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**“THE GROWING GOOD OF THE WORLD”:
PERSONAL AND CORPORATE REDEMPTION
IN THREE VICTORIAN NOVELISTS**

by

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Introduction

Many novels written in the Victorian period have not survived until the present day. The reason for this is that they were not good novels and George Eliot, generally considered by critics to be one of the pre-eminent novelists of the day, explains why:

The heroine is usually an heiress, probably a peeress in her own right, with perhaps a vicious baronet, an amiable duke, and an irresistible younger son of a marquis as lovers in the foreground, a clergyman and a poet sighing for her in the middle distance, and a crowd of undefined adorers dimly indicated beyond. Her eyes and her wit are both dazzling; her nose and her morals are alike free from any tendency to irregularity; she has a superb *contralto* and a superb intellect; she is perfectly well-dressed and perfectly religious; she dances like a sylph, and reads the Bible in the original tongues. (141)

Eliot does not stop here in her indictment; her essay, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” (originally published in the October 1856 issue of *Westminster Review*) runs for twenty-three pages as she dissects the vapid fiction of the day. But all fiction was certainly not of this type; in fact, it can be difficult to locate the type of novel described here, and I have never seen any of the specific titles that she mentions by name.

The Victorian novels that are still available to us today are not generally books that deal with the beautiful young heiress and her multitudinous lovers; instead they consider aspects of contemporary culture and the problems of humanity which are both universal and timeless. A problem they discuss frequently is one which has always been intriguing to Christians: the problem of redemption. For example, what is its nature and what does it consist of? How can it be brought about? Are its results lasting? Is it purely personal in nature, or can it be corporate as well? In this essay, I want to look briefly at the works of three Victorian authors who demonstrate religious or moral values in their works--Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Mrs. Gaskell--and discuss how their views of personal and corporate redemption differ.

Perhaps I should begin by defining my terms. When I use the term personal redemption, I mean the decision by an individual to live the life of virtue, a decision which is overwhelming, usually sudden, and which may occur with or without the agency of another individual. On the other hand, when I use the term corporate redemption, I am specifying a transformation that takes place in a system, or at least a collection of individuals. I should also make it clear that I am not using the terms redemption and salvation in a theological sense, or, in other words, as a change brought about in an individual's life because of a decision to accept Christ as a personal savior. Used in a literary context, these words are much less technical in nature. They refer to "personal regeneration," a term I have borrowed from Peter Toon, although our specific usages differ. Christ may be involved in the decision to change one's life, but He is not a necessary component in the literary context, as we shall see. Toon points out the frequency with which "Paul uses the verb *zoopoiein*, 'to make alive'" (43), but again he is discussing these texts from a theological viewpoint. I believe that they can be applied in a literary construct as well.

I think it will be evident from the examples of salvation I plan to cite, that the individuals involved do undergo a personal regeneration although it often does not occur in an explicitly stated Christian context. E. S. Waterhouse asks the question "What effect has [the fact of redemption] had upon the minds of men who have been given a changed attitude towards life, and, especially, towards their own sense of wrongdoing?" (34). The answer is that the lives of these characters are unmistakably richer and fuller and that the redeemed individuals have enlarged the area of their concern to include others. Thus, although God may not be explicitly mentioned in Victorian novels as part of the equation of redemption, I would argue that salvation has occurred.

Charles Dickens

It may seem initially strange for Charles Dickens to be included in this elite group of authors, for critics have given this author mixed reviews on his religiosity, both personal and authorial. On the personal level, he essentially never attended church; yet, he wrote a history of Christ's life for

his children because he wanted to be certain they grasped early the importance of Christ and his teachings. *The Life of Our Lord* contains passages like the following:

It is christianity TO DO GOOD always--even to those who do evil to us. It is christianity to love our neighbour as ourself, and to do to all men as we would have them Do to us. It is christianity to be gentle, merciful, and forgiving, and to keep those qualities quiet in our own hearts, and never make a boast of them, or of our prayers or of our love of God, but always to shew that we love Him by humbly trying to do right in everything. If we do this, and remember the life and lessons of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and try to act up to them, we may confidently hope that God will forgive us our sins and mistakes and enable us to live and die in Peace. (127-28)

Many of the characters in Dickens' novels openly mock the religious activities of others. For example, in *Pickwick Papers*, Dickens' first novel, Mr. Weller explains his wife's religion to his son in the following satirical manner:

“She's got hold o' some invention for grown-up people being born again, Sammy; the new birth, I thinks they calls it. I should wery much like to see that system in haction, Sammy. I should wery much like to see your mother-in-law born again. Wouldn't I put her out to nurse!” (297).

