."

In the accounts of the childhood of his heroes always representative of his genius at its best, Dickens as W. Kent points out, never introduces religious training as a source of happiness. P.
Fitzgerald suggests that Dickens's attitude to religion was very largely determined by his own early unhappy experience of chapel-going at Chatham. "It made him judge the whole by a corrupt portion and detest all formal sects." His references to the ceremonies of the Anglican church are made in a spirit which is in marked contrast to that of the Oxford Movement. In the Bloomsbury Christening, the ceremony is reduced to a formal pretence, 'to renounce the devil and all his works'. - "all that sort of thing" - as little Kitterbell said, - "in less than no time". In his letter requesting Walter Landor to be godfather to his fourth child, the ceremony is spoken of as only a means of enabling him to form a relationship with friends. Dickens's will, cited by his biographers as his profession of religion, affords according to Jackson, no satisfactory evidence on the point, and it is argued that the pious phraseology in it is to be explained as a legal safeguard against the Blasphemy Laws. Though Dickens had little use for religious forms or religious mysteries there is no mistaking the Christian spirit that pervades his writings. It is from this viewpoint that Dickens has been described as "one of the greatest of our Christian writers" whose religious message seems to be "In as much as ye have done it unto one of the least of my brethren, ye have done it
In a letter to his youngest son, who was leaving home for Australia, Dickens wrote:

"Never take a mean advantage of anyone in any transaction, and never be hard upon people who are in your power. Try to do to others as you would have them do to you, and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rule laid down by Our Saviour than that you should. I put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes, that made me write an easy account of it for you, when you were a little child - Never abandon the wholesome practice of saying your own private prayers, night and morning. I have never abandoned it myself, and I know the comfort of it."

What repelled Dickens were the unseemly squabbles of the churchmen and dissenters, all obtrusive professions of and tradings in religion which seemed to him to retard the true Christian work of redeeming the neglected and untaught children at home. Over-sentimentalised as the death-bed of Poor Joe is, it serves to embody Dickens's protest against the conventional attitude adopted by the Anglican and Non-conformists to the grave problems of poverty and ignorance. That for many a nameless urchin growing up neglected in the streets of London and elsewhere religion could have little meaning or reality is exemplified in Deputy, the destructive little imp in "The Mystery of Edwin Drood".

"When they say to me in the Lock-up, a-going to put me down in the book, 'What's your name?' I says to them, 'Find out.' Likewise when they says, 'What's your religion?' I says, 'Find out.' Which it may be observed in the passing it would be immensely difficult for the State, however statistical, to do."

2. Forster: Life, p. 819
3. The Mystery of Edwin Drood, Ch. XXIII
Whether it was due to his own neglected childhood, or his preoccupation with social problems clamorous for solution, religion plays but a minor part in Dickens' novels. The subject is well summed up by Kent with the remark that in Dickens there is no attempt to depict a human life lived with constant reference to the will of God, the pattern of Christ, and the duty of prayer and worship.

"The Way of All Flesh", a novel written as far back as 1848-1854, though it was not published till 1903, presents rather an iconoclastic approach to parent-child relationship under the Puritan tradition.

On the one hand we have in Ernest's father, a man, conscious of being ill-suited to his profession, with no affection for children or sympathy with their minds, and firmly persuaded of the necessity of orthodoxy and puritanic severity, especially as these served to safeguard his comforts and privileges. Ernest, on the other hand, is a weakly, sensitive, and affectionate child: "he doted upon his nurse, on kittens and puppies, and on all things that would do him the kindness of allowing him to be fond of them." Overton, a detached and not too friendly observer who is also the boy's godfather tells the story, giving a sarcastic edge to his account and reflections. In keeping with the then universally admitted principle: "Break the child's self will betimes." Ernest is brought up under a system of

repressive discipline.

"Before Ernest could well crawl he was taught to lisp the Lord's Prayer and the general confession. How was it possible that these things could be taught too early? If his attention flagged or his memory failed him, here was an ill weed which would grow apace, unless it were plucked out immediately, and the only way to pluck it out was to whip him.."

The system is seen in its full rigour on Sundays. The Sabbath is strictly observed. The young people may not cut out things nor use their paintbox, nor play with their toys. They are indulged however, to choose their favourite hymns. Ernest repeatedly pronouncing 'come' as 'tum' is visited with severe chastisement.

"I have sent him up to bed," said Theobald, as he returned to the drawing room, 'and now, Christina, I think we will have the servants in to prayers,' and he rang the bell for them, red-handed as he was."

The incident provokes Overton's sardonic humour but Theobald justifies himself and says:

"Please do not laugh, Overton, it will make the boy think it does not matter, and it matters a great deal." To the parent who believes it is his sacred duty to crush his child's self-will, small occasions are as important as great ones.

