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978-1-107-02126-6 - Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative

Jan-Melissa Schramm

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*(Unmerited) suffering and the uses of adversity  
in Victorian public discourse

To suffer is the highest command of Christianity – the history of Christianity is the history of the Passion of Humanity ... If God himself suffered for my sake, how can I be joyful, how can I allow myself any gladness, at least on this corrupt earth, which was the theatre of his suffering? Ought I to fare better than God? Ought I not, then, to make his sufferings my own? Is not what God my Lord does my model? Or shall I share only the gain and not the cost also?

Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot [1854] (Amherst: Prometheus, 1989), pp. 61–2.

There comes a moment in many mid-Victorian novels when the suffering protagonist, worn down by trial and unable to subscribe to traditional understandings of the educative purposes of adversity, calls aloud for moral guidance. For characters like Elizabeth Gaskell's Edward Carson, George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver and Dorothea Brooke, and Charles Dickens's Tattycoram, continued subjection to mental and physical anguish elicits the foundational cry of the shipwrecked heart, 'O God, where am I? Which is the way home?'<sup>1</sup> Destabilised by grief, loss, disappointment, isolation, these wanderers sense the potential insufficiency of Christian theodicy in an age of rapid social and industrial change, yet strive nonetheless to adhere to the ethical teachings which have been transmitted from one generation to the next. What they seek is not only, in George Eliot's phrase, 'some explanation of this hard, real life' which would make suffering meaningful (*MF*, p. 379), but a template to follow in the pursuit of virtuous action – a pattern or model which avoids the reductive simplicity of the formulaic maxims Eliot regarded with such suspicion, but which nevertheless packaged the complexity of lived experience in such a way that those who came after them could derive moral benefit from this hard-won inheritance. At stake, then, in these moments of crisis, is a range of issues crucial to Victorian understandings of the reading process and its value – including subjectivity (the ways in

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which protagonists understand themselves in isolation or in relation to others), sympathy, and the role of vicarious experience in the expansion of Victorian capacities for fellow-feeling. What will serve to ‘baptise’ these suffering individuals into that ‘enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the lot of others?’ (*MF*, p. 633).

VICTORIAN SUFFERING AND ‘THE GIFT OF  
A TRANSFERRED LIFE’

The early and mid-Victorian generations experienced both traditional and ‘new’ forms of human suffering. The impulse towards democratisation which characterised the period between the two Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867 ensured that the economic privations of the so-called hungry forties rose to an unprecedented cultural prominence: publications as disparate as *Hansard*, Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–2), countless newspaper editorials, and numerous novels all registered the ways in which the industrial revolution severed older forms of community-based support, concentrating workers in mill-towns and cities, and rendering them vulnerable to the upheavals of the market. The Royal Commission of 1840 drew attention to the exploitation of child workers in the mines which sustained the industrial boom;<sup>2</sup> Chartist poetry and oratory proclaimed the extent of the people’s bodily suffering in the capitalist credit economy; novelists including Dickens, Eliot, and Gaskell summoned their readers to deathbeds and spectacles of hardship in the hope of advancing mutual understanding between what Benjamin Disraeli had so aptly described as the ‘Two Nations’ of rich and poor.<sup>3</sup> All were attentive to the ethical questions involved in the observance of suffering and death. For whilst the vast numbers of the suffering metropolitan masses pressed upon the national imagination in new ways – forcing discussion of the need for better sanitation, or the dangers of anonymity, or resistance to cultural homogenisation, to give but a few examples – institutions such as Thomas Wakley’s coroner’s court were prepared to worry away at the meaning of every individual death, and authors of all persuasions pondered the relative value of happiness afforded to a hypothetical ‘greatest number’ if it was nevertheless predicated upon the suffering of one (or a few or many). For as Jonathan Lamb has noted, the accounts of misery offered by the suffering one invariably insist on their reception as singular and unique: literary recyclings of the complaints of Job, for example, from the controversies of the mid-1740s–1760s, on which Lamb dwells, to *Mary Barton* (1848), to *Jude the Obscure* (1896),

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serve to dramatise an ‘antinomy ... always recognizable in its basic form as a conflict between the law – in its broadest sense of principle, rule and precedent as well as of statute – and those elements of a personal history, usually painful, for which there is no prescription or parallel’.<sup>4</sup> The ‘particularity’ and ‘authenticity’ of an ‘unresolved personal agony’, expressed in first-person speech, here collide with the wider communal need to justify or vindicate the ways of God to man, to locate within the world some explanatory scheme of ‘universal equity’.<sup>5</sup>