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, written almost two decades later, the same jeering attitude is present in the comic character of Jerry Cruncher who refers to his wife as Aggerawayter. He repeatedly takes exception to her “flopping” as he refers to her practice of praying and accuses her of praying “agin” him.

. . . I won't be prayed agin, I tell you. I can't afford it. I'm not a going to be made unlucky by *your* sneaking. If you must go flopping yourself, flop in favour of your husband and child, and not in opposition to 'em. If I had had any but a unnat'ral wife, and this poor boy had had any but a unnat'ral mother, I might have made some money last week instead of being counterprayed and countermined and religiously circumwented into the worst of luck. (52)

Cruncher's views may shift when he is in danger--he tells Miss Pross during the crisis in France “that wot my opinions respectin' flopping has undergone a change, and that wot I only hope with all my heart as Mr. Cruncher may be a flopping at the present time” (346)--but the fact that the same word, “flopping,” is again used for continued comic effect tends to rob the passage of sincerity.

Furthermore, pastors in Dickens do not receive much respect. Mr. Milvey in *Our Mutual Friend* is probably the best of the bunch. He, along with his wife, is committed to good works,

but he is also totally unmemorable. Mr. Chadband, in *Bleak House*, makes much more of an impression, from his inappropriate and lengthy sermons on “Terewth” at his host’s dinner table to the comments on his oleaginous appearance and nature made by the narrator. Most worthy of condemnation is the fact that he is singularly lacking in compassion towards those in need.

Given these examples of Dickens’ lack of respect for religion, the question might be asked why he should be included in a study of this sort? The answer is that Dickens’ objections are directed more towards organized than personal religion, especially that which diverts the individual away from the worthy work he should be doing close to home. This is why Mrs. Weller, in particular, has failed as a witness of redemption. Furthermore, Dickens seems particularly concerned with the problem of redemption as I have defined it. It is almost impossible to read a Dickens novel where the situation of redemption is not addressed. Perhaps the happiest story of this nature (partially because of its simplicity) appears in “A Christmas Carol.” The unhappy Scrooge, who has developed the practice of being cold and harsh to his fellow men to a high art form, is brought to see the error of his ways by a series of visions which allow him to view his past, his present, and his future (should he continue in his present course of action). The horror of being forced to face himself as he will surely become causes the miser to turn towards salvation. His happiness once he chooses the path of virtue, compassion, and love is palpable. He is an elderly man, but he cannot force his limbs to stay in their accustomed positions of stiffness. Instead, he must skip, jump, and run, to express his exuberance and joy at his new life. Truly, he is a man transformed.

Some of Dickens’ characters who attain salvation only do so at the expense of their own lives. Certainly Sidney Carton (in *A Tale of Two Cities*) falls into this category. In Carton’s case, it is the actual act of giving his life for another that both signals and accomplishes his redemption. This novel with its light symbolism, its topic of sacrifice, and its allusions to resurrection may be the most overtly Christian of Dickens’ novels. But other of Dickens’ characters also find that death accompanies redemption, such as Lady Dedlock (in *Bleak House*) and Nancy (in *Oliver Twist*). I wish to omit these examples from our discussion, however, because I feel they are not especially

pertinent to the topic. Where redemption is followed so speedily by death, one of two things tends to happen--either the individual's influence extends no farther, or he becomes a martyr, in which case his influence may travel farther and faster than it would have had he remained among the living. For the purposes of this study, I intend to remain with the individual or corporate entity who is redeemed and lives at least long enough to consider the new life and its implications.

Martin Chuzzlewit, in the novel of the same name, is an example of successful redemption. Isolated in the swamps of America (on an estate ironically designated "Eden"), desperately ill with a fever and close to death, Martin sees for the first time how narrow and self-centered his life has been, especially when compared with the life of his companion, Mark Tapley, who has borne with Martin's foibles uncomplainingly.