What sets up in the child the automatic reaction of resentment is not so much the repressive discipline of parental authority as his father's want of affection and his mother's betraying his confidences and always siding with his father. Until he is fourteen Ernest's life at home and school is

1. The Way of All Flesh, S. Butler, Ch XX
dominated by a conventional middle-class priggishness and puritanical morality. His conscious and reflecting self bids him act in accordance with them. Butler however, holds "that it is our less conscious thoughts and our less conscious actions which mainly mould our lives". And Ernest's inner yet inarticulate self insists that his conscious self is "a prig begotten of prigs and trained in priggishness." What his inner self feels is disclosed in his musings after his parents have left him at Dr. Skinner's school. His Papa and Mamma are so good and wise, while he is always doing naughty things and can never hope to be like them. He hates Papa and does not like Mamma. He does not like Sunday nor his Bible readings. The Catechism is awful. It seems to him that he has duty towards everybody but that nobody has any duty towards him. In Butler's view the Catechism is the work of one who did not like children and is written too exclusively from the parental point of view.

"The complexes are formed by the time a child has reached the age of six," writes Charles Baudouin. The dominant emotional pattern thus early established in Ernest explains his growing alienation from his parents and even from the family as an ideal. At seven years of age he is looking forward to having a natural child. In his mature years he has arrived

1. Id. Chap.XXXI  
2. Id. Ch.XXIX  
3. Id. Ch.VII  
4. The Mind of the Child
at the conclusion that there is no inherent love for
the family system on the part of nature herself.

According to Mrs. E. S. Garnett, Butler's aim in
"The Way of All Flesh" was much wider than to draw a
picture of his early years. "He wanted to expose
the whole generation and ideals of the age that had
formed him."

"The Autobiography of Mark Rutherford" (1889)
and Gosse's "Father and Son" (1907) furnish two re­
markably illuminating studies of childhood brought up
under a puritan tradition which as yet retained some­
thing of the old rigour and reality before it was
replaced by the late 19th century "culture" and the
path of religion, as W. Hale White puts it, was made
flowery.

Mark Rutherford was brought up in a "moderate
Calvinism" when the rigours of the iron law of pre­
destination had a little abated. He lived much in
the open air. "The recollections of boyhood, so
far as week-days go," he writes, "are very happy."
"I remember whole afternoons in June, July, and
August, passed naked or almost naked in the solitary
meadows and in the water." Sunday, however, was
not happy. Parents, rigid Calvinistic Independents,
did not tolerate any book more secular than the
Evangelical Magazine. Not a letter was opened un­
less it was clearly evident that it was not on

2. Samuel Butler (1926) p.8
3. The Early Life of Mark Rutherford (Oxford, 1913) p.73
4. The Autobiography, Ch.1
business. Even in the coldest weather hot dinner other than a boiled custard pudding was not permitted. After family prayer and breakfast they attended the Sunday School. They then went to the chapel where three services were held every Sunday, besides intermitting prayer meetings. Each service consisted of hymns, reading the Bible, a long meandering prayer followed by a sermon the theme of which was pretty much the same from January to December. Mark found the service extremely dreary and endured it by tracing curious designs on the flap of the pew. Evening service was still more trying for the child, for he could hardly keep awake, conscious as he was of the sin of sleeping under the Gospel. As a deacon, his father was a lay-preacher and took him on his rounds in the villages. His religious education, notwithstanding its drawbacks, did confer upon him, he acknowledges, some positive advantages, chief of which he counts a rigid regard for truthfulness and purity of life. Impurity was looked upon not merely as an excusable weakness to be visited with some remote psychological penalties but a sin for which dreadful punishment was reserved. In this he found a strong weapon against temptation. He recommends that parents, by slight yet constant pressure, exercised directly and indirectly should form an antipathy in their children to brutish selfish sensuality.

At fourteen Mark Rutherford became "converted". Of this change supposed to have taken place in his
soul he writes:

"I had to be a 'child of God', and after a time professed myself to be one, but I cannot call to mind that I was anything else than I had always been."

To this creed he ascribes the following consequences: preoccupation with self, and a certain hypocrisy in professing what he did not feel or understand. It falls beyond the scope of this essay to trace Mark Rutherford's later spiritual development, his intellectual discord, his moral distress and his gradually learning the truth concerning God that "Thy way is in deep waters and thy footsteps are not known."

Edmund Gosse describes his "Father and Son" (1907) as "the diagnosis of dying Puritanism, a study of the development of moral and intellectual ideas during the progress of infancy." It is a literary document of supreme value, revealing as it does, with a singular frankness, not only the shortcomings, but also the pure and virile strength, of Puritan traditions. The reader is deeply impressed by the ceaseless solicitude and jealous watchfulness with which the parents follow their son's earthly career with a view to his spiritual salvation. After his mother's death when the son takes up his residence in London, the father writes:

"You were left as a solemn charge— to bring you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. That responsibility I have sought constantly

1 Id. Ch. I
2 Taylor, A. F.: The Novels of Mark Rutherford E.S.A. (1914) Vol. IV
3 Father and Son Preface
before me - in my choice of a housekeeper, in my choice of a school, in my ordering your holidays, in my choice of a second wife, in my choice of an occupation for you - and in multitudes of lesser things - I have sought to act for you, not in the light of this present world, but with a view to Eternity."