For the mid-Victorian generation, the public formulation of such theodicies was problematised by the scourges of cholera and typhus which were visited upon the country in regular waves between 1831 and 1866, and by the declaration in March 1854 of war in the Crimea. England had not been at war in Europe for forty years: her opponent on this occasion was Russia, another Christian country, and theologians worked hard to offer the necessary justification for such martial aggression. Self-sacrifice was seen as crucial to public discourse in this period, both of individual male soldiers, who were willing to die ‘on behalf of’ those at home, and of women who, like Florence Nightingale, felt called by God to ‘embody’ Christian charity and nurse the fever-ravaged troops abroad at considerable risk to themselves. And with the ending of the war, the churches called upon the nation to support those who had made such sacrifices:

To us it remains to bind up the broken-hearted. The widow’s voice cries to us, ‘for you my husband died’. The orphan cries to us, ‘for you my father bled’. The parent cries to us, ‘for you my son perished on the battlefield’. A country so rich in her charitable institutions, where human suffering under every shape meets with a place of refuge, will not be forgetful of what she owes to those who have devoted their lives to her service.<sup>6</sup>

It is hardly surprising that the great theological controversy of the 1850s centred on the theology of atonement – what it means for one man to die in place of many, and what lessons can be learnt from the example of such difficult deaths. And whilst the intellectual ferment of the period can be accounted for partly by the insightful intelligence of the Broad Church theologians F. D. Maurice and Benjamin Jowett who brought some aspects of Unitarian thought (and the inheritance of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s work on metaphor) into mainstream Anglican debate, there is no doubt that it was given particular force and poignancy by the Crimean context.<sup>7</sup>

That the meaning of death was pondered with such perplexed care in the period is thus particularly revealing: as Alfred, Lord Tennyson expressed so powerfully in his earlier study of loss, *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850), the disturbance of communal confidence in the truths of the

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Christian salvific scheme impacted upon the type of comfort which could be offered to the bereaved:

That loss is common would not make  
My own less bitter, rather more:  
Too common! Never morning wore  
To evening, but some heart did break.<sup>8</sup>

Studies of the value of human subjectivity in the period registered the devastating consequences of a shift from Christian to Lyellian and Darwinian indices of value and meaning. Maggie and Dorothea cry out ‘Where am I?’ and ‘What should I do?’ but an even more fundamental question of the time was ‘Who am I?’ – an immortal soul deemed worthy of discipline through adversity before reward in heaven in traditional Christian eschatology, or a suffering animal, of no value as an individual except insofar as one’s offspring may contribute in turn to the survival of the species? It is perhaps Tennyson who captures the contrast most poignantly: in ‘The Last Tournament’ from *The Idylls of the King*, the servant of Arthur, disfigured beyond recognition by the atrocities of the Red Knight, can nevertheless be addressed by Arthur as ‘My churl, for whom Christ died’<sup>9</sup> – and surely the highest marker of value is to be worthy of such a redemptive sacrifice – whilst the poet of *In Memoriam* (grappling with the implications of Lyell’s work on the fossil record) can allege that Nature’s ‘care’ extends only to the ‘type’ not the individual, for ‘of fifty seeds / she often brings but one to bear’.<sup>10</sup> In each case, the moral concern is expressed numerically – the supreme value of one, asserted by Christian teaching (in which, for example, Christ the Good Shepherd will leave the flock to secure the safety of just one lost sheep: Luke 15: 4) – and in evolutionary terms, the wastage implied in a scheme where even the species will eventually ‘go’. By the end of the century, authors were to confront more fully the nihilist implications of evolutionary thought, but this study is concerned primarily with the writing of a generation who tried to remain in active conversation with Christian values – Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Anthony Trollope. In the aftermath of Chartist protest, in the midst of epidemics at home and warfare abroad, under siege from local and continental scepticism, Anglican theology underwent extraordinary change in the 1850s and 1860s. Newspapers such as the *Examiner* had worked hard throughout the late 1840s to argue that England had passed through its recent trials with ‘a wonderful elastic energy’,<sup>11</sup> and enthusiastic responses to the Great Exhibition of 1851 led William Burn

in 1964 to label the mid-Victorian period ‘the age of equipoise’.<sup>12</sup> Yet as Martin Hewitt and Clare Pettitt have suggested, a more honest picture of the period may be far less optimistic.<sup>13</sup> As I shall discuss further in Chapter 4, National Humiliation Days (in which sermons of repentance were preached across the land) were proclaimed in 1854, 1855, and 1857 (the first two to address the Crimean War, the latter the Indian Mutiny) and the contact with Unitarianism generated searching enquiries into the extent of individual and collective sinfulness. By the end of the decade, liberal theologians were of the opinion that enhanced engagement with Unitarian thought had damaged traditional beliefs in substitutionary atonement beyond repair. For Unitarians, human nature was not essentially evil: Christ did not die in any ‘substitutionary’ sense for the sins of believers. On the one hand, this offered arguably less comfort than Trinitarian Anglicanism – it prioritised the role of human effort in the redemptive process. On the other hand, it freed theology from what many saw as an unsavoury paradox – that the central tenet of Trinitarian Christianity is the death of one innocent victim in place of the guilty masses.