Eden was a hard school to learn so hard a lesson in; but there were teachers in the swamp and thicket, and the pestilential air, who had a searching method of their own He . . . would look upon it as an established fact, that selfishness was in his breast, and must be rooted out. He . . . determined not to say one word of vain regret or good resolve to Mark, but steadily to keep his purpose before his own eyes solely: and there was not a joy of pride in this; nothing but humility and steadfastness: the best armour he could wear. So low had Eden brought him down. So high had Eden raised him up. (525)

Clearly, Martin has gone through a conversion experience in the swamps of Eden and he has accepted salvation. From the time of this crisis through the rest of the book, Martin never wavers. His redemption is accomplished.

Martin is chiefly young and heedless; he has not spent an entire lifetime choosing paths which ensure his development into a figure of evil as has Abel Magwitch (aka Provis), Pip's criminal benefactor in *Great Expectations*. But, as Dickens convincingly demonstrates in this book, even a lifetime of evil can be washed away if an individual chooses salvation. When Magwitch makes this choice, his lifelong rebellion turns to submission. Pip notices this change and comments on it:

I sometimes derived an impression, from his manner or from a whispered word or two which escaped him, that he pondered over the question whether he might have been a better man under better circumstances. But he never justified himself by a hint tending that way, or tried to bend the past out of its eternal shape.

It happened on two or three occasions in my presence, that his desperate reputation was alluded to by one or other of the people in attendance on him. A smile crossed his face then, and he turned his eyes on me with a trustful look, as if he were confident that I had seen some small redeeming touch in him, even so long ago as when I was a little child. (432)

Magwitch, in the short time which is left to him, knows happiness for the first time in his life as a result of his acceptance of salvation.

Many other examples of personal redemption occur in Dickens (far too many to cite here) such as the “Patriarchal Casby” in *Little Dorrit*, Eugene Wrayburn in *Our Mutual Friend*, and Newman Noggs in *Nicholas Nickleby*, but let us look for a moment at corporate redemption. Mr. Dombey is eventually brought to repentance and undergoes personal regeneration in *Dombey and Son*, but this could have been a corporate example as well. Mr. Dombey is, of course, an individual, but he is also a merchant prince who controls many other lives. If he should choose salvation, we might expect salvation to take a corporate leap so that the face of an entire business (whose branches stretch round the world) would change for the better. Mr. Dombey has waited so long to accept salvation, however, that the result is a purely personal one. At the end of the novel, he is described as “a white-haired gentleman, whose face bears heavy marks of care and suffering; but they are traces of a storm that has passed on for ever, and left a clear evening in its track. Ambitious projects trouble him no more” (873). The reader may rejoice that Mr. Dombey has finally (after over 800 pages) seen the light and accepted the redemption that has been waiting for him so long, but, at the same time, there is also the realization that an opportunity has been missed for more extensive good than has actually occurred.

The same situation exists in *Hard Times* when Mr. Gradgrind is transformed. Now the mill owner makes “his facts and figures subservient to Faith, Hope, and Charity; and no longer [tries] to grind that Heavenly trio in his dusty little mills” (297). But Gradgrind is also described as a “white-haired decrepit man” who is despised by peers and underlings alike. He may have reformed his life, but the damage he has done cannot be reversed and he is now too feeble to be much of a force for good. Therefore, his redemption is also only on the personal, not the corporate, level.

When we examine corporate systems attacked by Dickens, it is at once apparent that they are not changed tremendously for the better by the saviors who have worked in opposition to them. The chief evil attacked in *Nicholas Nickleby* is the school system which Dickens presents as a pestilential sinkhole of ignorance and brutality. The specific school where his hero labors is shut down, but this school is only one of many; the overall evil is not addressed. Furthermore, the schoolmaster is so grotesquely unintelligent, we tend to feel it would only be a matter of time until he was caught out in his iniquity. Fascination Fledgeby, the cruel moneylender in *Our Mutual Friend*, is whipped and has pepper thrown in his wounds, but this hardly seems likely to change the usurious aspects of moneylending. The legal system in *Bleak House* proceeds like a juggernaut, crushing all in its path. Few individuals involved in the case of Jarndyce vs. Jarndyce escape the devastating result of Chancery Court; this particular trial finally comes to an end, but there is no adjustment to the system. Another case, equally complex and harmful will doubtless begin the next day.