Shortly after the birth of their child the parents dedicate him to the Lord.

"Around my tender and unconscious spirit was flung the luminous web, the light and elastic but impermeable veil, which it was hoped would keep me unspotted from the world."

In a family life characterised by such perfect purity, self-abnegation, and earnest piety, yet not without some narrowness and isolation, the childish tastes find little or no indulgence. Story books and toys are sternly excluded. In his fourth year the child learns by heart hymns, psalms, and chapters of scripture. He reads aloud to his sick mother Newton on the Apocalypse. Almost their only relaxation the parents find in the literal interpretation of the Book of Revelation. Their faith, though not mystic, is yet profoundly serene. What a lesson in heroic resignation it must have been to the child when his mother endures the awful agony of her fatal disease and dies without rebellion, without repining, repeating the words: "We shall be one family, one song. One Song! One Family!"

Submission to the Divine Will is instilled and enforced in the child both by example and experience. His little aches and ailments are ascribed to divine chastisement. Disturbing his father praying by his
sick bed by screaming "Papa! Papa!" at the sight of a beetle, he is severely reproved:

"If your heart were fixed, if it panted after the Lord, it would take more than the movement of a beetle to make you disturb oral supplication at His footstool."

His religious instructions as carried on by his father are almost exclusively doctrinal and aimed at forcing his spiritual growth. At ten years he is admitted, after "public baptism as an adult" to the Saints. To the devout brother he is a vessel fit to contain the Holy Spirit. But to himself, a child utterly detached and analytical and repressed he is no more than an "adroit little pitcher." The public baptism is a turning point. After that the rift between the two temperaments slowly widens. As an âme d'élite it is now his duty to speak increasingly "in season and out of season of the blood of Jesus", but his heart never responds to these pious phrases with any inner conviction.

Writing of this period Williamson recalls that being a playmate with him was like trying to play with Almighty God. Backsliding of some brethren, his father's second marriage, interest in literature and fine arts mark the son's gradual sundering from the faith in which he had been trained. But as the Hon. Evan Charteris points out, the difference between Father and Son was mainly one of form rather than of substance. "Edmund recoiled from what was bleak and puritanical in his father's creed, but he still

1.Ch.VII 2. The Life and Letters of Sir Edmund Gosse, p.16
clung to the core of Christian belief which glowed within it." And it is also to be remembered that across this spiritual divergence was thrown the bridge of tenderest memories and the deepest affection that still existed between Father and Son. A near parallel in literature of affection that binds parent and child in spite of division is seen in Mrs. Browning's relation to her father. She wrote to Mr. Browning:

"But what you do not see, what you cannot see, is the deep tender affection behind and below all those patriarchal ideas governing grown up children 'in the way they must go' and there never was (under the strata) a truer affection in a father's heart...no, nor a worthier heart in itself - a heart loyaller and purer and more compelling to gratitude and reverence than his, as I see it!" 1

In a letter Edmund offers a tribute to the excellence of his father's training. "I do not, to be frank," he writes, "think you were wise in all things, but I do think that the general tenour of your example especially the deep consciousness I had that you sought with all your heart to bring me up for God, had an immensely beneficial effect on my character." 2

The Revue des Deux Mondes is struck by the sad and painful picture of "l'éducation d'un jeune âme dans ce milieu de 'saints'" and "l'impitoyable portrait qui remplit son livre."

This criticism seems to overlook the underlying tenderness and gaiety of the book. Shaw spoke of "Father and Son" as one of the immortal pages of

1. The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. (1845-46)
3. Ibid, pp.915-916
English literature. Here is a charming vignette of Gosse's parents:

"My Father and Mother lived so completely in the atmosphere of faith, and were so utterly convinced of their intercourse with God, that so long as that intercourse was not clouded by sin, to which they were delicately sensitive, they could afford to take the passing hour very lightly — my mother was sometimes gay, laughing with a soft, merry sound. What I have since been told of the guileless mirth of nuns in a convent has reminded me of the gaiety of my parents during my early childhood."

In a letter to Viscount Knutsford, Gosse emphasises the real central point of his book, namely "an exposure of the modern sentimentality which thinks it can parade all the prettiness of religion without really resigning its will and thought to faith. You have most excellently said it is either my father's creed 'or nothing'. To tell you the truth what I should like to think my book might be — if the idea is not of too great temerity — is a call to people to face the fact that the old faith is now impossible to sincere and intelligent minds and that we must courageously face the difficulty of following entirely different ideals in moving towards the higher ideal. But what ideals or (what is more important) what discipline can we substitute for the splendid metallic rigour of an earlier age?"