In such a climate, the meaning of Christ’s death as a route to reconciliation between God and man was problematised. Literary texts proved particularly sensitive to fluctuations and recalibrations of national and individual senses of guilt and innocence: that poetry may be understood, in T. E. Hulme’s famous phrase, as a type of ‘spilt religion’<sup>14</sup> and that literature may perform many of the functions of worship – particularly in relation to the memorialisation and commemoration of the dead,<sup>15</sup> the evocation of affect, and the call to moral reform – ensured that both authors and priests spoke the language of repentance and renewal. Yet the explicit convergence of the two discourses in the late 1850s was perhaps determined largely by the biography of just one man. Preoccupied by the administrative bungling which intensified the suffering of troops in the Crimea, Dickens produced *Hard Times* (1854) and *Little Dorrit* (1856), two texts rich in tropes of substitution, scapegoating, and atonement: moved by marital discord, Dickens wrote *The Frozen Deep* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, two studies of male sacrifice for love, just as Anglican publications on the efficacy of sacrifice reached their peak (1857–9). Despite both his attendance at Unitarian chapels in the 1840s and the self-evidently secular thrust of much of his writing, he was imbrued in the terms of Anglican controversy and familiar with the appreciation of Christian figurative language promoted by Maurice and Coleridge. Dickens, like Eliot and Gaskell, was acutely aware of the difficulty: if

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Christ's death did not in some sense 'stand for' that of sinful man, then how was reconciliation to be effected? If Christian dogma was untrue then not only was the promise of supernatural aid under threat, but the question of ethical exemplarity was complicated. Which moral (and, by extension, political) template offered the way forward for the Maggies, Tattycorams, and Dorotheas of the mid-Victorian generation? Two novels give us a clear sense of the parameters of debate.

VARIETIES OF VICARIOUS EXPERIENCE: TWO CASE  
STUDIES – EDWARD CARSON AND MAGGIE TULLIVER

For Edward Carson, the imperious mill-owner of Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), the moment of crisis arrives with the call to forgive the murderer of his cherished son, Harry. As John Barton nears death, he begs the father of his victim to accept that 'I did not know what I was doing ... Forgive me the trespasses I have done.' Carson's impulse is initially the repudiation of pity and the blasphemous insistence on revenge: 'Let my trespasses be unforgiven, so that I may have vengeance for my son's murder.'<sup>6</sup> How then is his heart to be changed? Gaskell eschews the route of public prosecution – Barton is already arraigned at the bar of Death and justice is less valuable than mercy in Gaskell's fictional economy. But Barton's pleas and Legh's prayers initially fail to move him: mental labour and the investment of effort are required. The lesson is finally imparted by the absorption of a drama which embodies and renders real the Scriptural teaching. On his way home, Carson watches as an innocent child, a 'lovely little creature decked out in soft, snowy muslin', is knocked to the ground by 'a rough, rude errand boy' who cares little for the blood he has spilt:

The [girl's] nurse, a powerful woman, had seized the boy, just as Mr Carson (who had seen the whole transaction) came up.

'You naughty little rascal! I'll give you to a policeman, that I will! Do you see how you've hurt the little girl? Do you?' accompanying every sentence with a violent jerk of passionate anger ...

His terror increased, and with it, his irritation; when the little sweet face, choking away its sobs, pulled down nurse's head, and said,

'Please, dear nurse, I'm not much hurt; it was very silly to cry, you know. He did not mean to do it. *He did not know what he was doing*, did you, little boy? Nurse won't call a policeman, so don't be frightened.' And she put up her little face to be kissed by her injurer, just as she had been taught to do at home to 'make peace'. (*MB*, p. 434)

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The carefully staged performance of this act of reconciliation softens Carson: the vicarious lesson renders him receptive to the private reading of the Scriptures which follows. All night he peruses the family Bible seeking to locate the source of the little girl's 'tender pleading', wrestling alternately with the revenge he considers a 'duty to his dead son' and the involuntary 'pity' which 'would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the smitten creature, who had told him of his sin and implored his pardon that night':

Years ago, the Gospel had been his 'task-book' in learning to read. So many years ago, that he had become familiar with the events before he could comprehend the Spirit that made the Life.