These less than stirring examples of salvation on the corporate level do not mean that Dickens characters do not attempt corporate redemption. The last view of Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit shows them striking out in faith to do what good they can in the world. After their marriage service, they “Went down into a modest life of usefulness and happiness” (826). This passage is sometimes cited as an example of lives dedicated to others, but the only examples specifically mentioned are personal ones. It appears that most of the examples of redemption we find in Dickens are chiefly successful in the personal context; accomplishing corporate salvation seems to be difficult if not impossible to achieve.

George Eliot

George Eliot is the second Victorian author I wish to examine. Again, she may appear to be a strange selection because of her life choices. Deeply religious as an adolescent, she turned away from the church at about twenty-one and spent her life in a way that was frowned on even by secular society--living with a married man who was unable to obtain a divorce from his wife. That

she found some ministers less than perfect spiritual shepherds is obvious from her essay, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming," which was published in *Westminster Review* in October 1855:

Given, a man with moderate intellect, a moral standard not higher than the average, some rhetorical affluence and great glibness of speech, what is the career in which, without the aid of birth or money, he may most easily attain power and reputation in English society? Where is that Goshen of mediocrity in which a smattering of science and learning will pass for profound instruction, where platitudes will be accepted as wisdom, bigoted narrowness as holy zeal, unctuous egoism as God-given piety? Let such a man become an evangelical preacher; he will then find it possible to reconcile small ability with great ambition, superficial knowledge with the prestige of erudition, a middling morale with a high reputation for sanctity. (38)

In spite of the evidence of this diatribe, Eliot never lost the respect and affection she felt for certain pastors she had known in her youth, whose sympathetic identification with their parishioners she portrayed so well in her novels. Eliot, like Dickens, tends to write about individuals who have fallen and who seek and find redemption; unlike Dickens, a pastor is often the agent who brings about the transformation.

Maggie Tulliver, in *The Mill on the Floss*, is sometimes cited as Eliot's primary example of salvation accomplished. However, I must omit Maggie from this study because of the juxtaposition of redemption and death. Instead, I would like to look at other examples of redemption, such as Silas Marner, in the novel of the same name. Marner, wrongly accused of theft by the religious society to which he belongs, becomes a miser who is suspicious of all mankind. He finds instant redemption when he assumes the guardianship of Eppie, an orphan child in the community. Eppie's golden hair now takes the place of gold which was stolen from him; more importantly, the love and responsibility he feels for her transforms his entire life.

Hetty is another individual who needs and receives salvation, in Eliot's *Adam Bede*. The agent in this case is also an individual, the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, who is both patient and supportive; as she says, "I've come to be with you, Hetty--not to leave you--to stay with you--to be your sister to the last" (493). Dinah's attempt to bring about Hetty's redemption is a

departure from the examples I have mentioned up to this point, because it is overtly theological (although this may be logically accounted for because of Dinah's vocation):

“Yes, Lord, I see thee, coming through the darkness, coming, like the morning, with healing on thy wings. . . . I see, I see thou art able and willing to save--thou wilt not let her perish forever.

Come, mighty Saviour! let the dead hear thy voice; let the eyes of the blind be opened: let her see that God encompasses her; let her tremble at nothing but at the sin that cuts her off from him. Melt the hard heart; unseal the closed lips: make her cry with her whole soul, ‘Father, I have sinned.’”
(497)

Hetty is brought, by Dinah's pleading, to a consciousness of where she has strayed. She accepts the hand of faith that is held out to her, but she cannot be totally redeemed in the eyes of society, so her salvation is entirely moral rather than social. She is not allowed to retake her place at Hall Farm, but is shipped off to the colonies instead.

