# ATONEMENT AND SELF-SACRIFICE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY NARRATIVE

Jan-Melissa Schramm explores the conflicted attitude of the Victorian novel to sacrifice and the act of substitution on which it depends. The Christian idea of redemption celebrated the suffering of the innocent: to embrace a life of metaphorical self-sacrifice was to follow in the footsteps of Christ's literal Passion. Moreover, the ethical agenda of fiction relied on the expansion of sympathy which imaginative substitution was seen to encourage. But Victorian criminal law sought to calibrate punishment and culpability as it repudiated archaic models of sacrifice that scapegoated the innocent. The tension between these models is registered creatively in the fiction of novelists such as Dickens, Gaskell, and Eliot, at a time when acts of Chartist protest, national sacrifices made during the Crimean War, and the extension of the franchise combined to call into question what it means for one man to 'stand for', and perhaps even 'die for', another.

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*For Nicholas Alexander (b. 2006)*
*and*
*Joshua Florian (b. 2008)*

The case of Barabbas ought to clear the doctrine of substitution from the charge of cruelty and exclusiveness, – for it shows us that the greatest sinners are not excluded from the benefits of Christ's death. Undoubtedly [substitution] is offensive to Pharisees of every denomination, for as these rest their hopes of God's favour on some merit in themselves, they do not like to accept even life eternal on the same terms as those on which a robber and murderer was delivered from temporal death: but such terms, humiliating as they are to human pride, are very full of comfort to those who are brought to feel themselves verily guilty and criminal in God's sight; to those who see themselves on a level with Barabbas, not perhaps as regards man's law, but as regards God's. Yes: when we are firmly convinced that on our own account we cannot expect a verdict of acquittal from a God who is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity, then our case instead of being hopeless becomes hopeful; then, like Barabbas, we rejoice to hear of one to take our place, – we acknowledge, as he must have acknowledged, that Jesus alone will be accepted in our stead; we learn to look first with hope and then with confidence at the bleeding substitute who suffered on Calvary's cross, in whom we see Divine justice satisfied, the claims of God's violated law met in full, and we understand what is meant by the words, 'faith in Christ'.

Hely Smith, *Substitution* (London: Hunt & Co., 1873), p. 12.

What does *donner la mort* mean in French? How does one give oneself death [*se donner la mort*]? How does one give it to oneself in the sense that putting oneself to death means dying while assuming responsibility for one's own death, committing suicide but also sacrificing oneself for another, dying for the other, thus perhaps giving one's life by giving oneself death, accepting the gift of death, such as Socrates, Christ, and others did in so many different ways … What is the relation between *se donner la mort* and sacrifice? Between putting oneself to death and dying for another? What are the relations among sacrifice, suicide, and the economy of this gift?

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 10.

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All references to the Bible are to the King James Version.