He fell to the narrative now, afresh, with all the interest of a little child. He began at the beginning, and read on almost greedily, understanding for the first time the full meaning of the story. He came to the End; the awful End. And there were the haunting words of pleading.

He shut the book and thought deeply. (*MB*, p. 436)

Like God the Father, and indeed the novelist, both Barton and Carson have lost a son; all share the suffering inflicted by an encounter with the 'awful End'. That Carson returns to embrace the dying man, to repeat the words of the Lord's Prayer, and to plead for God's mercy to a body inclusively conceived of as '*us* sinners' is no facile victory for sentimentalism: as I shall discuss in Chapter 4, this is the heart of the Unitarian schism with Anglican orthodoxy at mid-century. Whilst this retreat from the publicity of litigation towards private reconciliation is part of a long literary tradition (expressed in texts as diverse as *Caleb Williams*, *Eugene Aram*, and *Hard Times*), Gaskell's Unitarian instincts impart to the final embrace a philosophical coherence – she models for the reader the means by which sympathetic substitution can serve to effect reconciliation. Carson's response to Barton's confession enacts the growth of the Church on earth. As Job says to Carson in an attempt to account for the value of their final exchange of mutual confidences: "I can see the view you take of things from the place where you stand. I can remember that when the time comes for judging you" (*MB*, p. 456). 'Many of the improvements now in practice in the system of employment in Manchester' date from the time Mr Carson allowed his 'stern, thoughtful mind' to be 'taught by suffering' (*MB*, p. 458): this information is needed to make the lesson for the reader complete, for moral reformation must manifest itself in action if the value of adversity is to be asserted.

Dickens, too, depends for the resolution of a number of his narratives upon staged demonstrations of embodied goodness. As I shall discuss in



Chapters 3 and 4, in each case the offer of redemption comes through an appropriation of vicarious experience and the imitation of example. As Andrew Miller has observed, for the Victorians

[Evangelical] atonement was ... the centrepiece of a vicarious moral psychology crucial for [the pursuit of moral perfection]. Appreciation of their deepest experience as fundamentally vicarious provided a moral hermeneutics, a metaphysical orientation toward life's meaning, that pervaded evangelical psychology. Even when diffused, this profound recognition of the vicarious nature of experience – of the thought that someone else bears our guilt – amplified the central dynamic of perfectionism in which an exemplary figure is understood to anticipate and elicit our own nature.<sup>17</sup>

The vicarious nature of orthodox Christian experience is rendered explicit by contrast with the interpretation of the uses of adversity in other religious traditions: in Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), for example, the devout Jews Mirah and Mordecai feel the full weight of both their solitude and their responsibility when distressed by the return of their profligate father. Mirah confesses she is troubled by "[t]houghts ... [that] come like the breeze and shake me – bad people, wrong things, misery – and how they might touch our life", and Mordecai can only exhort her to endurance: "We must take our portion, Mirah. It is there. On whose shoulder would we lay it, that we might be free?"<sup>18</sup> Eliot here gestures towards one of the difficulties of the Christian tradition: Christ may have died 'in our place' in metaphysical terms, but we must not shirk personal responsibility for the consequences of our misdeeds. Mordecai's moral self-sufficiency may not be Christian, but it is bravely admirable.

The suffering Protestant protagonists of the Victorian novel stand in a complex relation to the Christ who died for the sins of mankind: they seek to appropriate his example but they appreciate the hermeneutic complexity involved in the reading of his life. Moral growth – the work of moral perfectionism, in Miller's analysis – involves intense personal scrutiny, a commitment to the singular value of each individual 'inwardness' or interiority. But it also requires that a protagonist's eyes must be lifted from his or her own plight, and interpretative activity undertaken: how are the appropriate examples to be chosen, and then read? How is the character of the chosen other to be 'reduced' to a useful form of evidence? For the Victorians, acts of recognition were invariably moral – by what signs and tokens was goodness to be known? And then the learning process itself was not straightforward: the example of other lives can offer a form of negative modelling – in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5), for example, Mr Boffin consumes the *Lives* of many misers in order to simulate



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meanness, but he is only seeking to serve for Bella as ‘the dearest and kindest fingerpost that was ever set up anywhere, pointing out the road that [she] was taking and the end it led to’.<sup>19</sup> And finally there were the potential dangers of a moral economy dependent upon the transmission and absorption of what Eliot called a ‘transferred life’ (*MF*, p. 633) – for if prayerful, deliberate imitation is one example of vicarious experience, another is a more involuntary intersubjective communication that could abolish the boundaries of personal responsibility altogether.