Janet Dempster, in “Janet's Repentance” (one of the three novellas that comprise Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life*), is a better example of redemption accepted. Through the offices of Mr. Tryan (an Evangelical clergyman to whom her husband is violently opposed), Janet finds salvation that can both answer her deepest needs and arm her to face the trials of life that are before her. Unlike the examples of Silas and Hetty who accept salvation, but who apparently do nothing to continue the process in another's life, Janet carries on the work that Mr. Tryan has begun. Mr. Tryan's life may have been short, but Eliot mentions the memorial he has left behind: “It is Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair, strengthened with divine hopes, and now looking back on years of purity and helpful labour” (412). Janet's scope may be limited to the small village of Milby, but in her case, we can see the ripple effect of redemption in operation.

Once again, corporate examples are harder to come by than personal ones. It is not that Eliot does not try to include them, but the details are vague, so that both reality and immediacy are lessened. With its background of political intrigue and election-eve occurrences, *Felix Holt, The Radical*, appears to be a natural forum for the study of corporate redemption. Felix Holt, the title character, wants to be a leader of men and he demonstrates qualities of leadership, both in his speech to the voters about political power and its uses and when he saves Spratt's life during the riot. That the two spheres, personal and corporate, are closely linked in Felix's mind is evident in

his proposal to Esther Lyon where he not only seeks to know whether she loves him, but also whether she feels herself able to live the kind of life he intends: “‘And the people I shall live among, Esther? They have not just the same follies and vices as the rich, but they have their own forms of folly and vice; and they have not what are called the refinements of the rich to make their faults more bearable. I don’t say more bearable to me—I’m not fond of those refinements; but you are” (601). It is apparent that “the people” and his role in ministering to them are important to Felix; of far more importance to the reader, however, is whether or not Felix will succeed in “saving” Esther from a life of trivialities and false values. “The people” and Felix’s work on their behalf is not developed, but Esther’s struggle with vanity is. Whether Esther will choose a life of luxury with Harold Transome or a life of poverty with Felix Holt is really the basic question of the book. Other issues, such as Esther’s heritage, Harold’s parentage, and Felix’s aspirations are definitely secondary.

In *Middlemarch*, when Dorothea Brooks Casaubon marries Will Ladislaw, Eliot reports on the corporate good that the young couple attempt: “. . . she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity. . . . Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good . . .” (II.361). But even though Eliot is commenting on efforts bent towards corporate salvation, the emphasis seems to return to the personal:

Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them, and that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. (II.361)

Will Ladislaw may be involved in saving the world, but we know nothing about his actual activities. Not much is said about what Dorothea specifically does, either, but we already tend to have a fairly well-defined picture of what a wife and mother does.

Mrs. Gaskell

Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell is the last novelist who appears in this brief discussion. Less well-known today than either Dickens or Eliot, she was their contemporary and, in fact, wrote occasionally for the journal *Household Words*, which Dickens owned, edited, and published. Mrs. Gaskell was certainly more traditionally religious than either Dickens or Eliot. She was the wife of a Unitarian minister and worked with the poor in Manchester where he was stationed. I have found nothing in either her novels or her personal life where religion is attacked, although she certainly found problems with the overly strict approach of some religious individuals. Indeed, she was remarkably tolerant of the various belief systems of her time; at the close of a chapter in *North and South*, she wrote, "Margaret the Churchwoman, her father the Dissenter, Higgins the Infidel, knelt down together. It did them no harm" (297). Often, although not always, Mrs. Gaskell's novels consider social ills and how they may be solved. She deals with both personal and corporate salvation, and the situations she presents (usually among mill workers and owners) have the ring of reality because of her actual experiences among the people of Manchester. However, we need to take a look at the solutions she proposes.

North and South examines corporate redemption much more than individual. Mr. Higgins, a minor character, moves towards salvation, but the story is centered on the characters of Mr. Thornton and Margaret Hale, who are attracted to each other, but who feel very differently about how labor problems should be addressed. Neither of these individuals is in particular need of personal salvation--they are both careful, thoughtful, moral people who must somewhat adjust their ideas and attitudes, but who only act from the highest principles. In *North and South*, it is the system that needs to be transformed and it is, at least temporarily. Mr. Thornton comes to see that he needs to change some of his dealings with his employees. Accordingly, he institutes radical changes at his mill, buying food wholesale and having nutritious meals cooked and served to his workers. This is not merely an act of charity on Mr. Thornton's part; the men contribute as well, paying rent for the mill space that is utilized by the kitchen and dining room. He feels that experiments like his should be attempted on a wider scale.

I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise . . . can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the classes into actual personal contact. . . . We should understand each other better, and I venture to say we should like each other more. (525)

Corporate salvation is achieved here because of the efforts of a committed individual, but a certain amount of ambiguity is present concerning Mr. Thornton's ability to continue his reforms. When he loses his money, the great experiment appears to be over. His proposal of marriage to Margaret Hale, a marriage which will make Mr. Thornton solvent again, is accepted; however, at this point (the conclusion of the novel) the tale of corporate redemption is abandoned in favor of the personal romance.

Gaskell's novel, *Mary Barton*, is somewhat different than *North and South*. Certainly transformation of the mill system is needed here as well, but the emphasis is on the personal which, as usual, seems far more vivid than the corporate. There are four individuals who need redemption in *Mary Barton*: Esther, a woman who has become a prostitute, a life that is not condoned by either church or society; Esther's niece, the Mary of the title, who, because of her love for a man of a higher class, is in danger of being seduced by him, thus following in her aunt's footsteps; John Barton, Mary's father, who has allowed the injustice of the mill system to affect his character until he is filled with hatred for both the system and its representatives; and Mr. Carson, the mill owner, who needs to be brought to an understanding of how the people in his employ are affected by his actions and decisions.

Mary's is the easiest job of redemption. She comes to realize that Harry's courtship is not honest—he is not concerned for her character or reputation, only his own gratification. Worry about her father and concern for Jem Wilson, the man who truly loves her and has been falsely accused of Harry's murder, cause Mary to return to the way of salvation after only a very minor detour. Esther's immediate salvation is uncertain, although hope is held out for the future. By the time she is located by her concerned relatives, she is a dying prostitute called the "Butterfly" by her street associates. She is buried in the same grave with John Barton, her brother-in-law; the inscription reads "Psalm ciii.v.9--'For He will not always chide, neither will He keep his anger for ever'"

(465). It appears that, although Esther's sin may have been too major for immediate redemption, we should hope, nay expect, that salvation is a certain thing--sometimes it just takes a little time. The same can be said for John Barton, who killed Harry Carson, the son of the mill owner, in retaliation for corporate wrongs, both imagined and actual. His salvation also seems assured as he is given the chance to repent and explain his action before he dies. He is, in fact, supported in his dying moments by his employer and former enemy, Mr. Carson, who "raised up the powerless frame; and the departing soul looked out of the eyes with gratitude. He held the dying man propped in his arms. John Barton folded his hands as if in prayer" (441).

As Mr. Carson is the owner of a large mill who holds the key to the system in his hands, it is necessary that his redemption be double, both personal and corporate. It does not initially appear that this will take place. Haunted by the murder of his cherished son, Harry, and thwarted by the release of Jem Wilson, who was first accused of the murder, Mr. Carson, when he finds out the identity of the true murderer, appears fully as vindictive and full of hatred as the murderer. He knows that John Barton is dying yet he can hardly wait to bring him to trial:

"You can have no doubt for what purpose I go. Straight to the police-office, to send men to take care of you, wretched man, and your accomplice. Tomorrow morning your tale shall be repeated to those who can commit you to gaol, and before long you shall have the opportunity of trying how desirable hanging is." (434)

Mr. Carson is miraculously transformed, however, after witnessing an interchange between two children on his way home. One inadvertently injures the other who does not demand justice, but instead requests mercy for the aggressor in a speech which alludes to the crucifixion: "*He did not know what he was doing*" (438). This is the beginning of Mr. Carson's redemption:

There are stages in the contemplation and endurance of great sorrow, which endow men with the same earnestness and clearness of thought that in some of old took the form of Prophecy. To those who have large capability of loving and suffering, united with great power of firm endurance, there comes a time in their woe, when they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual case into a searching inquiry into the nature of their calamity, and the remedy (if remedy there be) which may prevent its recurrence to others as well as to themselves.