The shift in focus here – from confessional self-scrutiny to the digestion of other lives – has implications for narrative form, as authors move from first-person ways of knowing to ‘third-person’ expressions of character dependent upon the interpretation of evidence and, often, inference. The right interpretation of moral choice is thus both crucial and difficult. To return to the example of Christ’s sacrificial death – as the impact of the act is felt at ever further removes from the ‘actual’ events of first-century Palestine, so too further analysis and indeed elaboration of his example is required if a new readership or audience is to be called to repentance and salvation. As Elinor Shaffer has noted, the factual knowledge of the eye-witness, based on empirical evidence, must then give way to poetry, story, myth, all dependent for their authority on some sort of inspiration (theological or aesthetic) and some sort of receptiveness on the part of the reader.<sup>20</sup> If the Victorian period was characterised by a tremendous interest in critical and semi-fictionalised ‘Lives of Christ’ (as ‘historical’ male),<sup>21</sup> then the novel’s interest in the ways in which the gift of grace can be embodied as feminine (both ‘Dorrit’ and ‘Dorothea’ mean ‘gift of God’)<sup>22</sup> acted as a supplementary, or perhaps even capaciously new, interpretation of the Gospel message: according to Mr Bagnet in *Bleak House*, ‘the noun-substantive, goodness, [is] of the gender feminine’,<sup>23</sup> and insofar as this female of redemptive power was also poor, humble, or even illegitimate, the radical potential of the Christian message was emphasised afresh. As Mrs Humphry Ward’s eponymous protagonist proclaims in her best-selling *Robert Elsmere* (1888): ‘*To reconceive the Christ!* It is the special task of our age.’<sup>24</sup>

Much work has been done on the ways in which the eighteenth-century novel was indebted to conduct books and ‘wisdom literature’, and critics including Christine Krueger and Mary Lenard have documented the extent to which Victorian fiction seeks specifically to harness the homiletic power of the sermon, preaching the need for the reader’s repentance through the example of lives lived well or badly<sup>25</sup> – and insisting, as Charles Reade was to highlight so effectively in 1856, *It is*

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*Never Too Late to Mend*. In Mikhail Bakhtin's terms, 'the literature of private life is essentially a literature of snooping about, of overhearing "how others live"',<sup>26</sup> and Eliot in particular affords an educative value to such aesthetic eavesdropping: 'Art is the nearest thing to life: it is a mode of amplifying and extending our contact with our fellow men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.'<sup>27</sup> But on closer inspection, if a moral education depends upon absorbing or imitating the example of others, then the acquisition of wisdom may be tarnished by suspicions of inauthenticity. What distinguishes valuable vicarious example from arguably less profitable experience by proxy cultivated in other types of public discourse – the performances of selfhood staged with varying degrees of sincerity in the theatres, the law courts, or on the oratorical 'stump' of popular radical protest? For whilst the novel wants to align itself with models which demonstrate the redemptive power of exemplarity, it is all too acutely aware of the potential difficulties involved in the appropriation of vicarious experience once removed from the supernatural framework of Christian inspiration which guaranteed its legibility for believers. As David Carroll notes, George Eliot – like others of her generation – wanted 'to define moral problems and assert certain values' but she was all too aware that 'the forms of wisdom literature [were] no longer available' to her: the result, according to Carroll, was a 'crisis' of interpretation.<sup>28</sup> Without the dogmatic coherence of Christian belief, by what means could the right readings of ethical exempla be identified?

In *The Mill on the Floss*, Eliot's narrator professed a wariness of the 'men of maxims' who judge humankind in the abstract and are unable to respond with sympathy to the particular plight of suffering individuals:

All people of broad, strong sense have an instinctive repugnance to the men of maxims; because such people early discern that the mysterious complexity of our life is not to be embraced by maxims, and that to lace ourselves up in formulas of that sort is to repress all the divine promptings and inspirations that spring from growing insight and sympathy. And the man of maxims is the popular representative of the minds that are guided in their moral judgement solely by general rules, thinking that these will lead them to justice by a ready-made patent method, without the trouble of exerting patience, discrimination, impartiality, without any care to assure themselves whether they have the insight that comes from a hardly-earned estimate of temptation, or from a life vivid and intense enough to have created a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human.

(*MF*, p. 628)

But Eliot's attitude to moral instruction is more complex than this apparent valorisation of sympathy would initially suggest. In her correspondence