Hence the beautiful, noble efforts which are from time to time brought to light, as being continuously made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done; one of the grandest ends which sorrow can accomplish; the sufferer wrestling

with God's messenger until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations. (459)

Clearly, a happier ending is brought to the story when Mr. Carson not only forgives John Barton for the murder of his son, but also goes on to reform the part of the mill system over which he has control. It may be happier, but it is not necessarily more satisfying because of its lack of reality. It seems quite unlikely that Mr. Carson could so quickly overlook the death of his beloved Harry and forgive all involved, while he works to make their lives better. Such an alteration might be more believable if it happened gradually over a number of years, but this change is almost instantaneous.

Conclusion

What then can we say about the Victorian novelists and salvation? Clearly it was a subject that fascinated them, perhaps more especially as it was a time when many individuals were rapidly losing their faith and possibly fearing the consequences of that trend. Had the novelists come to believe (as Matthew Arnold expressed so vividly in his poem, "Dover Beach") that the "Sea of Faith" had retreated from the shores of mankind, so that he was left alone without resource? Arnold suggests that we must "be true/To one another," that a connection between two people is the only answer when we live in a world that possesses "neither joy, nor love, nor light,/Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain" (226-27). The novelists we have discussed in this essay, however, seem to be more hopeful about what man must face and hope to overcome. There is more to life than merely clinging to one another and trying to survive. Redemption is still possible; a rebirth and better life are still possible, even if they may not occur in a strictly traditional religious context.

I think in order to more fully understand the position taken by these Victorian novelists, it is necessary to turn to Thomas Carlyle, the most influential philosopher of the age. One of Carlyle's messages is that we should constantly strive to do the right thing. As he mentions in *Sartor Resartus*, "The end of Man is an Action, and not a Thought, though it were the noblest" (108), thus indicating that it is always necessary to work towards good. He reiterates this thought in a later chapter, stating: "Conviction, were it never so excellent, is worthless till it convert itself into

Conduct” (130). I think it is important that Carlyle does not mention result here, only effort, which is also the case in his more famous lines, based on the words of Jesus in John 9:4: “Up, up! Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy whole might. Work while it is called To-day, for the Night cometh wherein no man can work” (131). We might ask how we can know what work to do, but Carlyle has an answer for that question as well: “‘*Do the Duty which lies nearest thee,*’ which thou knowest to be a Duty! Thy second Duty will already have become clearer” (130).

It should be noted here that nearly all the examples of salvation in the novels we have discussed come about because of the agency of another individual. Furthermore, almost certainly the duty which lies nearest will be personal rather than corporate. This was true in the Victorian context (as it is today) and doubtless is the reason why these three novelists were so much more successful in writing about personal redemption than they were in the corporate arena. Dickens regularly introduces the idea of corporate responsibility and redemption in his novels but to little result, while he often handles examples of personal salvation attained with both reality and tenderness. Mrs. Gaskell, in her desire to demonstrate that transformation is possible on both levels, is uneven and sometimes tends to lose reality in the process. Eliot is perhaps the most successful as she considers both corporate and personal regeneration, although her corporate examples tend to be left vague and incomplete. Dickens sometimes indicates that a chain of salvific effect may occur, as in *Nicholas Nickleby*, where the Cheeryble brothers help Nicholas who, in turn, helps Smike. But Nicholas is never in need of redemption, so the example loses its validity in the redemptive context. A much better example is that of Eliot's Janet Dempster who, once she finds salvation, endeavors to ensure the same regeneration in others. Furthermore, Eliot more clearly spells out the hope that the redemptive process is an ongoing one that can reach from the personal to the corporate when she sums up the life of Dorothea Ladislaw:

Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts. (II.364).

Doing the duty that is nearest may or may not bring salvation to another, but it may have further consequences than the doer ever dreams of. The “unhistoric acts” that Eliot mentions are the little deeds of thoughtfulness, self-sacrifice, and charity that bring hope, joy, and, eventually perhaps, redemption to the recipient. If the latter occurs, who cannot say whether the movement will grow as the individual who accepts salvation influences another, so that the “growing good of the world” becomes a reality. Dickens, Eliot, and Gaskell apparently believed in this chain of goodness and redemption whether or not God was part of the equation. But if we agree that He is, how much stronger should be our belief.

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